

DOMESTICATED PRIMATE & ANOMALY POETRY PRESENT



A note on the cover: *Earthlings* is a linocut print inspired by old gods and cicadas, imagining the more-than-human beings that might someday evolve on our planet.

--Beatrice Alder

STRANGER HARVESTS

An Anthology of Speculative Fiction
Containing Poetry, Short Fiction, and Visual Representations
of Worlds Beyond Our Own



A Domesticated Primate & Anomaly Poetry

Samhain publication.

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So, chill out and read more, fool.

Contact the publisher: nick@domesticatedprimate.com

Foreword

Nick LeBlanc

When I put out the call for this book, I asked for the blade that remembers every life it has taken, the village feast where the dead sit quietly among the living, and the strange abundance that comes after something has already died. The artists delivered in spades.

I spent longer than I'd like to admit shuffling these pieces around like a tarot deck, trying to find an arrangement that didn't feel like I'd just dumped them out of a bag.

Samhain, the holiday this book comes out on, was never just a night of ghosts and bonfires, nor was it only a Glenn Danzig side project. It was the end of the harvest.

Classically, the harvest was broken into three stages. The grain came in at Lughnasadh in early August. The fruit came in around the autumn equinox, which a lot of folks today call Mabon. The blood came at Samhain, when the herds were culled down to whatever could make it through the winter.

I decided to structure the book the same way.

The first harvest is grain, and the work there is about what grows and what we promise in exchange for it. Lughnasadh was a time for trial marriages and bargains, so this is where you'll find the lovers, the lonely, and the hopelessly devoted, including one fella who's genuinely hoping his date ends with him being eaten. It's where summer overstays its welcome, where the tourists clear out and something worse takes their tables, where a set of perfect teeth turns out to be a loan. It opens with a broom leaning against a garden wall in the August heat, waiting for its real work to start.

The second harvest is fruit. The equinox is the one night the light and the dark come out even, and these pieces are about what's waiting on the other side of that line: shadows wearing our faces, mirrors that turn out to be doors. The name Mabon comes from a Welsh tale about a child stolen from his mother three nights after he was born. I didn't know that when I started putting this together, and I was discomfited by how well so many of the stories fit that same mold. In this section, Death moves in next door. A moon comes through a bedroom window with an appetite. A hidden door opens behind the

family couch. It ends with a mother asking the child who keeps leaving and coming back what it breathes.

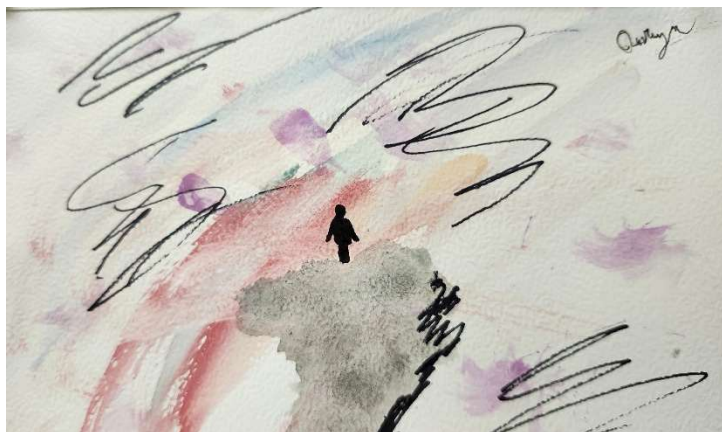
Between the second harvest and the last there's a short stretch I've been calling the veil. Samhain was the night the wall between this world and the next wore thin, and the four pieces here are where the walls of the book wear thin too. A room melts. Language breaks apart into static. The universe gets argued down to a hologram. Somebody three glasses of wine deep feels gravity let go of them.

The third harvest is blood, and it's the longest stretch of the book. So it goes. It starts with a butcher's blade looking for the seams in an animal, then wanders out into the woods with the hunters and the wolves, through sword and sorcery and dragons and the long, sad ache of the old knight who killed them. Then the monsters start to look more like us: a beast built out of the garbage we throw in the ocean, machines going door to door counting heads. Near the end, the monsters drop away entirely, and the blood is just ours, on a battlefield or on a school floor the day before a holiday meant for giving thanks. It closes on Halloween night, with a masked man walking between lit porches, a witch hurrying home ahead of the sunrise, and a pair of ghosts strolling down a farm road that smells like smoke and apples.

You don't have to read it front to back. Nobody's checking. But if you do, you'll start in the heat of August and end in the dark of the last night of October, and I hope by the time you get there it feels like the whole season passed through your hands.

Anyway, that's enough from me. Go on in.

STRANGER HARVESTS



Look to the Skies

Aubryn Stred

**THE FIRST HARVEST:
GRAIN**

Halloween Broomsticks

Sarah Das Gupta

Red, orange, yellow, russet,
scattered over the frost-white lawn.
Enigmatic jigsaw,
fragments of the dying summer.
The birch broom dozing
in the August sunlight,
leans lazily against the garden wall.

Now the seasonal call to arms,
as rumbustious autumn gales
replace late summer's final breathes.
Leaves swept into piles
of the varied autumnal colours,
as the garden palette fills
with all the shades of Fall.
Green washed away
by sudden squalls and thundery rain.

The strong birch twigs sweep
the multi-coloured leaves
into one large funeral pyre.
Soon the smoke rises.
The incense of summer,
curls over the autumn garden.
Flames flicker in the fading light.

Who knows what night adventures
call the broom?
The harvest moon lights the garden
with a magic, orange glow.
The birch broom's shadow
has vanished from the paving stones.
Silhouetted on the moon's face,
witch-like shadows chase
across the lunar surface.
Black outlines of old hags
astride their birch broom horses

ride upon pale, yellow moonbeams,
as midnight strikes in village squares.

