

— NUDE —
BRUCE
— REYIEW —



NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

Issue 5

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&
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Salutations, Brucers,

Lend us your ears and eyes—we have but three pair amongst us. Herein are poems and prose—a good many of them, in fact. The present issue of *Nude Bruce Review* is nearly the double the size of the previous issue, and so many more orders of magnitude larger than our humble pilot issue all those long years ago.

This time around we warmly welcome Ciarra Proulx as our new fiction editor; and proudly feature the work of the inimitable John Spriggs, the latest player in our round-robin exposition of the members of the infamous Jeb Kennedy art collective (jebkennedy.blogspot.com), on our cover. Bruce has truly never looked, nor read, better.

Our ol' boy Bruce has a saying for times such as these. Usually something like, “Where in blinking hell is my margarita?!” Our hope is that you will take these words to heart as you dig into this veritable panoply of poesie, assembled with all the love and care we can muster in and of our mortal coil.

Your proud editors,
Andrew Alexander Mobbs
Timothy Snediker
Ciarra Proulx

Update

By Chris Warner

Earthquakes register in central Connecticut;
a tornado ravages Bar Harbor, Maine.
Harvard ups their obese endowment. Again.
So, protestors block Route 93 South,
chained together, and tethered
to concrete pylons,
and sandblasters work
at erasing more beautiful (and *God*,
such illegal) graffiti.
Her watch stops.
Traffic is affected.
She decides not to go outside.
The city lies in waiting.
Clots of blue dust drift through the air.
It's thin, and icy.
More weather is predicted (of course).
Another suburban mother is missing,
or a wife, a neighbor, some girl, the high school
valedictorian
and cheerleader; an 11-month old infant daughter
is raped and killed by the latest boyfriend. It's Tuesday.
Meth may or may not have played a role.
Hoodies have been suddenly ruled unconstitutional.
And children's wooden sleds.
And lists of books, and public grieving.
Finally, the death chamber has been remodeled—
communication devices installed, and new wallpaper,

along with a padded plastic gurney
(no more wood, remember).
The Catholic theology professor
is considered for duty; he says:
There are no circumstances
under which I'll vote.
I will not.
Who would?
Attendance no longer counts,
and penmanship is measured
in pound signs and one line characters.
The Supreme Court is out.
The state budget is out.
But the five billion dollar olympics are coming.
Congressional healthcare will remain unchanged.
Fire is an issue. As are working clocks.
Anything electronic, or digitized.
A man drives along a frozen lake, its name
unpronounceable,
though the average thickness of its ice is reported to be
six and half inches;
he doesn't see her, she's just the last lover he's already
over, forgotten,
the one passing by, in the other direction,
one fist-width double yellow line away.
There are rules.
But distance is negligible,
it's just more nothing.
He's thinking
about the hometeam,
current stats and power plays,
today's latest possible client,

and the next upcoming game.
A pop star's perfect tits.
The pop star is not even twenty,
but she's got her own sex tape.
There are no missed opportunities.
A town meeting has been called
to address the issues—
horse problems,
and affordable housing.
There is much love being sent
through the neighborhood,
from one neck to another.
Mindfulness is touted.
For offenses against nature,
against religious hymns, and humanitarians,
the standard sentence is 1,000 lashes,
to be doled out 50 at a time.
And quickly.
Why not Saturday?
Nothing else happens.
Time passes.
There's another phase of the moon.
It's late morning again. And then, later.
The phone rings,
no one answers. Again.
Car sales are up,
but not enough to combat
the heavy rate of global borrowing.
An unmarked black rental truck
rumbles up the driveway.
She doesn't answer the door.
She's trying to look more

like the department
store mannequin.
Straw could be involved.
Everything is just dandy.
A new card arrives in the mail.
It, too, is unsigned.
The NRA
is at it again.
There are some concerns
over how to define business-casual
and security, along with life and liberty,

though no-fly lists
and messages imploring
or pleading,
or in any way *asking*,
continue to be ignored.
It's probably too late
to take flying lessons
anyway.
Flight of any kind is ill-advised.
The President neglected
to send a delegation again.
There is: Good morning.
There are: no further questions.
Nobody wants to know
what everyone is thinking. Every minute.
There are chest pains, night sweats,
and a vaguely threatening shadow
at the kitchen window.
The borders are not secure.
Statins and stents have stopped working.

Google it.
Watch what is said.
Act now.
Don't open anything.
We've already said that travel is contraindicated.
And shelter is open to interpretation—
like almost any verb.
An actual name is not important.
Was not. Ever.
Nouns, of course, are obviously overrated.
What could *proper* possibly mean anymore?
Timing has also lost its value, if it ever existed—
along with the idea of any kind of *opening*.
As if. Ludicrous.
There are no windows.
But, still, it's now, it's today.
It is the world.
And she's still here.
They say location is everything.
They talk about the importance of zip codes.
Meanwhile, the hometown heart is broken.
Meanwhile, Baltimore burns.

Love bends our mind without hope or promise

by Hans Mutchek

“the drug” is the addiction of our souls
that keeps the people coming to the show
I’m speaking for the voice of a million billion children
still unborn
whose odds are against them of ever seeing a pleasant
day in such an awful place
yet who still must find a reason to keep them going
on, and on as they struggle to know
as psychotic day turns into an unsympathetic night
then to once again repeat the favor
switching the task eternally
like an upside down reflection
that half the time appears right
one after the other in perpetual motion
for timely cuts the sickle
and like clockwork are the hands of time
the perfect mood of science
precise as a razor’s edge
or the tooth of a tiger
unmoving to the pleas of mankind
in a vain attempt to numb the inevitable
even when they know it’s coming
and you and I are just passing by to remind each other
that there’s more to the story
is it time to go
are you ready to say your last goodbyes

Marshall Family Vibrator

by Greg Marshall

ONCE A CAPUCHIN WAS out of the question, Danny started campaigning for an iguana. To hear my brother at PetSmart, you'd think this scaly, bored reptile was just a monkey with a removable tail. "It'd be pretty cool to have this little guy on my shoulder as I did my homework," Danny said, poking his finger through the cat cage that contained Oozy.

"I wouldn't do that," warned the pierced PetSmart cashier.

"You think any girl is going to want to pet that thing?" Mom asked. "It's uglier than a rat's patoot."

"She means ass," my sister Tiffany clarified to the cashier.

Oozy got his name not from the semi-automatic weapon but from his most salient quality: that of being slimy. He didn't blink and if you tried to stare back at him, he would scamper under your shirt and sink his curved nails into your flesh. He made love to a Utah Jazz sweat towel that had once been a door prize at the Delta Center and attacked anything green: the diamond on an argyle sweater, a sock.

The main difference between my fish and Danny's green iguana, amphibians and reptiles, was that if I got sick of my fish, why, all I had to do was feed them flakes until their fins sagged and they went belly up. Oozy, you couldn't contain. Once he erupted out of his enclosure, the iguana took over Danny's room, depositing its plant-

filled scat on the windowsill and making my brother's tidy double bed smell like a terrarium. It was Oozy's world. Our cleaning lady, Maria, was the only one who ventured into it, packing the dresser drawers with laundry each Tuesday and leaving us no choice but to forage for stray socks.

"Daaaaaaad," we'd say. "Oozy just took a shit."

"Go annoy someone else," Mom would shout back. "Your dad can't do everything for you."

"It was a big one."

"Listen, when we have time to take a shit ourselves, we'll go take care of your pet iguana instead," Mom would say. "Tell them, Bob."

"Guys? Mom's right. You're on your own with this one."

"Does she whip you, too?"

"What's that, Danno?"

"Never mind."

Rightly scared to enter his own room, let alone sleep there, Danny crawled into bed with me. I enjoyed our school-night slumber parties, both of us sipping Sprites and, when we spilled, daring each other to smell the wet spot to make sure it wasn't pee, as if somehow the substance could have transformed en route from can to mattress.

One of these nights, in iguana exile, Danny brought in my mom's Brookstone back massager. It was nothing fancy: a standard model with a flat, round head and a white handle, presumably so he could rub his shoulders and the center of his back without needing me to do it for him.

While I wasn't sure what Danny was up to as he uncoiled the cord and plugged it into the outlet behind my headboard, testing the settings against his palm, I believed his intentions were honorable that first time. He really did love having his back rubbed, but, as would soon become apparent, the same could be said for his boner.

My brother was a bold inventor of boyhood fun. The kid had a mind for obstacle courses and low-contact sports. He performed two different acts in Eastwood Elementary's annual talent show. One was a dunk extravaganza that involved a miniature trampoline, a Little Tykes hoop and a blindfold. The other was a yo-yo act with a boy in his grade who had spina bifida. Danny and knock-kneed Clark would come out whistling along to the Harlem Globetrotters' theme song as they walked the dog and built the Eiffel Tower out of string.

Danny could make a game out of anything. Give him one of the little girls' Big Wheels or tricycles and he'd have us scampering around the tennis court in our back yard, hurling a kickball at each other. Give him a household appliance from Brookstone and in a few minutes you'd be wiggling it against your dick and balls, wondering what you'd say if Dad shouldered through the door.

“Oozy made me do it!”

The feeling was different from humping, like being gently assaulted with an eggbeater. It felt good and then it felt great and then the vein along the underside of my penis seized, my foreskin jumped, my right leg shot out. I hadn't hit puberty yet, not really, so there wasn't any

mess. It was like swinging a mallet at a carnival game, trying to push a puck up a tower. I launched that jizz puck pretty high but I couldn't quite ring the bell.

Now that I'm thirty, the idea that a Brookstone back massager is actually a sex toy is so common as to be cliché. At the time, I puzzled over how Danny had figured out how to turn an otherwise innocent gadget into a rapturous advancement. Had he dozed? Had the massager skidded down his shorts? In any case, my brother was a genius; he had invented masturbation, and I do mean invent. I'd heard some innuendo about Vaseline, but having never properly jerked off, I wasn't sure what that meant. Besides humping my Looney Tunes pillow, the massager was *the* gateway to pleasure.

Danny and I stayed up on weekends to catch *Real Sex* on HBO and peruse *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit edition, dog-earring the photos we liked best. I would compliment a model's eyes or lips, the lacework of her bikini bottoms, and Danny would dry-swallow and pass me the massager. "Oh, by the way, have you tried it on your butt?" I'd ask. "It feels really good on your butt."

"I think I'll stick with my dick," Danny would reply.

Like most great inventions, the back massager was too incredible to keep secret. Danny stashed it under the guest bed in the basement and taught Mike Steffen and Bobby Leavitt how to use it. They were sixth graders, like my brother, but they went to the neighborhood school, not Eastwood, so they knew me in a more forgiving context: not as the girly fourth grader with asymmetrical calves but as Danny's little brother.

As the only other non-Mormon kids on Briarcreek Drive, Mike and Bobby constituted a kind of counterculture, meaning that they weren't disturbed by my doll case. Mike liked to draw and Bobby collected Pez and was building a pyramid out of Coke cans in his room. He'd recently loaned me *Taxi Driver* from his parents' extensive VHS collection and my mom and I, arbiters of taste that we were, declared it the worst movie ever made.

What made the vibrator the high point of my sex life was not just the full-body numbness. It was the sense of camaraderie, of being in a club. It was a different story for Tiffany, who had achy knees and cramps and awful skin, but early puberty was a box of wonders for the Briarcreek boys. Danny, Mike, Bobby and I spent hours in the basement firing Nerf guns, patronizing the gadget like a town prostitute.

The guestroom, though cool and dark, was decorated to look like a bed and breakfast. The only light came in through leaf-filled window wells and the closet was full of dead-people clothes and retired winter coats. Cold air blasted through one screen, its pane propped open with a Yankee Candle. A watercolor beach scene I'd picked out from Pier One hung over the bed; it was supposed to go with the seashell soap in the bathroom. The wallpaper was striped in yellow and white and a wooden placard knocked against the door: "It's not home...Get over it!"

None of us ever got under the sheets, treating each time like a catnap that left the bed rumpled, the pillows in need of a good fluffing. The vibrator canceled out neighborhood noises: the Black Knight's taunts and

Bond on N64. Those thirty seconds, lying atop the messy comforter, my ball sack basking in a warm, electric dance, were exquisite and lonely.

Once I was doubled over, fighting through the post-coital stupor to find the OFF switch before my nails shook free of my fingertips, I liked striding back out into the basement living room, back to box elder bugs in the lights, games of Double Shot and the family portrait of the seven of us in denim nailed above the chunky rock fireplace. I couldn't have put the feeling into words, but it was a kind of instant nostalgia. After my brush with human sexuality, I got to be a kid again.

"Just wait until you can jizz," Bobby said one day during a round of pinball. A self-described pro, Bobby only deployed one paddle at a time, threading the shiny ball up ramps and into bumper caps as The Black Knight pledged to destroy him. "It's like the feeling you get after you throw up."

"It's like your dick throwing up," Danny corrected.

"Don't tell him that," Mike said. "You're going to freak him out."

"What's it like then?" Bobby asked.

"It's like hitting your funny bone really hard," Mike said.

Danny bit his hand. *Eureka*. "You're all fucking wrong!" he shouted over his fist. "It's like that feeling you get during the drop in a rollercoaster, but just in your dick."

The pinball took an unlucky bounce and Bobby waggled his hips before the machine, a human tilt. The ball guttered and The Black Knight *ha ha ha*-ed.

“It feels good,” Bobby said. “Trust me. It’s the best feeling in the world. Just don’t hold it on there too long or it can hurt.”

Because of cerebral palsy, I drag my right foot and have what my family calls “tight” tendons. Since my first leg surgery as a toddler, I had gone to a child-oriented studio with magnets and toys. By fourth grade, thanks to the special intervention of my therapist, I left the kindergarten-ish games behind for an orthopedic gym called The Back Institute. Maybe it was the retro popularity of the Village People—kids in my grade were always folding themselves into letters—or the fact that being a cop or construction worker or plumber can be, actually, back breaking. Whatever the reason, The Institute was a veritable YMCA filled not with kids pushing walkers but with men. Oh, so many men.

After a bearded therapist contorted my limbs, I’d slide off the table, my hair askew, and float through my workout: Walk backwards on treadmill, do toe lifts and pull-ups. God made men, and then he snapped off a hamstring and made me to admire them. Even the receptionist was a dude. With slick hair and bearish forearms, he looked not unlike the actor who played Superman on a show I called, in Freudian fashion, *Louis and Clark*.

It’s not like we were religious. We’d dropped out of CCD after Danny super glued the pages of his *This Is Our Faith* workbook and ran around the house saying, “This is *my* faith.” We only attended the children’s Mass on Christmas Eve so we could shake hands with the Jazz’s backcourt; John Stockton and Jeff Hornacek were

both observant Catholics, but I felt guilty about Clark Kent as I used the vibrator.

I'd try to work girls into my tree house fantasies, my own boyhood crack at conversion therapy, only to find myself in Clark's arms at the moment of climax. I'd tell myself never again, *that* was the last time, and a few hours later I'd be pulling back the bed skirt and rooting around for the vibrator once more, hauling it out from under the bed by its cord.

Having a sex life as a kid is strange thing, even if what you're having sex with is an inanimate object. I started planning my life around the massager. I'd wait for Mom and Dad to take my little sisters up to bed or fake sick and stay home from family outings so I could sneak down to the basement and become as untamed as any pet iguana. I was not alone in my addiction. My brother was usually slumped at the bar, sipping a Mountain Dew. "It's my fourth time today, Gregor," he'd say. "I just hope I can lay off it once school starts."

"It's junior high, D. You'll be so busy you won't have time for this stuff," I'd say, hoping it wasn't true.

Danny was beginning to tire of basement games. As he was not shy of reminding, I was a waste of height, nothing but shins below the knee whereas Danny's calves, even his ankles, were ripped. He had a fro and a funny two-handed jump shot that never looked like it was going in until it did. The coaches on his super league teams called him an asset, the next Stockton. My mom compared him to two other undersized point guards, Spud Webb and Muggsy Bogues. "I mean, if those little peanuts can dunk, so can Dan."

Finally ready to make his popularity official, Danny ran for elected office in the fall of 1995, seventh-grade vice president of Churchill Junior High. Mutilating a Superman poster of mine, he cut out the Man of Steel's face and glued his yearbook picture in its place. Vote for Super Dan!

In the days leading up to the vote, the vibrator became a secret selling point in the election. Kids I'd never met before turned up in the basement and didn't go home. Friday Danny might chill with the brainiacs who, like him, skipped a grade in math. Saturday might be devoted to the Mormon kids on whose ward ball team he moonlighted. There was also a crowd of cool kids whose sole identifying characteristic was wearing multiple knee-high socks and saying "Yo" a lot. "Yo yo yo," they'd say when I came downstairs. "It's Marshall's bro bro bro."

What united these disparate groups was that buzzing appliance from Brookstone with the flat round head. Of course, the Back Massager Club didn't last long. For my brother and his friends, a communal masturbation tool was just a phase. All it took was one kid to say, "Yo, Marshall, that sounds really gay." And just like that, I was the only one jack hammering my genitals.

My inchoate sex life was not to be one of boys clasping hands as their bodies contorted in ecstasy. Still, for a few months, the basement became a jungle of jocks in basketball shorts whacking ping pong balls at each other's bare backs as they waited their turn to get off. A musky boy-mist hung in the air, airborne puberty. I'd come down to find five or six guys horsing around in

the guestroom. “Dude, Brandon just used it bare dick! He didn’t even have underwear on.”

And, from the stairs, I’d silently thank God.

Oozy’s attempted escape came sometime in the spring, when he took a chunk out of Danny’s index finger and scuttled over the molding at the top of the stairs, ricocheting discordantly off the piano a story below before finally hitting the carpet.

True to his demon nature, the iguana survived the fall. What he couldn’t survive was the subsequent blow to his reputation. “Fuck that little monster,” Danny said.

After Mom took Danny in for his tetanus shot, she swept Oozy into his cat cage with a dustbin and returned him to PetSmart for no refund. I was sorry to see Maria and Dad haul the UVB light and heated rock and glass enclosure to the trash cans in the driveway. It meant Danny and I weren’t going to share a bed anymore. With Oozy out of the picture, my brother had his room back and I was the one in exile. No more sleepovers or passing the massager back and forth, talking about basketball.

“But you can have your poster back,” Danny said.

“Wow. Thanks,” I said.

Somehow, bullets bouncing off that rippling S weren’t a turn-on with my brother’s tight smile on top. For as much as I would’ve liked to rip out the yearbook picture, how could I without hurting Danny’s feelings?

The first time a sticky, clear substance squirted out of me was during a humping session that April. I didn’t bother to hide my boxers under my dresser, like Danny did, and let the stain stay there on my Looney Tunes

pillow, daring Maria to ask about it as she changed my sheets. I'd linger in my room, letting her boast about her studious sons, all while trying to find the nerve to say, "You know, señorita, they masturbate, which I'm going to do as soon as you leave." Week after week, Maria arranged my pillows without ever bothering the stain. It stayed right where it was, on Tweety Bird's cheek.

Cold War Veteran

by Jeff Lambert

it's all on my skin
the time I forced myself to cry as I watched my dog die
I did feel bad - but I don't often cry so I had to just hold
her and wait for it to happen
as chemicals ran their course
my dad asked me to wash his hair so I did and
the hair came out in clumps and he let out a sigh
the sighs didn't sound like his
I think they were the hair's
as they clogged the drain
I was terrified
I never pour out bottles but I try to drink slower now
because you never know what happens
and I shouldn't waste things down the drain
I remember when my brother tried to tell me they would
never get a divorce
he talked slow because I was terrified and I remember
thinking he was such an adult and thank god and
I kept thinking about the reasons why and I felt like I
would probably go with mom
and that dad would be alone because I never saw him
with friends
I was worried about partial custody but I knew that he
didn't have time for much
he was with her that night
so he says he's sorry
he needed it

I remember studying for exams because I knew I had to
get a scholarship and am not good at exams
I really needed it so I worked hard and I didn't kiss a girl
for a long time so I took it slow
when I did
I just kind of let my mouth fall on hers but we were
both drunks and I think that's what we needed
the next morning Carl showed me a picture of her and I
was terrified that she would want to date
I didn't want to date Leah, I wanted to date Morgan
one night Morgan and I heard the weather sirens so we
were in the bathtub and she was terrified but she
wouldn't let me hold her so I just kind of sat there
I guess that's what she needed right then
she didn't want to be held often
the next day I found her hair in the drain and sighed and
I wished she had wanted to be held
we were taking things very slow and that was sometimes
too much for me
when it ended with her that was the only time I saw my
dad cry
it wasn't much but I saw it
I don't know if he forced it but it wasn't much

Midlife as a Tree

by David Olsen

Though stunted by shallow roots
and bent by Hebridean gales,
year by year I put on pounds,
expand my girth, aware
that when earth reclaims me
in an unattended death,
the doctors will discover
strange anatomical things:
my trunk has annual rings.

Framed

by John Mitchel

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>she had a photo of edie sedgwick on the wall shadow boxing the warhol quote: “She had a poignantly vacant, vulnerable quality that made her a reflection of everybody's private fantasies.” it’s like you can still hear warhol whining through the glass. some days I’d show up drunk and bang into that black wood frame and once it tore my bukowski shirt and i stumbled and tried to tear it off the wall. (bolted.) warhol, i’m glad you’re dead but aren’t we all?</p> | <p>she had a photo of edie sedgwick on the wall shadow boxing the warhol quote: “She had a poignantly vacant, vulnerable quality that made her a reflection of everybody's private fantasies.” it’s like you can still hear warhol whining through the glass. some days I’d show up drunk and bang into that black wood frame and once it tore my bukowski shirt and i stumbled and tried to tear it off the wall. (bolted.) warhol, i’m glad you’re dead but aren’t we all?</p> |
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“Hats, Gloves, Changing Times”

by Billy M. Pullen

I WAS IN THE 4th grade when Lois Fuqua Varnell, Associate Home Economist of Monroe County Mississippi, came to Greenwood Springs Elementary School to preach 4-H Club. And preach she did. Mrs. Varnell was the Highest Reverend of all things 4-H. Tall and soaring even taller with her ubiquitous hat and with striking strawberry blonde hair, she made her entrance to our special assembly. “Head, heart, hands, health—these are the four H’s that will change your life,” mandated Mrs. Varnell. She anointed me to lead the 4-H Club pledge: “I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country.” The pledge was on a laminated, homemade poster with stenciled magic-marker letters in for me to read. The words to the pledge were inscribed in green on a white flag with a huge green clover. With further panache, Mrs. Varnell helped herself to our school piano and led us in the song “I’m Looking Over a 4-H Clover that I Overlooked Before” sung to the familiar tune of “I’m Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover.”

After that day in 4th grade, the next ten years of my life were spent earning medals in public speaking, conservation, citizenship, horticulture, and cattle judging. I even earned a medal in sheep shearing during the summer, in Mississippi. Public speaking was

required for all the categories. We had to talk our way through it all, even justifying why one steer would likely have better steaks than another, why castration was better for growing beef cattle, and even why a good citizen should obey the law by being against integration. In Monroe County, Mississippi, Mrs. Varnell was omnipresent. She spoke at Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, and Lion's Club meetings. These predominantly male clubs in those days always gave an attractive woman a hearty welcome. Mrs. Varnell relished the attention, too. The men stood when she stood and practically ran over each other to help into her chair. Long divorced from a man she had met while working as a chemist on the Manhattan Project in Oakridge, Tennessee, Mrs. Varnell loved being a single woman. If there was a piano in the meeting room, Mrs. Varnell would play "America the Beautiful" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The men would get all watery-eyed at the phrase "His Truth is Marching On." She would take a bunch of us 4-H'ers in her 1965 Buick station wagon and pass around homemade cookies and brownies while driving. "I've got the future of Monroe County here with me today," she would tell all the men at these meetings as she gestured toward us. The beam on her face was infectious as she showed us off in our 4-H attire: boys with green blazers and white shirts, and girls with green and white striped dresses. Many times, after she finished her speech, she would have us speak, too. Once I had to stand on a coca-cola box because I was too short for the podium. She had given us all index cards which had typed quotes for us to memorize. "Give me liberty or give me death!" and "I am the

master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul!” were among my favorites. Standing on the coca-cola box added to my special oratorical power.

Besides all these community clubs, Mrs. Varnell even invaded some of the churches by establishing 4-H Club Sunday evangelizing the evangelizers with the merits of what 4-H Club could offer. No one at the Church of Christ even realized that they had allowed a woman to speak in the pulpit until after Mrs. Varnell, adorned in sartorial splendor with hat, gloves, and fur collar, had finished her spiel, shook hands with the deacons, and driven away.

My best friend Dennis Waldrop and Jeanette Thomas, the daughter of Greenwood Springs Postmistress Mary Agnes Thomas, and I often populated Mrs. Varnell’s 1965 Buick Station Wagon. Special trips included the two-hundred mile-trip to Jackson, usually for an awards banquet. While Mrs. Varnell drove, we entertained ourselves with the alphabet game. I think that’s the name of it. For example, if I were first I’d say, “A, my name is Adam, my wife’s name is Alice, we live in Alabama, and we sell apples.” I still remember Dennis who often got Z. “Z, my name is Zeke, my wife’s name is Zsa Zsa, we live at the zoo, and we raise zebras.” We must have skipped “X.”