In a chilly autumn dawn
the broom leans innocently
against the garden wall,
ready to sweep up last night's
treasure trove of rich gold leaf



The Dahrk
Margo Lemieux

GROWING MAZE*Alexis Emerson*

WHEN I WAS A GIRL
I FLEW
KNOTTED HAIR UNKNOTTED SHOES
THROUGH A MAZE OF GROWING
CORN CALLING
BLACK CROWS
MY MOTHERS HAUNTED
NESTED
FEASTED
IN THE OAK TREE. DEATH
POPS
LIKE CORN IN THE MICROWAVE.

The Alder's Smile

Natalie Harveld

My teeth grew up already in a line;
they never strayed nor quarrelled for their place.
This is my luck. I will not call it mine.
They met each crust and apple without sign
of weakness hidden somewhere in the brace.
My teeth grew up already in a line.
The dentists praised hereditary design,
a fortunate inheritance of grace.
This is my luck. I will not call it mine.
Yet sometimes, walking home at close of shine,
I feel them listening just behind my face.
My teeth grew up already in a line.
By late October, after first frost's sign,
they ache whenever woodland shadows lace.
This is my luck. I will not call it mine.
Last Samhain, deep amongst the alder's spine,
something smiled back with all my selfsame trace.
My teeth grew up already in a line.
This is my luck. I will not call it mine.

Made of Money

Margaret Pearce

“Do you think I’m made of money,” Dr. Brent exploded. “Flying track bikes indeed!”

His son shrugged. “I checked your income with the Federation authority and Mum earns heaps as a Meditech specialist. Why am I kept so short of pocket money?”

“You hacked into our private accounts?” Dr. Brent tried to modulate his voice. “Hacking is a criminal offence.”

“Anyway, their files are so unprotected that any idiot can hack into them.”

“You’re grounded.” Dr. Brent stopped trying to modulate his voice. “It’s all those criminal friends of yours.”

“You keep saying I need more exercise and shouldn’t send so much time huddling over my iPod,” was the retort. “And my friends are into exciting rides.”

“Exercise is something healthy like riding a push bike, not hurtling through the air like maniac bullets.” Dr. Brent glared at his weedy stooped undersized son.

“Everyone who is everyone has a flying track bike.” His son reverted to his original grievance. “It isn’t as if you and Mum can’t afford to buy me one. You want me to be a pariah, a social leper and a nerd?”

“You are not getting a flying track bike at your age. You are grounded, grounded, grounded,” Dr. Brent bellowed, forgetting about the necessity to sound reasonable and in control. “You will stay grounded until you get some common sense if ever.”

Peace descended on the Brent household. His son stayed in his bedroom, communicating with his friends through his various electronic devices, playing with his laptop and drowning the house with unmusical bands.

Dr. Brent dismissed him from his mind. There had been some new breakthroughs in communication that had made his powerful bosses the Federation Authorities very complacent and with his knowledge of the human mind he had been at the forefront of them.

“Wonderful, wonderful.” His boss almost purred. “The out of body theories for spying petered out unsuccessfully, the ESP and the telepathy experiments became less and less successful, but this is foolproof.”

“Using the internet to interface minds is a most successful breakthrough,” Dr. Brent agreed.

“We think our information on the internet transfers it to the recipient who downloads it straight into his mind,” his boss gloated. “We can now send highly privileged information through to our operators that no one else can access.”

“And I can transmit results of confidential medical experiments direct to the interested parties without breaking secrecy codes?” Dr. Brent asked.

“Of course, of course. Tomorrow we will all be using the new devices,” was the satisfactory assurance.

The next day, Dr. Brent sat at the internet and put on the oddly wired headphones to transfer information by thought to his professional partner on the other side of the world.

“The subject was both mentally stable and ...”

Music started in the background of his mind. Dr. Brent was amused. The Department was improving on the new technology. The music got louder. It was a repetitious catchy sort of tune. He started to hum it and stopped with a distinct effort.

“The world is your oyster,
Travel with Roister,
The travel agency Roister,
Travel with Roister,
Roister, roister, roister.”

“Physically healthy,” he managed before the lyrics drowned out his thinking. “The subject was roistered – confined,” he managed before the tune and lyrics started again.

He tried to think the next line he wanted to transfer but only the ghastly lyrics repeated over and over again in his brain. He pulled off the headset. The tune and the lyrics kept up their remorseless bombarding in his mind.

His boss stormed into the small cubicle. “Ruined,” he snarled. “We’ve been hacked

by a miserable advertising agency. The virus is free and floating around all our new technology.”

“And my mind?” Dr. Brent tried above the jingle in his head.

He was suddenly aware that his boss was shouting. “When our experts find out how, royster oyster, we can no longer risk putting royster oyster information through on it. Our technology is useless to us and a boon for all the royster oyster miserable advertisers.”

Dr. Brent realised that his was not the only mind hacked by the dreadful lyrics and tune.

“Technology is not my field,” Dr. Brent apologised equally loudly. It was hard to think clearly with that beastly jingle and dreadful lyrics in his mind.

“This is a matter for the experts,” his boss yelled back. “Royster oyster when we find out who hacked into our security, heads will roll.”

“The advertising agencies royster oyster employ a lot of anonymous outsiders,” Dr. Brent managed without repeating any more of the jingles resounding through his mind.

He headed home. He needed somewhere quiet to try and control his mind and work out how to empty it of the annoying jingle. His home didn’t sound as noisy as usual.

“Where is he?” he asked his wife forcing his tongue not to repeat the jingle.

“He has been so good quietly working away on his laptop that I let him out and he has gone to ride with his gang?” his wife said.

“Ride?”

“Picked up some job on his laptop. After they paid him so he went out and bought an air trail bike.”

“Two thousand and fifty dollars,” Dr. Brent exclaimed. “Where would he get that sort of money?”

“An advertising agency paid him to put their jingle on some electronic devices,” his wife said. “As he had earned the money by his own efforts I thought it was only right to let him go out and buy the bike he wanted so badly.”