Sometimes Mrs. Varnell wanted us to practice our gratitude speeches for the banquet, which always included thanking the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service for sponsoring 4-H clubs in the state, the various community clubs, our parents, and God. “Don’t forget to thank Monroe County Rotary Club,

Frank's Barber Shop, and Velma's Nibble Nook. They sponsored this trip." Velma was Dennis Waldrop's aunt and Jeanette Thomas's first cousin.

Mrs. Varnell knew how to work the room at these occasions. Upon entering the banquet room, she would size up the room, and whisper to us, "The bald man in the blue tie, Mr. Edgar Roberts, is Vice-President of Mississippi Concrete Company—he was most generous to 4-H club last year. The lady with the tall blue hair is Miss Ollie Dee McWhirter, state chairman of Mississippi Garden Clubs. They sponsor all of our 4-H horticultural and conservation projects. Be sure to go over and shake hands with them." Mrs. Varnell gave us a gentle push and followed our handshakes with "You look mighty pretty in that color, Miss Ollie Dee." After greeting Mr. Roberts, he would wink at us and say, "Who's this good-looking woman that drove ya'll down here?" On the return trip after collecting our trophies, certificates, and occasional cash, we often celebrated with a boisterous rendition of a 4-H club song:

*The peppiest club I ever I knew
It never comes apokin'.
4-H club, 4-H club, the peppiest club around.
It's good old-fashioned P, E, P!
It's really quite a notion.
4-H club, 4-H club, the peppiest club around.*

Mrs. Varnell even came to our house way out in the country and coached me on special projects. One visit was to help me earn my leadership medal. I had to memorize a speech about improving your personality, "Making Deposits to Increase Your Life Choices." I

covered a tall rectangular box with butcher paper and labeled it, "Your Personality Bank." Yellow, round cardboard pieces were marked, "Positive Attitude," "A Firm Handshake," "Be Positive," "Smile". I used yellow, because it was the closest color to gold. As I waxed eloquently and smilingly, I would deposit these big coins. "Make you sure you maintain eye contact with your audience while you put the personality coins in," Mrs. Varnell told me. "And keep smiling! You can't be positive unless you smile!" This particular speech I did on improving your personality was a big hit for a thirteen-year old boy. After winning district and state contests with this speech, I delivered it all over Monroe County to various churches and civic groups, all booked by Mrs. Varnell. Other projects such as these took me every year to district contests at Mississippi State University in Starkville, state contests in Jackson, and national contests to Chicago, Washington D. C., Indianapolis, and Omaha where several celebrities such as the Cowsills, Pat Boone, and Lassie appeared. I think Roy Rogers brought Trigger to Chicago.

During my junior and senior years of high school, I missed several days in school to attend these contests and conventions. Daddy used to worry about me missing school, even though the school always excused my absences. Mrs. Varnell eased my father's concern by making sure my out-of-state visits got front-page coverage in the local newspaper. The year our horticulture team won state, there was a photo of Miss Ollie Dee McWhirter handing me a check for five hundred dollars. Everybody in Monroe County wore me out asking me if they could borrow some money.

They were probably joking, but I don't think they realized the five hundred dollars was to cover traveling expenses for the horticulture team's trip to the national contest. Also, my father never got tired of hearing people tell him that they had seen my picture in the paper.

Once, I was chosen to lead the Share the Fun Hour at the state convention in Jackson and led all the delegates in singing a Mississippi song. Here I was in full 4-H regalia, a forest green blazer, white shirt, with green and white necktie, standing in front of about five hundred 4-H'ers belting out:

Go Mississippi! Keep rolling along!
Go Mississippi! We're singing your song!
M, I, S, S, I, S, S, I, P, P, I!

Around 1968, the 4-H clubs of Monroe County integrated. Many 4-H club sponsors quit and the fate of the program's success, most of it because of Mrs. Varnell's leadership, was in question. Miss Brewer, my 5th through 8th grade teacher at Greenwood Springs, was my 4-H sponsor. My older sister had watched Miss Brewer cry when James Meredith integrated Ole Miss and when President Kennedy was assassinated. In 1968, I watched Miss Brewer cry when Martin Luther King was assassinated. That summer, Mrs. Varnell rallied with Miss Brewer, and another white leader, Mrs. Leonard Ross, from over at Bartahatchie. To most of Monroe County's surprise, Mrs. Varnell was not about to let integration ruin 4-H Club.

I had assumed that because Mrs. Varnell was a graduate of the "W," Mississippi State College for Women, (now Mississippi University for Women) she

promoted the epitome of the advancement and preservation of white Southern womanhood. Everybody at Greenwood Springs assumed she would join in with the fear, anger, and prejudice. Concerned? Yes. Afraid? No. Fear was not in Lois Fuqua Varnell's vocabulary. Even the governor of Mississippi had told her that she was ahead of her time.

The first integrated 4-H Club meeting took place in the fall of 1968 at the Monroe County Courthouse. I think we all gathered for a lecture and exhibits on horticulture, a favorite subject of Mrs. Varnell, who eventually served many terms as State Garden Club President. A goal for earning the 4-H club horticulture medal was to be able to identify, from endless slides and pictures, genres of trees, shrubs, landscape designs, and even the early stages of diseases that threatened local crops and flowers. For us 4-H'ers, knowing the difference between a sycamore leaf and a poplar leaf was the difference between winning 1st and 2nd place. Mrs. Varnell had even set up potted displays of shrubs, for us to determine if they had been trimmed properly.

Mrs. Varnell stood at the podium welcoming what at first seemed to be an all-white crowd. "I am so pleased for this turnout and to know that this community loves 4-H Club as much as I do." Mrs. Brewer and Mrs. Ross led the applause and all the parents joined in. Mrs. Varnell smiled and continued, "I want everybody to know that this meeting is for all of Monroe County." She emphasized "all." More applause followed. Mrs. Varnell continued, "I believe everybody will leave here today with a little more knowledge of horticulture," Mrs. Varnell began. "I want to thank Resa

Brewer, Mrs. Leonard Roberts, and Pocahontas Roberts for helping with all this lovely displays.” Pocahontas was the only black person in the crowd, but no one seemed to mind. Her mother, Willie Mae, had worked at the school cafeteria for decades. Mrs. Varnell went on longer than usual, and to this day, I think she was stalling. Just when we finished the 4-H pledge with the words, “...and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country,” lo and behold a carload of black girls pranced in nearly thirty minutes late. Mrs. Varnell’s eyes bugged out. No one came late to her meetings. The girls talked while Mrs. Varnell was still talking. Her eyes were about to explode. I thought she might choke them to death, but instead, she breathed deeply and announced that we could take a break to look at all the exhibits. Then, Mrs. Varnell motioned for Pocahontas Roberts, the sole black 4-H leader who had been sitting in the back, to come to her side. “Poke, you’ll have to handle this. If these girls plan to be 4-H’ers, they have to follow the rules like everybody else. I know you wouldn’t put up with this tardiness and talking, would you, Poke?” I’ll bet that no white woman, except Mrs. Varnell, ever called her Poke.

“Don’t you worry about it, Mrs. Varnell, I’ll take care of this.” Pocahontas then marched over to the girls who were all dressed in green and white dresses, the proper 4-H attire. Obviously, Mrs. Varnell had developed a friendship or a special bond with Pocahontas, who, like Mrs. Varnell, also created an indelible impression. The name fit Pocahontas. Decked out in hat and gloves, she was a statuesque, dark-skinned African-American woman, who held her head up like an

Indian Chief. Mrs. Varnell's eyes were still swelling, but Pocahontas pranced over to the late girls, breathed in heavily, and pointed her index finger in a staccato-like punch on every syllable: "All right, now, you all think you gone mess up the 4-H Club in Monroe County by sashayin' in here late and runnin' your mouth while Mrs. Varnell is talking? Huh? I tell ya'll one thing, me and Mrs. Varnell is here to keep 4-H Club in Monroe County at the top of the state, AND if Mrs. Varnell or me says for you to be here at nine o'clock in the morning, you better have your big black ass over here on time." Pocahontas's index finger continued the staccato movement. "AND, if I catch you talkin' while Mrs. Varnell is talkin', I'll throw you outta here with my bare hands." The girls' eyes protruded. One of them spoke for them all, "Yes ma'am." Pocahontas adjusted her hat and began pulling off her gloves one finger at a time. She walked over to Mrs. Varnell and declared, "You gotta let me handle stuff like this. I'm the one that knows how to talk to these gals." She turned to leave and then glanced back. "They'll be on time at the next meeting, and they won't be no talkin' either." I thought then that Mrs. Varnell had met her match, but the "match" was on her side. Pocahontas knew that she was the one to discipline these girls, and she knew that Mrs. Varnell needed her. Pocahontas also knew that she was the one who could talk that way and get away with it.

I have often wondered how long Mrs. Varnell and Pocahontas had known each other before that event, and I have often wondered if Mrs. Varnell had actually staged that event. It was perfect theatre. The parents

needed to see that Mrs. Varnell would not bend her rules for the new era. They also needed to see Mrs. Varnell let Pocahontas have the reins in a situation that could have turned into one of the many notorious riots in 1960's Mississippi.

I asked Mrs. Varnell years later about all those hats, because very few women were still wearing hats and gloves even then. She looked at me and announced, "A career woman had to wear a hat then. When I walked into a conference room with businessmen, I didn't have to worry about a man asking me to make coffee or make copies." Mrs. Varnell and Pocahontas had shared yet another bond. No professional man would have ever dared to ask them to make coffee.

Roux

by Kayla Baugh

sidewalk cracked, splintered nail bed
jazz fills my ears like warm liquid
and my nose bleeds smoke
lukewarm
while the stars hang crooked
like glass ornaments long forgotten
that refuse to fall for fear of shattering

Museum Pieces

by D.E. Kern

He'd serve as an angle, at 115 pounds, the Air Forces' uniform slack, more room to spare than he enjoyed in North Africa. Food from the bazaar gave him dysentery; chow hall stuff was worse. But the numbers on the scale didn't matter, not with 8,000 pounds strapped to his belly, minus a few tons for long-range work. He opened the door, flashed a short-handed smile, pointed to a seat, and saddled off to quiet the stereo, where Glenn Miller soared through "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You." Laid out on his table like battle plans, snapshots and clippings straight as his ribbons tell the story of an *Innocent Warrior* — report of the raid he led on Messina, B-24s skimming the water, nearly caught in the aftershock of their own bombs.

He found an equation for keeping the body count down, insisting they hit ports, factories and supply lines, but never aunts, sisters, mothers, nor their nursing babies. And when it was over, two shots of whiskey and a swing around the floor with a WAC was the next-best thing to forgetting. "In the Mood" buoyed him in a manner The Liberator couldn't, so he smuggled a transistor on any trip across the Pyrenees, imagined he had an orchestra for escort, questioned his near-fatal penchant for volunteering and refused to count his missions, concentrating instead on the oddity created by the strains of "American Patrol" commingled with the smell of fresh goat dangled by a hook in the heart of Tripoli's bazaar.

The aging Liberado's watch, unencumbered, spun about his wrist, and I imagined his mind in flight to 1944. He told me he loved to bathe in the Mediterranean as much as he hated that muddled war, where nary a refugee resembled Mussolini. He smiled, recalled the nightlife in Cairo, said he'd rather dance than fight. Marking the downbeats in "Little Brown Jug" with a frail finger, he mourned the loss of culture, the private collections carted off by Hitler's bandits. Now his plane was a museum piece, and he pondered—hand cupping chin, elbow on table—

if he was a relic too. “Think I rank a ride?” he asked, already yielding the ground he really wanted. “It’s such a nice bird to fly; there’s nothing up there but you and God.”

Mountain Sickness: Selections from the Author's Bedroom Journal in Guayaquil –

by Connor Bjotvedt

I REACHED THE PEAK of the mountain Cotopaxi at four in the morning on the third day of my walking. It was the middle of winter and a fresh snow had fallen the hour before. I felt the sense that I would never know another moment of being so alone. The fresh snow had not been touched yet. The condor that called this mountain its home had not yet awoken, in this early hour.

I had come to Quito in the spring and had spent my time with a woman named Xiomara. She was Mayan, and very beautiful. She had emigrated from Honduras the month before. She was unable to work in the cities. She was not educated. Her father had been a farmer and had hoped for a son. When she was born, her father took her to the orphanage in Santa Rosa and left her with the nuns. They kept her until she was eighteen. On her last day in the orphanage, the nuns gave her four hundred Lempira - roughly twenty dollars American.

She bought a train ticket to Quito using the money the nuns gave her. When she arrived she stayed on the streets. She slept in bundled, and bloody, tarps from the town's butcher shop. She looked for jobs in the markets for the first couple weeks. She ate loose food out of the

gutter like the city's birds. She worked briefly for a fat man who sold cigars and grain. He was rough with her.

She quit her job in the market after he threatened to beat her for spilling grain in the alley behind the market building. That afternoon she was found by a local priest who offered her sex in exchange for a bed that night. She accepted and slept with the man.

I found her later the next day. She was sitting on the steps outside the Catholic Church. I had come to pray and ask for safe travel from St. Christopher. She was holding her left hand over her eyes to block the sun as I walked up the stone steps towards her.

“Sir? Sir? Can you help me? I have no money, and no food. Anything you have would help.”

“I have some here.”

I bent down to meet her eyes. She had wonderful green eyes. I handed her twenty Sucres and left her there. I prayed to St. Christopher and left the remainder of the money I had brought in the offering. I left the church and walked down the street towards the main square of the town. This section of the city was beautiful. The church walls were tall and white and surrounded by graying marble steps. The windows were wonderful glass depictions of the saints holding lambs and the children. The golden cross at the top of the foremost steeple had begun to chip away as the years and wind took their toll. The cheaper lead body had begun to show through the fading golden skin.

The street had worn to an uneven ocean of brick and gravel. The houses that lined the opposite side of the street from the church were lush colors of turquoise, magenta, and sea foam green. Their roofs were lined in

white trim and topped with coppered sandstone tiles that shone brightly against the afternoon sky. The air along the street smelled of spices and flour tortillas from the food stalls surrounding the main square.

I had walked thirty paces from the church when I heard the hard stepping of a body behind me. I turned to face the noise. A waterfall of hair bounced and swayed along her shoulders and in the wind as she ran to catch up to me.

“*Señor, señor*, please...”

I stood looking at her, captured by her movements, until she stood at my feet. She wore a green dress. The pattern of the dress was something I had never seen before. Hard mountains of white peaked lace and swooping valleys of blue below it, carrying it. They met and tied themselves together under her breasts. Her feet were bare and had bled over themselves; however, the blood had hardened to a maroon brown across her toes.

“*Señor*, please, take what is left.”

“I meant for you to keep it all.”

“I did not need it.”

“Did you eat?”

“Yes, now please, take what is left.”

I took the money from her hands, three Sucres and a small commune of change. I put the money in the breast pocket of my shirt. She turned to leave me and, as she did, I felt my hand meet her to stop her.

“What is your name?”

“Xiomara.”

“Do you have a place to go?”

“I do not.”

“Well, come with me. I have rented an apartment in the city for the year.”

“No, *señor*, that is too much.”

“Please, come with me.”

We walked together and she told me of her first days in the city, and the man that she used to work for in the market. We passed the square of the town. There was a large fountain in the middle of the square. It dressed itself in stone flowers, and, carved in the center, was a lighthouse with gulls and ships dancing around it. The water flowed from the mouth of a condor down three levels of pools to the foot of the fountain. The women of the city circled the square selling bracelets and paper dolls to the white travelers. Children walked around carrying open cases of cigarettes and loose tobacco, which the men of the city bought from them. The food stalls filled the air with sweet smells.

We walked to my apartment and climbed the outer staircase to the third floor. The room was simple: a single bed, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The bed was worn and the middle concaved and formed to the bodies of past visitors. The sheets were royal red and the skirt was an off white. A single painting hung opposite of the bed - a birthing house high atop the Andes Mountains. From the window you could look out over the town, the church loomed high over the smaller homes that surrounded it. The kitchen was simple with a small sink, an old stove, and a small refrigerator. The cabinets that surrounded the walls would have been beautiful at one time. The doors hung loosely from their housings and the staining had begun to pool and thicken the lower lips of their faces.

“I like it here.”

“I had hoped you would. It’s nothing special, but it is a place for you to stay.”

“Thank you.”

We spent the next seven months together in the apartment. I would paint her while she lay naked on the bed some nights. I would cover her breasts with the bedsheet, and her legs. Her stomach, neck, and arms would still show. Her skin was light, her hair long and light brown. Her vivid green eyes captured my brush and, with each painting, shone brightly on the canvas. I would sell my paintings in the town square below us. She would cook for me in the evenings and I would wash her hair in the sink in the bathroom.

We slept together for the first time in late July. I grew to care for her. She began to fall sick in August. I did not know why she could no longer eat and began to wither away. She stopped cooking for me and would not let me wash her hair. She would sleep for more than half the day, the sun would wake her as it crept through the sky in the mornings, but would soon lull her back into slumber. The moon would again briefly wake her, but could not lift her from the bed.

I left for the square the morning of the seventeenth in October. Her body had wilted in to the bed and had conformed to the concaved heart of the mattress. Her skin was worn tight around her body, her bones were pressed hard against it and curved and broke her skin into forms that resembled the streets we used to walk on.

I returned that night having sold nothing. The room was dark when I entered. I had forgotten to leave

the light on for when I returned. The light in the ceiling flickered to life and in the bed lay a single feather of a condor. The feather was a deep black with flecks of pure white dripped from the base to the tip. I stood there motionless before the bed. It was November before I took another breath.

I drew a string through the feather and hung it from my neck. With every breath I felt my muscles loosen from their motionless rest. I walked to the bathroom where I looked into the mirror and saw the bones sticking out from under my eyes. My cheeks pressed against the concave mouth that they walled and supported. The bones of my shoulder stuck through the skin and the left had begun to tear from the bone's sharpness. Blood had begun to drip down my chest some time ago and had hardened over and over creating a current of maroon and copper streams.

I planned to leave this place at the end of the month and return home to Guayaquil. I began to regain my strength around the twentieth and planned to leave early. The winter was bitter to the town and snow had shut the trains down until the end of the year. I returned to the apartment to wait out the year. I climbed my way up the stairs to my floor. I opened the door, the daylight sun illuminating the room and casting a single beam over the bed where Xiomara used to lay. There on the bed stood a condor, its wings extended and touching both walls of the small room - its chest as big as mine, its eyes as green as hers. I stood in the doorway of the room as it stood and watched me. As I began to enter the room and walk towards it, the condor began to turn and faced the window. It walked onto the frame of the

window and took flight. I watched as it sailed through the air towards the mountain south of the town.

I left the morning after its departure. I walked to the base of the mountain and looked towards the sky where the peak met the lower clouds. Its jagged rock face showed signs of age; the stones at the bottom had been worn smooth from their falling along the mountain's slopes. The rocks held a blueish tint to them and reflected the sun's light that fell on them.

I began my journey late in the afternoon hoping the prayer from months earlier would keep its blessing. I left two coins from my pocket at the base of the mountain for further worship to it. With further sacrifice, I began to climb.

I was forced to sleep on the south face of the mountain on the night of the second day of the climb. A western wind had cut through the skies and brought with it a storm. Snow began to fall around eight in the evening. I found an outcrop of rock that would shelter me from the winds and the snow. I closed my eyes and began to dream of Xiomara. In the mornings she would wake before me and cook three eggs. She would walk over to me and brush my face with her palm. When my eyes opened to meet her, she would lean in and kiss my cheek.

This dream soon cut quite violently to our last month spent together. I would wake and cook eggs. She would not eat. She would lie in bed without a word. I could not brush her face, nor kiss her. Every movement, touch, glance drove her to pain.

I awoke to a cold air down my neck. The blizzard outside had begun to slow and the flakes of snow drifted

lazily through the air. I walked out to meet them. They rested on my face and began to melt from my warmth. I took up my ascent again and faced the peak of the mountain, the moon as my guide. The clouds had parted enough to gift me with light. The snow in front of me lay undisturbed, the silence of the chilled air engulfed me, and the stars shone brightly overhead.

I reached the peak. The path before me was unclear, yet behind showed the struggle of every step. The fresh snow had begun to cover my tracks as I had walked further; only ten steps still sunk below the surface of the white blanket. With the path in front of me unclear, I sat in the interstice between directions.

I sat there in the snow until the morning sun came to break the cool of evening and split the clouds that still formed over the peak. The sun began to shine off in the distance and the clouds began their retreat. I stood again and faced the summit of the mountain. There, standing wings spread, was the condor. Its stare focused on me, pulling me forward. I approached it, each step cutting through the deep snow. I soon stood a few paces from the animal. It closed its wings and covered its breasts.

I walked on further and was soon at the feet of the animal. It lowered its head and stared into my eyes. I met its gaze in fear. My eyes were heavy and almost closed as I looked upon it. It pulled its head back from my face and began to open its wings. As the feathers lifted from the bottom of its chest, the feet of a woman began to unwind and lift from within it. As it opened further, the full form of a woman became exposed. The feathers opened to the view of her legs, hips, stomach,

breasts, and face. Xiomara walked out from the open cavity of the bird. Naked as when I painted her, she stood in front of me.

I walked to touch her. I raised my hand to meet her face. The condor struck the top of my hand in defense of her. It forced its neck in between us and locked its eyes with mine. I pulled my hand back to my chest and began to soothe it. I stood and stared over the head of the condor and into her glowing green eyes.

“My love, what have you become?”

“I have become the city where you sleep, the land on which you stand.”

I turned and looked away from her - over the city, the valleys, and down the slopes of the mountain. I saw no image of her in this place.

“You are not in this place. You are not the land beneath my feet, the air in my lungs, or the snow on my face. You are not the water of the fountain, the steps of the church, or the bed in our room. You have never been this city. I found you. I took you and cared for you. You are of me and my doing. You are my image. My picture on canvas.”

I kept my gaze towards the land. I walked farther from her. I felt the snow break under my feet, the air kiss my neck and brush my face.

“Why have you picked this fate?”

“I was taken by the bird to the mountain top and picked by the gods. I have become the voice of death, the Santa Muerte.”

“Why have they picked you?”

“I was taken and left for dead in their city. So the people will know the fate that they left for me. They will know what they have left me to be.”

“My—”

“I will leave you now. I will wash this town of its image, and rebuild it in my own. It will know what it left me to be.”

With those words the wings of the condor began to coffin Xiomara. She walked towards the chest of the animal. She crossed her arms and was soon folded into its body again. The condor bowed its head to me and leapt from its perch. It took to the sky and flew north until I could not see where it would go, so that I may hope to follow.

I sunk farther into the snow below my feet. The sun had fully perched itself in the sky and rested over the eastern breadth of Quito. I rested for a night atop the mountain. The air was warm and snow did not fall. The next three days I spent in descent from the condor’s perch.

I returned to the Church where we met. The cross atop the steeple had peeled further. The sun bounced off the darker lead and shone over the homes that skirted its steps. The marble had been washed clean. The streets had been paved over. The windows in the church had been exchanged as well the saint of worship. A statue of Santa Muerte was placed above the oak doors of the church. The windows showed skeletons carrying men’s bodies to their graves, and women at the feet of each praying. The homes around the church had faded - the turquoise, magenta, and sea foam green faded into a single shade of gray. Their rooftops no longer shone

with a copper tone, but instead had fallen into a muddy brown, staining the white of the trim underneath. I returned to the apartment and waited until spring. Then I took a train home.

Dying Breed (original)

by Chrystal Berche

I stop on the trail
Writing
stream of consciousness
poems
that roll
and jangle
through my head
as I walk
words
so loud they drown
the cicadas
and the distant
pop, pop, pop
of the guys on the range
getting ready
for the season to hunt
with their camouflage guns
their grizzly chew
their backwards hats
proudly perched
on heads just beginning
to turn gray
real men hunt
and ride
and fix the things that break
before you ask them
a dying breed

in a land of slackers
and hackers
and video game
whores who won't lift a finger
unless it's to press
a button
they'd all be dead
if the game zombies came
can't kill the undead
with down, down, back, up arrow, green.

Envy

by Chrystal Berche

Woman in baby doll top
Swings leg over Harley
Black chain motorcycle boots
Jingle jangle as she walks
Hips sway to unheard music
Eyes follow her every move
She buys rum cherry ice cream
From the shop on the corner of Main
And sits in the shade to eat it
God I hate her
Don't even know her
Never seen her before
But she can eat ice cream and still stay skinny

Manual

by Alan Orr

WE'RE LEARNING FIRST GEAR today. A little gas and less clutch. We're driving from the apartment building where we've been boxed in for six months. Fourteen floors, not counting the first one. No balconies. Just a creamy red monolith where there's a living room-kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom that we call home.