She turned back to her laptop. “Travel with Royster, Royster Oyster, the world is your oyster,” she kept humming, the tune repeating so remorselessly in his head.

Dr. Brent went red and then white. Despite the interference in his brain patterns by the dreadful lyrics and the tune he was still able to guess clearheadedly why the advertising agency had paid so much money to his clever nerdy unsatisfactory son.

Strawberry Moon

Elarie Pyttes

Youthful pink orange blush
Arrives trembling on the horizon
Moving in a smooth silent arc
Sinking into blue heavy with expectant humidity

Salivating at your arrival
They make crystals and waters in your name
Harvesting your loveliest season
Then holding you up by the scruff like a hunter's trophy catch

At your peak power
They beg you to dim
Your gray and white a scourge upon all that sparkles
For you are masking the planets, the constellations, the
northern lights

Still, your tentacles spray through the forest
Watching from your black perch
Collecting starlight, moving oceans
You love and love and love and love

Returning, full of wisdom
Colors dancing on the horizon, radiant once more
You dazzle them one last time
Waning and fading into the pastel dawn

Juniper

Stan Džengelewski

Clouds capped the south side of the city, in a gloomy, rolling
Mushroom bloom that
Blotted the July-bright sky,
And loomed over the hilltop
Where Genever and I sat — idling —
Watching the gathering storm
Through the windshield
Of her dented, red

Pontiac Tempest.

I waited to hear the “something important” she drove me
across town To tell me, but she was silent, save for an
occasional sigh, Looking down all the while,
Like the words she was searching for would be found
Laid out on her lap.

When she finally spoke, her voice sounded oddly hollow —
distant — As if through a landline telephone half a world
away.

Perhaps this was her subconscious attempt
To put space between
Her words and their meaning:

“Jovan is dead.”

“Jovan? Your coworker? That Serbian dishwasher?”

*“Yes. Him. He hung himself with an extension cord. His mother found
him like that.”* Her voice broke, *“His brother cut him down.”* “Oh,”
I said, *“That’s terrible. I didn’t know you two were close.”* She fell into
a spell of

Spasmodic sobbing.

Finally, Genever said,

“You and I were on a break. It was just one time.”

I stared out the window, without saying a word,
Watching the juniper blue skyline
Turn to soot black.

I asked, *“He did it over you? Because we got back together?”* As if the
weather were a readymade metaphor,
A fiber-optic fault line fractured the horizon
Followed by a thunderous snap. Her voice
Echoed the electricity with a

Simple, "Yes."

The sky capsized: A great lake

Flipped upside-down.

I was trapped between a confession I'd rather not hear

And the storm outside, which clattered on the hood

In rapid, rhythmless rushes, drowning her voice

Beneath a cannonade of rain

That hammered the land,

Pooled in puddles, and—

Where the curb met the street—

A rivulet became a swelling stream.

My eyes followed the water downhill, and

Spotted something strange at the bottom:

The parkway danced and glinted like

Damascus steel.

"*Oh shit*," I said and started to laugh.

She stopped crying and asked me,

"What the fuck is so funny?"

I answered, "*Midtown is flooded.*

We're stuck here.

There's no way back home."

Locals' Summer

Michael T. Fournier

Beth had been around long enough to know the idea of locals' summer was a myth. Sure, plenty of tourists left Cape Cod when Labor Day hit. The prospect of taking a left into traffic no longer required adding fifteen minutes to travel plans. Befuddled dads clotting grocery store aisles with their carts and their kids returned to banking or stockbrokering or whatever it was they did the other nine months of the year. All this was true. And the weather after Labor Day – when locals' summer started – was lovely.

During the summer, she and the seasonal staff turned and burned as many tables as fast as they could, serving a greatest hits menu of Cape dishes designed to maximize profit, all lobster rolls and fish and chips and oysters. But the customers at the Shanty more than made up for so many families leaving. The ones who stayed, the snowbirds waiting until Thanksgiving (or later) to make their exit from the Cape were twice as demanding as the summer herds. And way more entitled. While the rest of the world had to go back to work, they didn't. All they had to do was boss servers around. And especially bartenders.

Beth closed up her bar on a Sunday night in late September, after all the football games, the wings and lite beers of the afternoon bleeding into the more refined diners and their multiple checks and steaks cooked between medium rare and medium. "One hundred thirty-eight degrees, got it," she always said with a smile, waiting for someone to get the joke.

She locked up and drove the fifteen minutes down the road to her apartment, a place just nice enough so her worries of being priced out never felt unfounded but crappy enough so she felt like she was slumming. She peeled off her work clothes, took a hot shower, dressed in pajamas and sat on her barely two-person couch and watched TikTok videos, a glass of cold vodka in hand. By three a.m. her nervous system had relaxed enough so she could sleep.

Beth wore earplugs because of her fucked-up sleep schedule. She knew the world woke well before she did and made adjustments. Most days she could get back to sleep if traffic was loud.

But most days did not bring such a din.

She opened her eyes and picked up her phone. Six-thirty-three. Well before any landscapers or contractors would be out.

This wasn't the usual symphony of leafblowers creating avant-garde chords as they ripped and howled. And this wasn't the fitful pounding of hammers on new addition framework. This was something else, guttural, forceful and vaguely mechanical.

She stood, bleary, and scissored blinds apart with fingers. She couldn't see anything.

So she went back to bed.

Before she could even drift, it snorted and growled back to life, whatever it was, heavier, and with a sense of urgency.

Fuck this, she thought, pulling on sweatpants, a hoodie, sneakers. She'd go out and talk to them.

She walked a brisk perimeter of her building. Nothing. Then up and down the sidewalk.

Silence.

But she knew it would start when she went back to bed.

She tried to sleep again, this time contorting to fit as much of her frame as possible on the tiny couch. But, as anticipated, the noise came when she closed her eyes.

Fine, she thought, hand over her face. Fine. I'll get up.

Beth stood, stretched. She felt blood running double-time through the large vein on the side of her neck. She'd never get back to sleep. She was too pissed off. She put on some coffee, because what else could she do?

As she waited for the coffee to percolate, she thought about finding a hotel room. But checkout would be in a few hours. And she couldn't afford it, anyway. Tips weren't great during locals summer.

She wasn't scheduled to work lunch, but by the time late morning arrived she had walked around the house three more times and couldn't find the origin of the noise. She had to do something, go someplace different. The restaurant was as good of a place as any.

She pulled a fresh black button-up and a pair of black jeans from her closet and dressed quickly, still hearing that godawful sound outside. She still couldn't place what it was or where it was coming from.

As Beth drove to work, she could hear the noise, whatever it was, all around her. She turned up the car stereo, hoping classic rock would drown it out. But it didn't.

She parked in her normal spot and entered the Shanty. Day manager Ward was there at the host desk, wiping down menus.

Didn't think you were working today, he said.

I'm not, she said. I just needed to get out of this house. There's this noise. Did you hear it?

Ward shook his head.

You didn't hear it?

Nothing out of the ordinary, he said.

Weird, she said, wondering if she was going crazy. Hey, need help with those menus?

Shayla's not here yet, he said. Mind setting up her bar?

No problem, she said. She'd just broken the bar down, though in some ways the end of her Sunday double felt like an eternity ago. She removed plastic wrap from atop the speed pours in the bottles behind the bar, catching a glance at the clock on the main touchscreen: almost eleven. Shayla wasn't late yet, but she was close.

The front door swung open. A pair of customers came in, probably mid-seventies, all Vineyard Vines and boat shoes. They'd probably ask for their steak between medium rare and medium.

Hi folks, she said. We're not open until eleven-thirty.

Yes you are, the man said.

His voice sounded guttural, forceful. Vaguely mechanical.

She gasped.

You're open, he said in a voice so loud the glassware behind the bar shook. You're open every day. And we'd like to order. We're your new regulars. We'll be here until spring.

Midnight Recital

Michael A. Russo

My marriage to destitution has been one of incorruptible
fidelity,
or so I thought.
I should,
perhaps,
clarify.

I am not a poor man-
no, no
-far from it.
My material worth has been the subject of a great admiration
and jealousy alike,
I'm ashamed to admit.
No, my poverty is rooted at the very core of my being,
a famine indelibly imbedded.
I am still youthful,
though I choose to exist as an aged recluse in my manor house,
not only for having lost my interest in the nefarious deeds
required of me,
but largely out of the fear of falling prey to false pretense.

How will I determine if I am ever truly loved?

One solitary step inside my residence by the loveliest woman
of the noblest breeding
and even a man stricken with blindness from the brain fever
could recognize the devious machinations she would have set
in motion.
I implore you not to judge me as a man who possesses
a deep-seated contempt for all womanhood.
I assure you, nothing more could be to the contrary,
I am simply stating what is lamentably real...
...or at least what I *thought* was real,
until a few nights ago when she appeared.
Well, it was more like *what* I heard-
actually, when I heard *it*,
it being my piano.

Earlier in the evening,
 I had been in my study reading and had fallen into the deepest
 slumber,
 when,
 at the stroke of midnight,
 I heard the tinkling of the keys-
 the most hauntingly divine interpretation of Liszt's *La*
Campanella.

At first, I believed it to be a delightful dream,
 but when I returned to full consciousness the recital continued.
 I had no fear of who might have illegally entered my residence,
 as I was simply enchanted by the intoxicating echo emanating
 from my salon.

And it was there that I first saw her,
 this divine apparition perched on my piano bench,
 appearing as if she had reached Nirvana on a lotus flower in
 full bloom.

I know not if she was aware of my presence,
 it was of no consequence,
 for I was in complete awe of hers.
 At present, I think of nothing else.
 How divine!

My one justification for existence, my awaiting her deific
 reappearance.

I will wait for her, the bringer of extrication,
 with undying patience, an incorruptible fidelity.

And all this wretched man of pathetic desperation begs of,
 from whomever it was that sent you to me,
 is that my appeal does not fall upon the devilish irony of deaf
 ears.

On my aching knees, I plead with you,
 can you *please* tell me *when*?
When this desolate house will once again
 echo with the dulcet tones of my Siren?

Ménage à Monstrois

Ben Begg

It had been so long since he'd been on a date, he'd almost forgotten what you were meant to do. He felt uncertain, would the Fear be there? Would it fade like a dying star or stay, pulsating and sharp in his chest? To be fair it was always easier as the male in these situations. If your date was a traditionalist anyway. She'd make the decisions, take the lead, he was just there for a terrifying time and maybe, just maybe she would devour him at the end. He scoffed at that. He hadn't been devoured on any of the other dates he'd been on, so maybe neither of them had been that into him. Not enough to get him inside them anyway. Oh sure, they'd seemed to go well enough from his point of view, he'd had a lovely time paralysed with fear as the ladies had roared about their day or devastated the table furnishings in a dramatic retelling of their latest desolation of a kingdom. But on the last date he'd got the feeling that she was performing more for the bar-beast, her third and fourth eyes flickered over to him when she trampled the table to splinters to see if he was suitably cowed by her demonstration of destruction. The gibbering wreck behind the bar was clearly so much more impressionable than Batsheba, and more and more of her eyes focussed on the little cubby next to the glasswasher where they had hidden. Batsheba felt the dread dissipating, washing away like blood in a stream. Urgh. It wasn't going to be his evening. Typical. And sure enough it hadn't been him getting his head ripped off that night.