First gear is a gear we'll come back to, to contend with its complexities.

In second we watch the traffic rules we knew well back home get thrown out the window like a beer can from a "sad" man. Muslims only drink when they're sad, a coworker told us. In the hills, on the dirt roads outside the city, there's evidence of a lot of sadness. The hills are alive with the sound of cars parked, Turkish music pumping, cigarettes being drawn from, and older gentlemen resting their bottles on the trunk of the car having a gran— sad ol' time.

Our progress with third gear is halted by, for lack of a better term, a Turkish round-about. It's the type you'd see in Britain, but with a traffic light at each of the roads coming into the round-about and at each of the quarter turns around the thing. While it's easy to criticize these things of being symptomatic of the lack of logic applied to civil engineering, doing so feels hypocritical. Who am

I to say anything? Doesn't my life have about as many traffic lights that flicker on and off at inopportune times at each indecisive juncture?

Are we staying another year here? Maybe. No. Probably not. Yes, but only in the eyes of those who are pumping us for an answer so that they can make a prediction about next year's numbers and so that we can have a safety net.

Before our drive yesterday, I blamed my wife for our indecision. Graceful as she is, when my tantrum was over, she said that she thinks that I see elements of myself in her and that she's a scapegoat for my own frustrations.

We're both tall. We both have blue eyes. Sort of. We both take about a thousand invisible trips around the block when we're deciding whether or not we should even take one.

In fourth gear we've made some progress. Our speed is up. On the highway it's easier to live in a foreign country. You can pretend you have a place to go. You get just as many stares as you would on any highway anywhere in the world during that moment of passing. It's relaxing. Containing.

In fifth gear, there is an illusion of flying. Transcendence. The moments in the day when you could make this life work for as long as you want. This feeling comes on the walk back to the office after a good

class. It comes on Saturday when you're returning home from a day trip with friends. It comes when the sun's red light rests on the edge of the horizon, and you're not worried about what's to come.

You're never in fifth for long. Realities disguised as those well-lit roundabouts are bound to appear. The man carrying sticks on his back steps into the highway. The dog trotting in the shoulder gets something thrown at it by a car going eighty.

Reverse is the same as first gear but backwards. Just like they told you in your driver's ed., put your right hand on the back of the passenger seat, look over your shoulder, and then give it a little gas as you let off the clutch. Stall. Don't worry. There's only about fifty cars headed for you, waiting, expecting, glaring. They want you to get your shit together and get out of the way.

I wonder about my sense of objectivity. As a traveler, do I ever see the world for what it is? Or, is it the local people who see my wife and me wander around like lost chickens; is it them who get the most candid glimpse into our beings? And is that why the stares are uncomfortable and why we are embarrassed to accept the help that is sometimes offered us? We by nature of our language, our skin tones, our hair colors, our values, our way of reasoning are inadaptable. Especially during this first year. Especially at first.

notes upon a barbed wire

by Jonathan Dick

i was born to rust, and cuss
because my mind, is my mind,
is my mind, grovelling
like belly punctured straight
as the infinite justification
for poor-being or flatfooted
reason, as a means to a beginning
like the sun before his stroke,
sentencing a perhaps blank
page stuttering
like a torn starfish in heat,
no longer my crusted limb.
no longer rusting, free the brain
and let in the err, damning
hope, barbed and wed.

No One Thinks He's a Creep

by Michael Jeffrey

I like watching you
Jog across the crosswalk
Ahead of the light
In boots with the fur.
Makes me think back,
To Junior year
Water bottles missing
Labels, and Meredith,
Who let us take turns,
and had her first kid
In rehab.

There's a song about
A possum in my ear
Finger strumming me home
To avenue C. Winter gray,
in April. Smell the river.
Forecast calls
For spring in a day.

You walk in front of me,
All black, because New York.
You won't ever see me.
Do all you pretty girls
Feel us watching you?

One in four,
So we've been told.

“Far too many,”
We say at the table
With desert menus,
Indifference.

Your ponytail, my phone
Corrects into a pint
As I type you into memory,
Hands in your jacket pockets
Stepping into Fed Ex
Empty handed.

There're birds out, and
Boys
Skipping school, wearing camo
Huddled around a single
Cigarette.

When I pass
The auto-doors, I peek in
And see you, I think,
Obscured in the reflection
Of the street
A disproportionate number
Of white cars passing by
In the accordion glass.

I want you to know me,
To smile
Like I wasn't following you.

I stop and listen

To the honking and
Kick air, and wait,
Scattering briefly
Pigeons poking at a puddle of puke.

Words and Music

by Steve Slavin

WHEN I GOT MY invitation to attend a performance that featured a couple of friends who would be reading their poetry, I immediately thought to myself, “Cheap date.” Only two bucks for an evening of poetry and avant-garde music? Now, if I could just convince someone to go with me.

When I asked Nora White Cloud – who had kept her name after a brief marriage to a man with a very dubious Native American lineage – she agreed that it sounded like fun. Like me, she thought most modern music was complete bullshit, but we both wrote poetry (in the 1980s, who didn’t?).

Although we had seen each other just once before, I liked Nora a lot. Very bright, kind, pretty, and seriously Catholic. She smiled a lot, and confided that she was “a hysteric,” but only under the right circumstances.

Nora was a social worker for a very poorly funded anti-poverty agency. When she won \$10,000 in her church lottery, she gave the check back to the church.

“*Why?*” I asked.

“Because I felt so sorry for the poor nuns.”

The musicale-poetry reading was held in a Lutheran church in Chelsea, a growingly popular neighborhood just above Greenwich Village. There was a wide center aisle, seating for about 400, and a raised

stage at the front. On the stage was a piano, a stool to the left, and a solitary music stand to the right.

I introduced Nora to some of the people I knew, and she seemed to be having a good time. Someone asked her if she was an Indian.

“Actually I am.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m from India. And I’m a cook in the *Royal Begali* on 6th Street.”

“You’re joking, *right?*”

I couldn’t resist. “No, it’s true! That’s how we met. I was eating in her restaurant and sent a dish back, with a note to the cook.”

“What did it say?”

“That the food tasted like the cook peed in it.”

“And that’s how you met?”

“That’s right,” said Nora. “I came out of the kitchen and told Steve he was mistaken. I assured him that someone *else* was the culprit.”

Nora and I found seats about 10 rows back, just off the center aisle. We were close enough to see everything, but far away enough in case the music was too loud.

The first performer was introduced. It was David. While always friendly in person, tonight he had a very somber expression. Slowly, he approached the music stand. Another man came out with a floor mike, which he plugged into a socket at the front of the stage. We were ready to go.

“This is *exciting!*” said Nora.

“Are you serious?”

She smiled. “Do I *look* serious?”

“Question answered,” I relied.

David gazed out at the audience, reached into his pocket, pulled out a sheet of paper, placed it on the shelf of the music stand, cleared his throat, looked out at the audience once more, and then... almost imperceptibly, the shelf slowly, very, very slowly, began to slide down the shaft. Everyone saw what was happening and a kind of murmuring began to grow.

David, of course, noticed the problem. After the shelf had declined about a foot, he calmly reached down, raised it again, tightened the large screw at the top of the shaft, looked out at the audience, cleared his throat, and then, just as he was about to read, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the shelf once more began to slide down the shaft.

Again, the crowd began to titter. And again, David made the necessary adjustment, this time tightening the screw as much as he could. But then, yet again, the same thing happened.

Was there a musician in the house? Luckily there were quite a few. A tall young man strode out on the stage to raucous applause. He bowed, raised the shelf, expertly tightened the screw, nodded to David, received another round of applause, bowed once again, and strode off the stage.

Now David was finally ready to read his poem. The audience was ready. We were his friends. We wanted this evening to be a great success. Well, you know what happened next. That’s right: very slowly the shelf of the music stand....

“This is *great!*” said Nora. She leaned over and gave me a big kiss. “Thank you for bringing me. This is the funniest show I have ever seen.”

“I don’t think they planned it this way.”

“Don’t you *see?* That makes it all the better! It’s spontaneous!”

“Yeah, it’s spontaneous all right.”

After the audience quieted, David, realizing that the show must go on, discarded the music stand, stood by the mike, and read his poem. When he finished, the audience applauded wildly. And David was thinking, “Strange. This poem has never gotten such a response.”

The announcer was back on stage. “We promised you a program of words and music. Are you folks ready for some *music?*”

“*Yes!*” we roared.

“Then with no further ado, Pierre Bezukhov will be singing an original composition, accompanied by pianist Andrei Bulkonsky”

“There’s something strange about those guys,” Nora whispered to me.

“You mean the way they’re dressed?”

“Yeah, why is the piano player wearing a pork pie hat? And that outfit the singer’s wearing? It looks like it’s from the 1940’s.”

“I think the piano player is supposed to look like he’s a songwriter from Tin Pan Alley. And the singer? He looks like what they used to call a ‘crooner,’ with the white sports jacket, open shirt collar over the jacket lapels, and baggy trousers.”

“That’s some pretty weird shit.”

“Nora, you’re telling *me?*”

The pianist began to play. That is, sounds were coming from the piano. Loud sounds. Random notes. Discordant chords. Maybe like the banging on the keyboard of a two- or three-year old who was being bad.

Again, the audience was murmuring. Bad sign. Maybe something was wrong with the piano, like it was with the music stand. But the pianist seemed unperturbed. In fact, he played with great *élan*! He gave every appearance that he was hitting exactly the right notes.

“Steve, I think the piano player might be insane. There is no *way* you can call that music. I took piano lessons for eight years, and trust me, I’ve never heard anything like *this*. In fact, this guy is so bad... he’s good!”

Still, the audience was polite. I did see a few people kind of shaking their heads, but there was no booing, or any other sound. Perfect silence, punctuated by strange noises. I noticed Joe Doyle sitting in the first row. He seemed to be laughing to himself. Maybe the music had gotten to him – and not in a good way.

Nora whispered, “I’m afraid I’m going to lose it, but I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“Are you talking about your hysteria?”

“Yes! If something makes me *really* start laughing, I can completely lose control. A couple of times I laughed so hard, I peed in my pants.”

“Better in *your* pants than in *my* food.”

“Steve, I’m warning you: don’t get me started.”

Now the singer was ready to join in. I wondered how anyone could possibly sing words to this music. I now found out.

He sang out a high note, a very low note, and then a whole series of other notes. Again, there was no rhyme or reason to his performance, nor was his singing even remotely coordinated with the piano playing.

Even their timing seemed way off. The pianist would stop playing while the singer continued. Or he would play a series of notes while the singer held a note three octaves higher.

Suddenly, Joe Doyle burst out laughing. He seemed completely out of control. He began pounding his fist on the stage. Nora immediately spotted him and burst out laughing. Within seconds the entire audience was in hysterics. We were all out of control. We couldn't stop.

And through all the laughter, the unflappable duo soldiered on. It wasn't until a couple of minutes after they finished that we were finally all laughed out. The announcer came back on stage.

"Thank you! Thank you! I didn't realize how many lovers of modern music are here among us tonight. Again, thank you!

"And now, as a special treat, we're going to hear the poetry of the great Guy Banning."

Applause.

"Those of you who are familiar with Guy's poetry know why he is one of only a handful of poets who almost make a living working at their craft. In fact, his creative talents are rivaled only by his great modesty. And so, in his stead, his dear friend, Patricia, will be reading two of his most memorable poems."

He nodded to Patricia and walked off the stage. Patricia was standing behind the mike, looking out at the

crowd. And among them was a guy who appeared to be very, very drunk. He had what looked like a fifth of gin or vodka, and he was climbing over the pews, offering swigs to random members of the audience. At the mention of Guy Banning, he thumbed his nose, and then began making a series of obscene gestures towards the stage.

Patricia remained unperturbed. That *really* set him off. “Are you going to stand up there and read that *shit* to us? Guy Banning? That no-talent fake? Hey, he can’t even *find* his way outta a paper bag, let alone write his way out. Guy Banning: go *fuck* yourself!”

“Who *is* that drunk?” asked Nora.

“That’s Guy Banning, the great alcoholic poet.”

“*Perfect!*”

Just then it finally dawned on Guy that it was his dear friend, Patricia, who was up there on the stage. He yelled out to her, “Hey Patti, yuh wanna drink?”

Patricia just smiled. There was nothing Guy could do or say that would surprise or upset her. If he needed to vent and to act out, she could wait.

I remembered how she almost always managed to say the right thing at the right time. Still, what could she possibly say *now*?

Finally Guy fell onto a seat, curled up, and immediately fell asleep. Except for his snoring, there was complete silence. Patricia now had everyone’s attention.