After that he'd sworn off dating for a few years. Get your head down, get your talons up, get some good terrorising in amongst the plains peoples. It wasn't flashy, it wouldn't probably lead to quaking storytellers whispering his name around the Undying Flame, he wouldn't gain some kind of legendary status but it was simple, honest monsterring. Someone had to be mediocre otherwise the best and the worst wouldn't have a yardstick to compare to. And as the years passed he started to think maybe he was too old to find a partner, his flesh too chewy, the first flush of youthful tenderness gone. His paroxysms of fear in the horrible faces of the few females he met felt fake and hollow, just done for appearance's sake, and he knew they could tell. He was just too old for this kind of shit. Sure, his father had been over forty thousand when the old bastard had met Batsheba's mother and it hadn't mattered to her as she'd sucked out the marrow from his bones but he'd been in far better shape at that age than Batsheba was at thirty-eight. He'd given up on it really.

But wasn't it always the way that when you'd finally admitted defeat and got comfortable with just being a singleton shoggoth for the rest of your days that the One comes along. As she had thundered down the valley to devastate the city of Mezkhland, swallowing proles, priests and potentates alike, smashing towers and temples with sweeps of her scaled tail, his heart had skipped a beat and then repaid that loss with interest. The rapid heart rate of utter, paralysing terror. Could there be a surer sign of true love?

Back in his bachelor lair, he'd searched through the piles of booty, finally finding the little glass bottle he'd spent a caliph's fortune on all those years ago. Never had the gumption to try it before, but maybe it had all been waiting for this moment. He splashed a little on, sniffed, winced, dry heaved, splashed a little more on. Can't have too much of a bad thing, can you? And was there anything better for getting her in the mood than the delicious smell of Man for Brutes? Sure, it wasn't a delicate perfume but she hadn't looked like a subtle lady as she gulped down the populace of Mezkhanda. No point in half measures he thought, and poured the rest over his head. If this didn't have her eating his hand within milliseconds, his whole arm even, then nothing would. He checked his reflection in a bronze shield, nodded in satisfaction as it tarnished to opacity, and went out to meet the girl of his nightmares. With any luck, he wouldn't be coming home tonight.

In Sickness

Abbey Branco

I can feel you, my love.

Deep inside, I can feel your heart beating
even when the movements are frozen beneath my touch.

I tried to reach you and hold you and mold you against me.

I couldn't lose you, couldn't have you wandering in perdition.

My love, I can hear you, wailing against the billowing air.
The chill sharp against my cheeks as I file away your arms,
your legs,
the slickness of your lips.

You're cold, my love. So cold.

They told me you were gone,
that there will be others to fill makeup and redden my heart.
Even the peeling of your tongue and wet sickness on my hands
tried to keep me away. The tar sticky under my fingernails.

My love, please. *Please.*

I hold you to keep you here,
to place my tender soul in yours to see if you rise.
Beneath the floors and the stairs, where the earth is sodden
and your grey skin is tucked away from the sun's ravenous
belly.

Your hair is beginning to fall, sinewy and sharp in my palms.
It's started to grey, my soul and Earth, did you know this could
happen?

I've tried to keep you together,
Even as the black, globbing form of your
insides begins to soak out, I clean you, bathe
you, keep you here where the air is sodden
and safe.

I can feel it rack in my chest, the same pain that drove you
away.

But you're here now, my love,
and I can see the sun beginning to rise.
Even as the yellow in daybreak begins to
bleed on our aching home, I feel your still
blood on me, blackened and clumping, I
know it will quicken soon.

Poem*Brendan Princi*

Running my fingers
Through the stillness
Of dawn
Eyes shaded
By infant fog
Stepping forthright
Through shielded glass
Shelter dissipates
Lonesome winds gale
Tossing hair
Watery droplets
Crash on to dusted earth
Streaming steaming
Being chased
from naked sockets
Expressions of earthly colors
Autumn has risen

Toting the path
Enthralled in spiraling wind
Cold air on my bare neck
Suns blazed rays
Upon my bronzed face
Complete and divine
The rot of decaying leaves
Stripped and scattered
From the limbs life line
A home
But wanderer's now
Nomadic on floating breezes

I'll go
I'll lead a life
Wherever the wind stirs
Another spiral
Peculiar in nature
Swirling air spins

Red yellow and orange wonderment
Around my own
Mystified

Here now I fall
Buffering in the decay
As my head lands Lacey
Upon a pillow
The wind sneaks through
My window sill
Skittering, spur, swing, scidattle
A solitary leaf
I welcome to my presence
Lay your leafy soul
Weary it may be
Shine on in my reflection
In soft serenity



Nice to See You
Margo Lemieux

**THE SECOND HARVEST:
FRUIT**

HARVEST

kvp

Aloysius walked through the middle of the street, avoiding potholes and cracks in the concrete. On Harvest, there were no vehicles or people crowding the road, and Aloysius was free to roam unbothered by prying stares.

It was a mark of human resilience that no matter what system reigned, what government was in power, and what religious texts were pressed upon them, the people wouldn't let their deepest-rooted traditions die, he mused. Sure, the ways they were celebrated changed — some now honored the cult of the Emperor, others were forced to be confined to shadows — but the ancient festivals and their rituals never quite disappeared. Aloysius knew that his ancestors had celebrated Harvest on the autumnal equinox from the tales his grandmother told, but for as long as he could remember, the bonfire dance was always held on September 21, the Emperor's birthday. This year, both Harvest and the equinox fell on the same day.

"They say we build a pyre so large to match the Emperor's might and wisdom," Aloysius's grandmother would whisper to him. "That we burn it to show the world His Enlightenment because it is He who shines brighter than any god. The truth is, it's the spirit of nature we celebrate, and Summer passing its torch to Autumn."

When Aloysius reached the intersection of Main and Freedom Street, he climbed a low brick wall, lingering for a moment atop it. If he squinted, he could see the skeletons of drowned buildings on the horizon, sticking out of the water like splinters from a decaying log. Someday, the ocean would swallow the brick wall too.