Still, she stood there silently, waiting, waiting. Finally, at exactly the right moment, Patricia looked out at the audience, wet her lips, and with perfect

enunciation, uttered a single word which summed up the entire evening: “*Fuck!*”

You're a dead man, Rocco

by Charlie Keys Bohem

What wild night is this, where
I now find myself?
The light has gone crazy, has
Come off its halter and
Runs rampant,
This light has learned to strike elsewhere, it is
A porous white which
Travels up the nose
To pull into its very tip and
Draw from the sinuses a demented blow,

Here, "Smells, it's only smells!"
A man on a crate
Is shouting, "Smells, it's only smells!"
Shut up, Rocco, shut up!

And how did you come to be
Here? On the Blade's Edge
Of the night?
The Blade's Edge Blade's Edge Blade's Edge,
Repetition is the revolution in the dredge of recollection,
Shut up, Rocco!

On the great glitch
Of the night,
It's daylight against black,
It is a tree in the middle of the asphalt, misplaced fractal,

Wild whirling like Cogs' arms,
Spitting bolts before the
Blast, but without 2002's doomed disuse,
Rocco, I will come up there myself!

Smells, smells, smells, it's only smells,
(And only one at that - the light) where are the rest?
Rest,

Windows spit yellow onto the curb,
Into old stone gutters, glowing,
Blade's Edge leads to Nether
And sure there it stands the
Black bay water, wood pillars
Railingless above its pillow,
'Ten-foot drop, it smells like fish and diesel fuel but I see
neither,
Rocco, you're a dead man,

People pressing gather now,
About a crate about the
Bile lights awash with
'Tirade, all perched, but
I, on this Blade's Edge, am
Precarious, never I ventured past the stand, the strand,
To the rippling shadow and the smells,
You're a dead man, Rocco, you're -

Standpoints

by Stephen Mead

For a while we sure were looking good—
No numbers on our shoulders or worry about plants—
Being clean for 3 straight weeks even,
being regular priests of the pavement in salvation
jackets:
imitation leather, mothball tweed...
God, man, what concessions we took
while running the confessionals, always listening,
on the look-out for strays, those hostage
desperadoes holding out on hold ups
or sending somebody down 'cause
that would mean taking blind alleys
& they still believed in decency,
or at least wanted to.

Yes, what a crazy bunch of nobody's all searching to
belong,
all attempting to get work & yet with some shred of fun
since danger's so demanding & the hardest thing's taking
fear by the hand, giving him coffee, a mattress for
flopping on.

Baby, stop shaking.
I'll hold you 'til those boots pass,
hide you from their target running risk by carrying guns.

See, there's not a single face to recognize.

No one turned us in & hey, aren't you still my James
Dean,
your tender passion far from twisted
by the razor-slashed jigsaw of this world?
Baby, remember the drugstore? Remember our business:
a prairie of prayers doled out like medicine
for cactus thorns, rattler bites, the mirage of fevers?

So just make like a cowboy & ride me,
ride this out, another midnight delivery
before the long home stretch
where those pistol packers won't notice because,
under cover, the night knows how angels glide.

England's

by Stephen Mead

Skies:

You chide

Their whiteness.

You cannot abide,

At least when seen on film,

The chalk of the tele, that grey

Of our own Cape whose dawn is often

Even at mid-day, & these sleepy

Noontimes usually our morning,

The groggy fog to shake,

While dreaming of tidal green,

The tang of a moor's clarity.

Thorn-gripped, dune-swept,

A Bronte geography, love, I,

Cloudy, like to imagine

The passing shadows of

When the air is Heathcliff's

Tempest heading out to sea &

Our own bony passion boat

Makes waves into pages

From those British books

I can only visit

While tied to your New England

Tracks

by Heidi Espenscheid Nibbelink

IN THE EARLY YEARS, after her hands became hooves, Debby would sometimes have Steve epoxy five popsicle sticks on each side, to help her remember having fingers. You could get a box of a hundred at the craft store for less than three dollars, not like when she was a kid building cabins for pioneer dioramas and would have to wash and save sticks from all the fudgesicles she ate. Sometime she even fished her brother's sticks out of the trash. If Steve unscrewed the bottle and poured a little onto a paper towel, Debby could dip the ends of her sticks into nail polish and walk around like that for a few days, until the sticks started breaking off when she carried in groceries or snagged them on the bed covers at night. It had been quite a while now since she'd gone to the trouble.

It's not like it wasn't an adjustment for all of them. Steve was one of those men who wanted a back rub every night, which Debby was happy enough to give him in the early love-besotted years of their marriage, but when Ashley was small she was too darn tired and would fall into bed at 8:30, leaving Steve with the final tooth-brushing and bedtime-story duty. She'd do it when he asked after Ashley started school and things got easier, but it wasn't a nightly thing anymore. After her hands became hooves, backrubs once again seemed important because it couldn't happen the old way. They developed a system of pressure and light pummeling

that seemed to satisfy Steve pretty well. And honestly the pummeling was easier on her than the squeezing and kneading had been before.

One thing that made her cry was when she couldn't braid Ashley's hair any more. Ashley had thick, luscious, brownish-red hair that looked like grownup hair on a little girl's body. Strangers remarked on it and often reached out a hand, almost involuntarily, breaking all the rules of Midwestern body space and privacy, to touch it. To tone down its exuberance some in public, Debby French-braided Ashley's hair every morning. Teaching Steve how to do that particular chore had been a real heartbreaker.

“No, it's under, not over,” she said.

“Hold it with your little finger and pull in the extra strand.” She couldn't demonstrate which was frustrating.

Steve threw the brush down in the sink where it clattered in an alarming way, and stomped out of the bathroom. Ashley started to wail. Debby got her calmed down and gave her some toast and by then Steve was ready to apologize and he did a pony tail for Ashley instead. After Ashley got on the school bus, Debby cried and cried, sitting dead center on the green couch and wiping tears and snot off her face first with one sleeve and then the other. Steve sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulder and just let her go. When she was winding down he said, “It's okay, honey. It's all gonna be okay. We all have something.” That afternoon he cut up a clothesline rope into equal lengths and tied them to the back of a chair and practiced. After that, he managed to keep Ashley in passable braids until she got old enough to do it herself. When Ashley

reached behind her head to braid, though, the motions her fingers were comfortable with resulted in a French braid that popped the braid part out so it ran down the back of her head in a ridge, instead of being tucked under so the crisscross was the main feature. Her way was pretty too, but a little unusual, and so attracted the notice they tried to avoid in the first place. That Steve is a keeper, though.

It's not like there were no advantages. Taking pans out of the oven without hot pads was one, as long as the pan had a large enough lip to hook onto. Debby sold her potato masher at a yard sale as soon as she realized she could mash with her hooves just as well. Better, even. She had a great casserole she made at least once a week with mashed potatoes, cottage cheese, and sour cream. Steve and Ashley loved her "special potatoes" but they had no idea there was cottage cheese in it, which they both professed to hate. Lately she'd taken to putting a little grated carrot in too, just for color, but not so much that the flavor got sweeter.

The year Ashley started middle school was hard on her and Debby both. Her happy, bright little daughter was suddenly sullen, prone to enthusiastic and byzantine phone conversations with friends, but when Debby or Steve asked her a simple question like, "How was school?" or, "Is there anything in your backpack I need to sign before tomorrow?" she acted like it required an unreasonable amount of effort to answer, "Fine" or, "No."

Debby knew it was misguided from the start, but since Ashley stopped telling her anything she wanted to get closer to her, to find out for herself somehow, so

she joined the middle school PTA. She'd managed to avoid these entanglements during Ashley's elementary years, using work as an excuse, but really she knew she couldn't keep up with the elaborate cupcake decorating and all the cutting letters out of construction paper with tiny, blunted scissors.

She drove herself to the first meeting. Years ago Steve had drilled into the steering wheel and attached two cup holders sticking straight out towards the driver's seat. Debby stuck her hooves in the cup holders and managed to steer just fine. She didn't know what the DMV would think, but she renewed her license by mail.

The PTA ladies met in the media center. It really was a media center instead of a library, there was hardly a book to be seen, nothing but row after row of computer stations. Debby felt nervous. Hyper-involved parents are a force of nature, and she tended to steer clear of them the way one takes cover during a tornado warning, for example, or boards up the windows when the hurricane approaches. She hoped there would be a few normal people like her in the mix. Carla Wingate was running the show. Debby recognized her from her real estate ads. Win Big with WINgate Realty!

"Ladies! I guess we are all ladies, as usual," Carla said. A few people laughed, since that seemed to be what Carla expected. She smiled at them over the top of her purple-framed reading glasses. "Our first fundraiser this year is the chili supper/bingo/jazz band night coming up at the end of the month. I hope tonight after we run through our agenda we can spend some time

making posters to hang around school. We need to get publicity out on this ASAP.”

Debby raised a hoof. Carla’s eyes widened, surprised, no doubt, that a newcomer would speak up first. “Yes?”

“Um, excuse me, but shouldn’t the children be making the posters? You know, so they can participate and have a meaningful role?”

Carla removed her glasses and let them dangle from the chain around her neck. “Well yes, obviously, the children will assist and have meaningful roles. Such as the jazz band children, there’s something meaningful, to provide the entertainment. And distributing the bingo cards and calling the numbers, that will be the children. Children will even help hang posters up tomorrow—I’ve got that arranged with Ms. Simmons. But in order for them to have something to hang, we’ve got to get a jump on this tonight.” Other mothers nodded assent. Debby crossed her hooves in her lap. A woman sitting behind her tapped Debby on the shoulder, leaned in and whispered, “Don’t mind Carla. This is her third kid to come through so she thinks she knows everything. Sit by me when we break into groups.”

When the poster-making time came, Debby followed the kind woman to a round table in the back with absurdly small chairs. “This is where they do the peer-reading groups with the elementary kids,” the woman explained, “so there are always some extra good craft supplies we can poach. I’m Ellen, by the way. Dion’s mom.”

“Debby. My daughter is Ashley, in the sixth grade.”

“Is she the Ashley in Ms. Tower’s homeroom or the one in Mr. Prince?”

“Um, Mr. Prince, I think.” Debby felt bad. This is exactly what she was talking about. She should know who Ashley’s homeroom teacher is. Middle school was so different, with all the class changes and going to different teachers for different subjects. Ashley didn’t tell her anything. “She’s the one with the braid.”

“Oh! That Ashley,” Ellen said in a knowing way. “Such pretty hair.” Debby wanted to ask Ellen more about how she knew Ashley, but then two other women joined their table and there was a flurry of arranging tag board and glitter and stamp pads and sharpies. “Okay,” said Ellen, “who has the best printing?” Silence around the table. “Not me,” Debby said. She saw one of the latecomers glance at her hooves and look away. “No one?” Ellen said, “Okay, I’ll do it. But what do we want to say? We need a theme.”

“How about,” the lady who glanced at Debby’s hooves said, “Make Tracks to the Chili Night?”

“Nice!” Ellen said, “I like it. Do we agree?”

Everyone nodded, and Ellen started printing Make Tracks to Chili Night, along with the date and time, on the poster boards and passing them around the table for decorating. When the board came to Debby, she flipped open one of the ink pads, pressed her left hoof in and then the right, and made track marks marching across the bottom of the cardboard.

“Oh Debby, that is so cute!” Ellen said.

The other two women agreed and Debby repeated her pattern on all four of their table’s posters.

When she got home, Steve asked, “How were the Stepford wives?”

Debby answered, “You know, it was kind of cheesy like you’d expect, but they’re really not all that bad. I met at least one woman who wasn’t a Stepford at all. “

Debby was not prepared for what happened when Ashley got off the school bus the next afternoon. Steve was home early to pack for a two-day business trip. Debby decided to get started on fixing dinner, since she wanted them all to sit down together in the dining room. Ashley burst into the kitchen and hurled her backpack on the floor, yelling, “Mom! How could you!”

Debby turned from the stove where she’d been placidly stirring risotto. Ashley was literally quivering with rage. *So that really happens*, Debby thought. She said, “Ashley, what in the world?” Steve stuck his head in the doorway, drawn in by Ashley’s ruckus.

Ashley held up a torn corner of poster board. “Make tracks? Make tracks to Chili night? And then you actually MADE THE TRACKS! Everyone knows it was you! The whole school was laughing at me! My life is over!” She rushed out of the kitchen. Debby stepped after her, “Ashley...”

Ashley stopped at the door of her bedroom. “Get away from me! I hate you!” She slammed her door shut. Debby stood in the hallway. Risotto dripped off her customized spoon onto the hardwood. Steve came up and put his arms around her shoulders. “It’s okay, honey, it’s okay. She’s thirteen. Today is a bad day. Tomorrow will be better. Just let her be for a while. Everybody has something.”