Aloysius took a deep breath, letting the heavy, humid air fill his lungs before jumping down onto the sun-beaten grass. If only people had the ocean's strength, he thought. Alas, they were too small for big acts, too weak to stand without guidance. He suspected that in the past this hadn't held true, but all that was hearsay and could have easily been lies spun by people starved for heroes.

Aloysius began climbing a dirt road toward a wooden structure some fifty feet from the edge of a forest on the

hilltop. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were gathered around it, spilling onto the other side of the hill, moving like the waves of a tide. The first shy flames licked the sturdy beams at the base of the pyre just as Aloysius reached the forest and disappeared inside it. Purposely fashionably late, he'd rather not mingle but absorb the atmosphere from a distance instead.

"Hand it over, sister, I won't play your petty games," someone said nearby, his voice smooth but sharp. Aloysius turned instinctively toward the sound, crouching behind a bush.

"Not yet," a softer voice replied calmly.

Aloysius moved a cluster of branches out of the way, just enough to reveal a spacious clearing. A tall woman stood in the center. Instantly, he knew it wasn't the Emperor who shone the brightest — it was she. Clad in a long, flowy yellow dress, her skin was so radiant it looked like molten gold steeped in sunlight. Her wavy, pale hair nearly reached the forest floor. A few steps away, a stocky man with brown skin wearing a maroon and mustard colored suit scowled, his arms crossed. In place of pockets, moss and mushrooms grew from the velvet fabric. Aloysius blinked, keeping his eyes closed for a split second longer than necessary, but upon opening them again, the strange pair was still there.

"It's my turn, you stubborn..." the man didn't finish. His sister reached into the folds of her skirt, producing a thin gold circlet and raising her arm.

"Get it then, prove you deserve it! Prove that I'm fading and you're stronger than me!" she sang as the band spun on her long pointer finger.

Somewhere beyond the tree line, dogs began to bark. The sound of voices and snapping branches followed, growing louder. She lowered the circlet to her head, hesitated, then set it into his hair instead. The crowd behind the forest's edge cheered — the flames must have reached the top of the pyre.

"Their god is so gullible that he believes it's all in his honor," said the woman, gesturing vaguely toward the bonfire.

"You must mean His Emperorship," the brother corrected her, lingering on the last syllable as though he had just swallowed something sour.

Aloysius pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, beads of sweat forming beneath the frames. The man touched the nearest oak tree, and the leaves on the lowest branch turned yellow. Aloysius watched the color travel all the way to the canopy, jumping to the neighboring oak like a spark.

“There they are!” A booming voice sounded alarmingly close.

The man froze. “They knew,” he said.

“Impossible,” his sister protested.

The bushes across the clearing parted, and a man in a military uniform holding a rifle stepped in. His firearm raised, he moved methodically like a predator who, after a long fruitless hunt, had finally cornered its prey.

“How can they see us?” she hissed, grabbing her brother by the arm.

“The weaker we are, the less protection we have.” The man freed himself from his sister’s grip, reaching for her hand.

A group of soldiers broke through the shrubbery, hunting dogs at their heels. They quickly spread through the clearing. Aloysius lay flat on his belly, resisting the urge to cover his eyes. The circlet slipped from the man’s head; he flung himself backward in an attempt to catch it, but his sister pulled him away, and in the blink of an eye, they vanished. The soldiers ran on, paying no attention to Aloysius or the glint of gold beneath their boots. Aloysius waited several minutes after the last soldier left the clearing. He freed the circlet from the undergrowth and wiped a few specks of dirt from its surface before stashing it under his shirt.

Aloysius moved through the jubilant crowd until he reached the bonfire, his hand clasped tightly around the treasure, feeling its warmth radiating through his chest. His eyes followed the crowd from the hilltop to the beach, where the silhouettes blended with the lace fringe of the ocean’s edge. Behind him, the forest morphed, its green summer coat turning to shades of gold, brown, and red.

Vigil Dark*Steve Bucher*

October night lengthening
Plight washes over me
Like balance overdue

Balance slowly tilting
Wilting toward dark

Stark undying night
Brilliant corners
Bending bright
Silent edge before
Watcher's wordless wake

Stumbling night's relic ramparts
Keeping vigil dark
Before deaf and drowning dawn
Frowning hour's cold comfort

Alone in shadows grim
Eyes in wild affright
Pale hand reaching
Preaching solitude most certain

Reciting lines I'll not recall
In crawl of breaking day

At silent odds my vigil dark
With deaf and drowning dawn
October's long-awaited dawn
Reaching out past weeds and whispers
August thick now giving silent way

October's hallowed swan song
Deeply bladed green unmet
Rush impossible beyond
Life's lush and verdant mien

Impossible green
Reaching out
Breaching surface
As I...
In steadfast prayer
Await visitation brief

Impossible green of
Pious plea unmet

Traveler's tale grown small
In book grown smaller
Book somehow holding
Smoldering still
The composer's key

Canticles I'll leave closed for now

Will you wait
Winter's witching while
To ease my solitude
Most certain

Dark vigil
Gasping grave
Grasping at straws
Flaws in fiery lines I draw

May gaping ground
Grant me grace
Though doubt and dust bedim
My desperate way

A traveler's tale...

What would it be like
The vigil met
The hand taken
The psalm writ and sung

Dusty parable
Retold in quiet confidence
Cautionary tale
Conjuring October's
Deeply bladed green

Will you wait

Sacred ground
Beneath my feet
Forgive heart's
Doubt and dust

My vigil dark
My psalm unsung

My psalm unsung...

Dance with Bats

Kathryn Lee Hamilton

When Sun is waning,
Darkness grows so fast. The world—
A riot of bright
Colored leaves; my time at last!
"I'm the girl dancing with Bats!

September kissing
The equinox brings us fall,
When the wild Bats fly.
Hunting they screech. People need
Me. The girl who talks to Bats!

Bats fly here, fly there,
Bats fly in windows, through doors,
Fill sky black as night.
Bats eat fall grains, shit on floors.
Villagers can't control Bats!