Debby turned and buried her face in his chest. His blue sweater felt scratchy and comforting at the same time. “I don’t want you to go away,” she said into the blueness. Steve said, “I wish I didn’t have to. It’s just for two days. I’ll talk to her before bed tonight. It will be okay.”

On Thursday night Debby’s laptop wouldn’t boot up and she had a spreadsheet to look at before Friday’s staff meeting. Why does technology always seem to know when the partner who is best at that sort of thing is out of town? On Steve’s last business trip she and Ashley lived without the internet for four days because something went wonky with the router which Steve was able to fix within about ten seconds of walking in the door. She let herself into Steve’s study to use the desktop he kept out of nostalgia; he only used it for household stuff, for work he had a laptop like everyone else. Debby opened the internet browser to go to her email, but noticed that YouTube was set as the home screen. *That’s weird*, she thought, and then, *I wonder what he’s been watching*. She hit replay and sat back as commercial after commercial began to play. Ads for dish soap. Ads for lotions. Ads for Bengay pain reliever. Nothing but hands.

Time Looks Up to the Sky

by Case Duckworth

I wish I'd kissed you when I had the chance.
Your face hovering there, so near to mine,
your mouth pursed - what word was it you pronounced?

When I think about you, something in my pants
tightens, and my thoughts run, and I realize
I should've kissed you when I had the chance.

I want that moment never to be past
like Keats's lovers on the grecian urn:
his mouth pursed, her figure turned to pronounce

her hips in ways that are not feminist.
But time strolls mildly on, not glancing at my
wish to kiss you when I had the chance,

whispered like a beggar to a prince
outside his palace: time looks up to the sky,
purses his lips, and hears what I pronounce

but pays it little mind. If he would just
turn back, bend down, and follow my design,
I would have kissed you when I had the chance,
as your mouth pursed and you pronounced goodbye.

Death on a Tuesday

by Sadie Miller

As a child I learnt to be good
To listen to my parents
Obeying their requests
Compliant
Eating greens
Biting down on pencil tops
Biting down on fingernails.

At 3pm on a Tuesday
I would meet my friend
Death
At the bottom of the garden.
Together she and I
Would decide whose turn to die
From my menagerie of toys and beetles.

The beetles were the best
Curling into a ball
Before they spilt their blood
Guts and all

The dolls were too compliant
As myself as a child
And made no sound as I cut their hair
Or ripped their clothes

At 3pm on a Tuesday

I would meet my friend
Death
At the bottom of the garden.
She would hold me in her lap
Listen to my tears
As their rang loudly against the paving stones
And the birds all flew away.

As a child I learnt to be bad
By watching my parents
When I thought I was obeying their requests.
Throwing away greens.
Biting down on sweets.
Biting down on fingernails.
Biting.

Without You

by Michael Wells

You are not here but I speak
as though you are—
conversing about the same clouds

overhead. The sky is darkening
there is poetry in the shapes
the cumulonimbus gives rise to.

I've been struck on some crosswords
for too long— I don't have to ask
for your help, you are right there.

I forget that you are not here
and yet another glance and I see
the crosswords are complete.

I talk about how the day has been long
without you, and I ask if you'd like to hear
a poem draft I wrote earlier in the day.

I begin reading aloud— you are not
really here but are collegial about it
none the less, tell me to tighten up
the second stanza.

Sapiens Sucks

by Walter Ruhlmann

To disconnect oneself,
to unwire from all the mass movements,
hysterical people made more hysterical
by the atrocities, the blood-filled images
spilling over from the box, the overloaded screens.

To enter blunt dumbness,
no matter what happens.
To unplug from the sound, the noise rather;
razor-like screams of children being torn apart,
women raped and men beheaded
by pigs whose silvery, sharp teeth penetrate
the human mind, the fandango.

To switch off the wide eye,
any blinking eyes blinded by purple lids,
liquid hums, snow flakes melting
on the carpet stained with tea,
semen maybe, an orgasmic mayhem.

To cherish these moments:
sofa crouching,
bed burrowing,
cat purring on the laps,
laptop off, folded back to its lair.

To forget existence, others' work or worries,

only mooning over the Earth,
the large crust ball formed then deformed,
through the geological epochs.

To feel the blows of a comet,
another gamma ray outburst,
the billion miles, the trillion stars
out of reach, under this bruised skin,
concealed deep in these tar-coated lungs.

Villain

by Jessica Klein

The guests of the asylum smashed
green olives, minus the pits, onto the walls.
In OM, ego disappeared, but insanity met
sanity for the first time. I awoke one mourning
with a mesh pattern on my face, drunk,
and filled to the surface with tension.
In the darkest of nights, the color of coal
collard my wrists, and bound me to my bed.
Daddy ran through my veins again, and I
fought in vain. His terror caught my heart
by surprise, and it knocked on my chest
to alert me. I wanted to sound the alarm,
but our fates mingled in bloody horror.
I resolved to stay silent *no matter what*.
My therapist, like God, knows what she
knew, and I dragged my consciousness
along on a ridiculous road trip. Vital to
efface this villain, I smashed my head,
as dumb as a big olive with a starved
pit, upon the bedroom wall. Wasted, the
ether helped me to weather the last
few slams. Blackness Bam. I awoke with
a fear which tore each eye in half, so my tears
ran amok while my face looked like a crime scene—
from a dream with one black anemone in
a hot pink vase. Yes, Daddy, I still nurtured

You with hopes of love, instead I beheld
You, the enemy, with a knife to carve up my breasts.

Drinking Coffee

by JW Mark

We drunk the poison deep and down
our chattered teeth were raw
so numb the gums, they plead to plead
reprieval for a sip

but black the brew, so swallowed slow
it struck the gut and stripped
all slime depleted shield removed so
anxious brain replaced

all calm desired mind denied
no gathered peace in sleep
but crazed cognition, brain to burn
ignited blood to blaze

Exiled in Bulgaria

by Joseph Giordano

BILLY JOHNSON'S WORK BOOTS crunched snow. It was dark as tar, and he smelled burnt wood from downtown fireplaces. A fifty-something man in a tattered Twins cap and a drab green army field jacket asked for spare change. Billy stuck his hand in his jeans and came out with the buck and a quarter he had left.

“Much obliged, brother.”

When the man walked away, Billy spotted the black Lincoln parked at the corner, and his stomach soured. There was no point in running. Billy knew the guy who got out of the driver's side, Teddy Stokes, a former heavyweight club fighter with puffy eyes and a nose that pointed left. Teddy walked to the sidewalk near the rear door as Billy approached him. “Mr. Kowalski would like a word.” Billy shrugged and got into the car.

Günther Kowalski had no hair; even his eyebrows were gone. Rumor was he'd been on chemotherapy. Kowalski's shrunken body was a wire hanger for his gray suit. His business was loan sharking and gambling. Billy didn't want to get into Kowalski's pocket, but when his mother was sick, he borrowed money. Billy still owed after she died.

Kowalski's voice was low. “Johnson, you're late with the vig.”

“You know what the economy is like. I can't even get ‘shape up’ work. I need time.”

Kowalski looked out the window. "Time . . ."
Kowalski stared at the snow that stuck to the glass. His breath fogged the window, and he wiped it away. "I need you to do a job. Do it, and we forget what you owe, and I put you back on your feet."

Billy sat back in the leather seat. "I don't do muscle work. Anyway, you have Teddy."

"It's not a muscle job. When you helped your mother, that showed respect. You need to respect me now."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I have a daughter, Molly, she's nineteen. She got on a bus to New York a few weeks back. She's probably living on the street, and I want you to bring her home."

"You want me to kidnap her? Come on, send Teddy."

"What are you, twenty? She'll take to you. Convince her to come home." Kowalski took a brown envelope from an inside pocket. "Here's a plane ticket to New York, a credit card in your name, and three thousand dollars for expenses."

Billy didn't take the envelope. "Why did she leave?"

"We argued, father-daughter stuff. The flight leaves tomorrow morning. There's a cell phone inside with my number on speed dial. I want daily updates."

Billy sat back. "How do I find her?"

"We're tracking the GPS on her cell phone. I'll call you with her location when you arrive in New York. There's a recent picture in the envelope. You'll get twenty grand when you bring her back."

Billy put his hand on the envelope, but Kowalski didn't let go. "Two things. You don't screw her, and you don't come home without her."

Billy blushed.

Kowalski released the envelope.

Billy sat in a Greenwich Village café with yellow walls and red accents. Bullfight and matador posters were everywhere, and wood-bladed ceiling fans stirred the air. He smelled saffron rice. Billy nursed a double espresso and watched Molly wait wormwood tables. Kowalski had called with Molly's general location, and Billy spotted her in the second place he looked. Molly had a pixie face and clipped her blonde hair up in a ponytail. She wore a tee shirt tucked into fitted jeans with, "Like them apples?" written across the front. Billy hoped to find her scared and alone, ready to return. But, if she lived on the streets, she cleaned up great in the ladies room. The longer Billy observed Molly, the more likely he felt her response would be, "Get lost."

Billy stepped outside to call Kowalski. The restaurant was on a tree-lined street of reddish brown brick-faced homes with stone stoops and black iron gates. Cars and delivery trucks belched fumes. Billy ducked into an alcove for quiet. Kowalski answered the first ring.

"Molly waits tables at the Andalusia café, and she looks fine, great in fact."

"Have you spoken with her?"

"No. I'm not sure how to approach her."

"Figure it out. That's why I'm paying you. Get her on the plane." Kowalski hung up.

Billy decided he would talk to Molly after her shift. He bought a NY Post and huddled in a doorway until she came out of the restaurant. Billy called out. She stopped, but kept her distance.

“How do you know my name?”

“Yeah, hi, sorry. My name is Billy Johnson. Your father is worried about you. He asked me to come see you. Don’t be scared, I just want to talk.”

“Don’t come any closer or I’ll scream. Who did you say sent you?”

“Günther Kowalski sent me. He’s sick, and he would like you to come home.”

“Günther Kowalski isn’t my father. I’m walking away Billy Johnson, and if you follow, I’ll phone 9-1-1.”

When she disappeared around the corner Billy called Kowalski. “She said you’re not her father.”

“I lived with her mother. That makes her my stepdaughter. Why are we having this conversation? Convince her to come home.”

The next afternoon, the café was almost empty. Billy sat at one of Molly’s tables. She had on a tee shirt with the words, “Stimulus Package.” When she saw Billy, she tossed the menu at him like a Frisbee.

“Are you stalking me?”

“No, hey, what’s with the sexy tee shirt?”

“If a guy thinks he has a chance to make it with me, I get better tips.”

“You’d get big tips even if you dressed like a nun.”

“A compliment gives you two minutes of my time. What do you want?”

“I have a business proposition for you.”

Molly put her hand on her hip. "I'm listening."

Billy fanned out the money he'd been given. "This is about three grand. Agree to come home with me and it's yours. I'm promised twenty thousand when you go back. I'll give you half. You don't have to stay. You can take off again but with a nice bankroll. What do you say?"

Molly looked at the ceiling. She blew out a breath. "Billy Johnson, you really are a hayseed."

"Kowalski wants to see you before he passes."

Molly smirked.

"If you come with me, I swear I won't let any harm come to you."

"Yeah? Who are you, Sir Billy Galahad?"

"If necessary."

"Well, you're kind of cute. Tell you what, give me a thousand bucks, and I'll think about your proposition."

Billy counted out ten one hundred dollar bills and handed it to Molly.

She tucked the money into her jeans. "This proves it. You were born under a mushroom cap."

"Well, if I was, you're from the same sleepy hollow."

"Yeah, well, I don't live there any more. High school soccer, pig roasts, and dates with aw-shucks guys who got greasy working on trucks and bought wrist-corsages. Not my idea of excitement."

"New York is chaos USA, yet you sit this horse like a Sunday mare."

"You need to order something before my boss throws us both out."

"I can't understand anything on the menu."

“Have the *tortilla de patatas*.”

When she returned with his order, Billy said,
“What’ve you been doing in New York?”

“I enrolled in acting class. Stick around and you’ll see me on Broadway.”

Billy raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t look like that. Come to class this evening. My teacher is Mr. Gatteau. He’ll love you.”

Lindsay Gatteau’s claim to fame was his role as one of the patrons in the diner scene of Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*. He had flowing gray swept-back hair and a bit of a paunch. He wore his yellow and green flowered shirt with three buttons opened to reveal a gold eagle charm around his neck. He walked in an atmosphere of Bay Rum cologne. He accepted Billy as a visitor to his acting class with a sweeping gesture of welcome.

After a few warm-up exercises, Gatteau gave Molly and Billy some pages to perform a lovers’ quarrel scene. Molly’s face reddened as she read. Suddenly, Billy grasped Molly and kissed her hard.

Gatteau threw up his hands. “Cut. Mr. Johnson, this is not improvisation.”

Molly pulled Billy aside, “Who gave you permission to kiss me?”

“You were going to leave, and I wasn’t going to let you go.”

Molly tilted her head. “Why are you hanging around?”

“You know why.”

Billy’s phone call the next day was:

Kowalski: "Get her on the damn plane."

Billy: "I hear you."

Molly's tee shirt said, "Just Do Me," under a Nike swish. Molly handed Billy the menu. "What do you think of New York?"

He shook his head. "It's as foreign as Bulgaria."

"This is the third day I've seen you in that shirt. It's getting a little ripe."

"I packed like I'd be home by now."

"I imagine your underwear can stand on its own. Get your stuff and come to my apartment. The family next door has a washer-drier."

Molly lived in a studio the size of a shoebox above a Chinese restaurant on Mott Street. She pushed Billy into the bathroom. "Hand me your clothes and take a shower. I'll get the wash started and come back."

Billy had soap in his eyes when he heard the shower curtain slide open. "Is this a good idea?"

Molly put her hand between his legs.

They tumbled wet into bed.

When Billy called the next afternoon, Kowalski's voice was artic. "Johnson, where did you sleep last night? Don't answer. The GPS doesn't lie." He hung up.

Billy ran into the restaurant. Molly's tee shirt said, "Very Cherry."

"Molly, we need to go."

"What are you talking about? I'm in the middle of my shift."

"Kowalski knows we slept together."

"Good."

The café door jingled, and Teddy Stokes filled the doorway. He had a smirk on his face.

Billy grimaced. “Too late.”

Teddy walked up to them. “Hello Molly. Nice to see you.”

Molly put hands on hips.

Teddy’s right fist snapped into Billy’s face like a whip. Billy’s back hit the wall, and he slid down on his butt. The patrons in the café froze in their seats. The turn of the ceiling fans was audible.

Teddy turned to Molly. “Mr. Kowalski says, ‘You win.’” Teddy flipped open a blue velvet-covered jewel box to reveal a diamond ring.

Molly held the three-carats up to the light. It sparkled. “Okay, we go. Just leave him be.” She bent toward Billy. “Stay down. My boss will help you get to the ER. I’m sorry.”

Teddy took Molly’s arm and walked her toward the door. Billy jumped to his feet, grabbed one of the heavy wooden café chairs and cracked it across Teddy’s back. The chair exploded like a hand grenade, and Billy was left with one stout leg in his hand. Billy jabbed Stokes three times in the gut, and the fighter didn’t move. He grabbed Molly’s hand and pulled her into the street. Billy’s nose streamed red. They ran three blocks before they stopped. Strangers stared but kept walking.

Molly threw her arms around Billy’s neck and kissed him. A smudge of blood transferred to her face. “Sir Billy Galahad. What a rush. I enjoyed that ass kicking you gave Teddy.”

“You won’t go back?”

“Damn, Billy, Kowalski will be dead in a year. He agreed I’ll get everything when he’s gone.”

Billy shrunk back on his heels.

Molly pulled out the thousand dollars Billy had given her. “Here, you’ll need this. Don’t come home until Kowalski’s passed and avoid Teddy.”

Billy wiped blood. “What are you saying?”

“I guess you need to get used to Bulgaria.”

Contributors

listed alphabetically according to the first letters of the author's first name such that one can easily locate a particular bio by simply matching the letters above—that is, above the poem or story—with the letters below, below this block of text, this very one here, yes this one; the letters which, of course, are placed in bold type so as to facilitate the matching of names with names with works of literature, may God save us all and the poems too, every one forever, amen

- Alan Orr** is a writer from the Western US who is currently living in Turkey where he teaches English language and literature courses. He plans to move to Thailand next. Contact him at orr.alan@gmail.com.
- Billy Pullen** recently received an MFA in creative writing, from Sewanee, May 2014. After receiving some success in playwriting, he began writing nonfiction, mostly memoir pieces, a few years No matter what genre he uses, he loves exploring the entire gamut of the human spirit: the triumphs, the vulnerability, the unpredictability, the joys, and the woes. Like the psalmist, he believes we are fearfully and wonderfully made, but would toss in another adverb—“comically.” We can be frightening, glorious, but we are also humorous. He thinks of his writing as a valentine to all the people (warts and all) that he’s ever known.
- Case Duckworth** ~~is almost finished~~ is all done(!) with his MFA from Northern Arizona University in the shadow of an ancient volcano. He is the poetry editor of *Thin Air* magazine, and hopes one day to breed toy pigs.
- Charlie Keys Bohem** is a high school senior living in Los Angeles California. Charlie has had stories and

poetry published on *Popcorn Fiction*, *Two Sentence Stories*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Thick Jam*, *Cleaver*, *Blonostics*, and soon on *Yellow Mama*, the *Rotary Dial* and *Synchronized Chaos*. Charlie hopes to be the first creatively published neuropsychopharmacologist!

- Chris Warner**, (M.Ed., '97), is an emerging poet, and the author of a micro-chapbook, *Strokes (Mostly) in Silence*; her poem, “Engulfed” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize (2013). Chris co-leads a creative writing program for inmates at a medium security prison, and also teaches yoga and mindfulness meditation in West Boyford, MA.
- Chrystal Berche** writes. Hard times, troubled times, the lives of her characters are never easy, but then what life is? The story is in the struggled, the journey, the triumphs and the falls. She writes about artists, musicians, loners, drifters, dreamers, hippies, bikers, truckers, hunters and all the other things she knows and loves. Sometimes she writes urban romance and sometimes it's aliens crash landing near a roadside bar. When she isn't writing she's taking pictures, or curled up with a good book and a kitty on her lap.
- Connor Bjotvedt** is a Graduate Student in the MFA at Northern Arizona University studying poetry. He began his writing career in fiction but switched his focus to poetry shortly after his move from undergraduate study to graduate study.

- David Olson** is a poet and professionally produced playwright with a BA in chemistry from University of California-Berkeley and an MA in creative writing from San Francisco State University. He was formerly an energy economist, management consultant, and performing arts critic. He has lived in Oxford since 2002.
- D.E. Kern** earned his MFA from San José State University in May 2011. These pieces are part of a collection tentatively titled *Rust Stains*, a commentary on growing up, outgrowing, and growing used to loss in an industrial town. His work has been published by *Reed Magazine*, *CRATE*, *Hypothetical: A Journal of Everything Imaginable* and *Mission at Tenth*. Poems are forthcoming in *Wilderness House Literary Review*.
- Greg Marshall** holds an M.F.A. from the Michener Center for Writers and is the former nonfiction editor for *Bat City Review*. His work has appeared in *Barely South*, *Beecher's*, *Everyday Genius* and is forthcoming in *Tampa Review*.
- Hans Mutchek** didn't provide a bio, but if you google his name you can find his public LinkedIn profile, and he appears to be a very accomplished writer by any standard. We're proud to host his work here.
- Heidi Espenscheid Nibbelink** is Midwestern by birth, Western by heart, and Southern by circumstance. She lived in Wisconsin and Wyoming, where she worked in various professions such as sandwich artist, ice-cream

scooper, oboist for hire, territorial prison administrative assistant, and the voice of the hourly station identification on Wyoming Public Radio. She currently lives in Athens, Georgia, and works as a counselor at an urban public high school. Her writing received prizes in short fiction and poetry from Wyoming Writers Inc., and *Atlanta Review* named her a merit award winner in their 2014 International Poetry Competition. She is presently an MFA candidate at the Sewanee School of Letters, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.

—**Jeff Lambert** is a tom-fool of a took who is currently working on his PhD in Philosophy at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA. His love for the interplay of philosophy and literature has given him the grand delusion that maybe he, too, can write.

—**Jessica Klein**, in her own words: Now, I live in the moment by the use of a tool called mindfulness. When I forget about the past and remember tomorrow may happen, but not in the glorious present. My life, God watched me run unsuccessfully, then I finally stopped everything. The present, every crinkle every obstacle, always reminds me that God bestowed me a wonderful gift. Right now, my health remains precarious. I need a lung transplant. I found out that my defective family also passed down a genetic disorder. So, I stay in the light (spiritual—physical) as much as I can. Nothing, I mean absolutely not one thing, will stop me from the written word. I earned a BA from Wilson College, in

Chambersburg PA, in 2013. I wanted to write. I minored in Mass Communications. Sorry for the lack of brevity.

—**Joe Giordano** was born in Brooklyn. He and his wife, Jane, have lived in Greece, Brazil, Belgium and Netherlands. They now live in Texas with their little shih tzu, Sophia. Joe's stories have appeared in more than sixty-five magazines including *Bartleby Snopes*, *The Monarch Review*, and *The Summerset Review*. His novel, *Birds of Passage, An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story*, will be published October 8th by *Harvard Square Editions*. Connect with Joe at <http://joe-giordano.com/> and read the first chapter of his book.

—**John Spriggs** is an illustrator, currently on the run from the law after being falsely accused of his wife's murder. He hops from town to town, never staying in one place too long. Until he can clear his good name, he cannot come in contact with any friends or family for fear of incriminating them. If you have any clues or details as to the identity of his wife's murderer, or illustration inquiries, he can be reached at john.spriggs@gmail.com. Keep up to date with the latest news about John at spriggsisagiant.com. Let us pray that this comes to a swift conclusion.

—**John Mitchel** is a poet with a fiction problem...well, many fiction problems, one being that he writes it. He has finished his work in the Arkansas Writers MFA and is now moving on to higher and greater things. He spends his off time collecting cigars because he enjoys lighting expensive things on fire.

- Jonathan Dick** is a 21-year-old poet and human being from Toronto, Canada. He is graduating this year from Huron University College with a major in English Language and Literature. You may have seen his recent work in *The Commonline Journal*, *Potluck Mag*, *Danse Macabre* or *Maudlin House*. Twitter: @jkdickyboy
- JW Mark** is a poet living in Stow, Ohio. Publications to include his work include *The Ampersand Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Midwest Literary Magazine*, *flashquake*, and *The North Chicago Review*. He is the author of a novel, entitled *Artifice*, as well as a book of poems entitled *Patched Collective*. He can be contacted at jwmarkmail@gmail.com or through his website jwmark.wordpress.com.
- Kayla Baugh** didn't provide a bio, but we're very happy to have her in the issue. Thanks, Kayla. Never change.
- Michael A. Wells** is poet, a baseball aficionado, lover of wine and a Diet Coke addict. He makes his home in a Kansas City, Missouri suburb with his wife and pets. His work has appeared in both print and online journals such as *Rockhurst Fine Arts Review*, *Park University Scribe*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Autumn Sky Poetry* and *Right Hand Pointing* and *Rose & Thorn Journal*. He is currently working on a poetry manuscript and routinely blogs at Stick Poet Super Hero.

—**Mike Jeffrey** is twenty-four years old. He received a BA in English from Boston University. He lives in New York City.

—**Sadie Miller** has had work previously published by *Aurum Press*, *Gothic City Press* and *Oddville Press*, with forthcoming work appearing in *Prole Magazine*, a novel commission by Snowbooks Publications and several novellas appearing on Excessia.com. She has also had poetry published by the *Red Booth Review*, *Clockwise Cat* and *The Commonline Journal*, with an audio play in development with Audio Scribble. Her URL is www.sadiemiller.co.uk

—As a writer and artist publishing for the last three decades, **Stephen Mead** has finally gotten around to getting links to his poetry still online at various zines available in one place:
<http://stephenmead.weebly.com/links-to/poetry-on-the-line-stephen-mead>. His latest Amazon release is entitled "Our Spirit Life'", a poetry/art meditation on family heritage, love, and the evanescence of time. For Christmas 2014 he released a sound collage song cycle, "Threnody for a Forgotten Plague", a series-in-progress, dealing with the early days of the AIDS Pandemic, free to listen to via Amazing Tunes, UK.

—A recovering economics professor, **Steve Slavin** earns a living writing math and economics books.

—**Walter Ruhlmann** works as an English teacher, edits *mgversion2>datura* and runs *mgv2>publishing*. His

latest collections are *The Loss* through *Flutter Press*,
Twelve Times Thirteen through *Kind of a Hurricane Press*,
and *Crossing Puddles* through *Robocup Press*, 2015. His
blog: <http://thenightorchid.blogspot.fr> and
<http://nightorchidwork.blogspot.fr>

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