People need my help.
Beg, offer what gold may be.
I screech, call out in,
"Bat," and Bats come circle me.
I twirl. Dance. Sing: "Follow Bats!"

It is a Sabot
Of sorts. Thousands of Bats fly
Overhead, I lead
Them to a far cave to try.
I help people, I help Bats!

Hallows night has come;
Costumes, candy, tricks-or-treats.
Far from the village
Bats, mosquitoes now just eat.
"I'm the girl dancing with Bats!



Taken Flight
Kate Frazer Rego

The Shadow

Michelle Sen

You stand there
alone - unsmiling, unspoken
You look just like me
but grey, dark and almost formless
I look at you
and you stare back
with yellow, soulless eyes
But I still see
all that is hidden and locked away
The parts I refused to acknowledge
The lives I didn't get to live
The secrets I couldn't share with anyone
The pain I couldn't release
all of that swirling behind those eyes
like an inferno
I'm afraid of you, I must admit
But also strangely drawn to you
For in the depth of your darkness
I see beauty I have never seen before
ancient, terrifying and almost unbearable
beckoning to me
And if I'm not careful
you will draw me in and consume me whole
But if I reach out and let you speak
I know you'll complete me
such that I will never need
anything anymore

Pink Stilt House

Autumn Williams

Their figure recedes into the dark room as I look up at them through a window. They won't approach a man in the bright sunlight. My camera clicks and I examine the picture. This pastel pink stilt house is the first of its kind I've seen. White curtains blow in the chill air against the ocean backdrop. Lilting music from a piano reaches beyond the raised dwelling. It hasn't stopped or changed its melody. I zoom in with my camera and see silver letters stamped on a black telescope in the third-floor window. It's my name ~ it looks like a brand name. I would take it if no one was inside. Photographing these private beaches fills my days. Occasionally I see figures inside the deserted mansions. One sometimes follows me through the shadows ~ never two at a time. I run faster than they can move. My feet crunch dead leaves through the tree-lined estates, and I don't think about the coming winter. On the secluded beaches the soft sand slows me down. Presently I notice the song still hasn't changed. Before I turn to go, I look for the telescope. It's gone from the pink attic. I scan, and find it placed in the open window closest to the red front door. As I lift my hands to take a close-up of this new image, I read my name ~ Levi ~ written in gray on the back casing of my camera.

Twilight Covenning

Lenore Balliro

The path back is filled with tricks, the moon so plump it sheds
a luminous

compassion. Clear space blues us: calm ice. Heart break. Heart
beat. Heart breath.

The scent and heat of fires flicker behind the blindfold. The
moon races its way

in rapid grace. The path back is filled with tricks. Eyes lock to
eyes. Hand on heart.

Blue soothes. Hands on shoulders in front, rough wool, safe
solid. Scent and heat

of fires, flickers behind the blindfold. A rope in the hands, I
can't untie the past, despite

the request. How can the pale child step for hours and the
other one sob? Nests of bodies,

still. I leave the small ones on the cold floor and still regret it.

The moon races its way in

rapid grace. Accelerates. I see my face in the mirror when she
lifts the blindfold,

but it is a door, another's face, not mine. The path back is filled
with tricks.

The Ripple

Julia Sinclair

Everyone asks *where were you, when* — . One of *those* days, of which there had been many, of which there now is only ever one.

I was in my personal hollow of heaven, playing paleontologist with fossil-pressed stones. *Inconsequential bones*, my mother said, winking, surrendering the past to my small hands. The underbelly of her lab bench made a lovely cave, and the translucent lab coat over her legs, a ghostly curtain.

Crisp fractals of October sunlight scattered on the spectrophotometer, filtering through the curved glass of half-filled flasks. The shadow of a red-tailed hawk swam shark-like through the glow; I turned, and the fishhook of its gaze pierced my eye just as the Ripple suspended its flight. For those six seconds' strange infinity, it was frozen in space like that amber-fixed, gene-mined Jurassic dragonfly. Must've met the threshold for bird-maturity, to have heard the herald; insulated in youth, my thoughts remained an instrument of unplucked strings. Still, I beheld my own red messenger, and was delivered of the truth: *something had happened, was happening, was about to change*. A pyroclastic shift shattering the tectonic shelves of the known.

My mother's knees buckled and she collapsed to my sightline. The hawk vanished with a feathered flurry and a high sharp cry that lingers yet within me like starlight spun to gossamer by an event horizon. Once the muscles of mother's lungs unseized and our ears ceased ringing, she met my eyes and — haltingly — obeyed.

Tell your young.

With trembling fingers, she took from me an osseous
rock. *Remember in the movie?* she bade me. *No sightings since*
the brachiosaurus; no current to the fence; then – a rustle in the
dark forest – false thunder in the storm –

some predators move
unseen yet step heavily
something ancient nears

THE SHINING

Inspired by Stephen King's novel *The Shining*

Lina Buividavičiūtė

Translated from Lithuanian by Ada Valaitis

What will you find in the memory cutouts, Daddy?

How will you explain the black dream mutations,
the degenerated hedge beasts?

It was all inside of us from the beginning, we always
needed a reliable light to see within – long dog trails
of history, bulging veins of the house –

I remember it all, that's why at night my dark
earthen brother is calling me –

Can you hear the loud thumping of hooves, Daddy?

These walls are too thin, you're already breathing so heavily –
my time bone is still open, my fear nerve still exposed.

I soar in your Purgatory, I'm a lost little boy,
they say I was the Sunday child, I had six feelings,
but the hammer's so hard, it beats rhythmically, forcefully –
the thunder is rumbling with fury, Daddy,
it's raging against our windows –
so what's the use of shining so desperately?

Brothers (Without Apologies to the Brothers Grimm)*Amy Allison*

stinging nettles
pierce my skin
nettles I twist
into flax
to sew garments
for brothers
turned into ravens
black as my
sleepless
nights

memories crowd
the hours
memories
of bullying
of my brothers'
brittle laughter
as they rode into
the forest
to hunt
while trees
trembled
in the wind

I did not choose
to share their blood
the same blood
streaking
my hands
red as fire

yet it is my task
to break the spell
clothe them
with my labors
turn them back
into men

still beasts
in their hearts

will I ever
find my way
out of the silence
I must bury
myself in
to keep them alive

Death Moves In

Brian Mosher

Harry was out of town when Death came for him, so Death moved into Harry's place. At first, the neighbors didn't notice. It was that kind of neighborhood: no one pays much attention to anything beyond the tips of their noses. But as the air around Harry's place grew heavy and the dark clouds refused to disperse even in the face of a stronger than normal east wind, and the stench of something rotten began to seep out through Harry's windows and under his door, it eventually became impossible to ignore.

A week after Death moved in, Phyllis (in number 73, directly opposite Harry's) commented to her husband, "Jerry, did you notice those birds? I wonder if it's the smell that brought them."

Jerry responded, "what birds do you mean?" Jerry was kind of a prick, always pretending he didn't know what Phyllis was talking about even when he knew perfectly well, just to make her feel stupid and worthless, which she already did, so they were quite the couple.

"The black birds on Harry's roof, in the yard. One's even sitting on his mailbox. I don't know what kind of birds they are."

"Of course, you don't know what kind of birds they are." Jerry turned to look out the window at the precise moment it started to rain blood. He had no answers for Phyllis.

Meanwhile, in the backyard of the house next door to Harry's, Lakshmi Chandra was playing under an oak tree with her baby brother Dinesh. Dinesh wasn't really a baby, but Lakshmi thought of him that way. When you're seven, a five-year-old brother seems like a baby. Like Phyllis, Chandra was curious about the birds around Harry's house. Tossing some pieces of toast over the picket fence she tried to whistle, but failed. The birds paid no attention to either the toast or Lakshmi.

They did notice Dinesh, who was no typical five-year-old. He had never showed interest in the usual toys and games; didn't respond to music or the laughter of those around him. He had begun speaking in full sentences and displaying an uncanny understanding of his parents' conversations before his third birthday. His pediatrician assured Mr. and Mrs. Chandra they had nothing to be concerned about. They should just accept the fact Dinesh was exceptionally intelligent, and proceed from there. They were fine with that at first. But when Dinesh started building a "temple" in the backyard they began to think the pediatrician might be wrong.

The temple was constructed of sun-dried mud bricks, which Dinesh formed using discarded two-by-fours. He added mown grass from the compost pile to the mud, just as the first builders had, millennia ago. His parents asked him how he knew to do that. He looked at them like they were idiots.

The birds could see Dinesh was not a typical human, so they began to discuss him amongst themselves, in their bird language. Death, sitting in Harry's recliner in Harry's living room, heard the birds through the open window. He naturally understood them, being fluent in all languages. When he heard them commenting about the unusual light emanating from the young boy and about how they suspected the tot might understand their speech, Death took note. He stood to look out the window.

By now, Lakshmi had grown bored with the birds and was thinking about going inside to ask her mother for a snack. Dinesh was clearly content to sit where he was, forming clay into the shape of a kid. Not a child, but a young goat.

Death was impressed, not only by young Dinesh's facility with forming clay, but also with his choice of subject. When Dinesh took a jackknife out of his pocket and slit the clay kid's throat in front of the temple, Death decided to join the game. Thus, the rain of blood Jerry and Phyllis witnessed from across the street, which sent Lakshmi screaming toward the safety of her mother's kitchen.

Dinesh wasn't frightened by the crimson torrent. It's what he'd expected, knowing who was peering at him through the curtains next door. The sanguine shower ended as suddenly as it began when Death stepped out the front door of number 72, came down the walk onto the street, strolled from number 72 to number 74, up the Chandra's front walk, and rang the doorbell, ignoring young Dinesh who was watching him like an owl watches a mouse.

Mrs. Chandra opened the front door, still holding the bloodied towel she'd been using to clean Lakshmi. She felt an icy wind despite the unseasonably warm weather, and found herself with no words to greet the tall, dark stranger on her front step. Death was not concerned with her lack of speech. He brushed her aside and strode into the overly decorated, cramped living room.

Dinesh was surprised at this. In fact, he was overcome with curiosity and frustration. Don't forget, he was still a child of five, at which age we believe we are the center of everyone's attention – and after all, he had gone out of his way to call Death out of Harry's house. Fighting back angry tears he toddled to the back of the house, entering through the open back door into the kitchen which was full of the scent of the naan mother had been preparing. He crept slowly and silently across the hardwood floor and peered around the corner into the living room, where he found Death, on one knee, peering back at him.

"Hello," said Dinesh, calmly.

"Hello," replied Death. "You're an interesting little person, aren't you?"

"I think so."

"Yes, you certainly are. Would you like to come with me?"

"Yes."

And with a clap of his hands Death transformed into a large black bird. Grasping Dinesh in his claws he rose through the chimney and flew directly into the mid-morning sun. All the other birds followed obediently and no one ever heard from, or thought about, Dinesh ever again.

Harry, returning home the following Monday, was completely unaware of any of these strange events. He went on to live a long and boring life until, just short of his 91st birthday, he choked on a piece of Mrs. Chandra's curried lamb and died without even trying her naan.

Cassandra*Stephanie Paquette LeBlanc*

The sky was black. The air was cold.
Her coat was damp, green with mold.
She stumbled through the eerie night
and asked the stranger, "Got a light?"

He squinted through the alley's murk,
and the smile she gave made him jerk.
Jagged, yellow teeth. Impossibly wide.
Then she opened her mouth, and he looked inside.

She tilted her head back and unhooked her jaw,
outstretched her arms and bared her claws.
Muck and mire, flame and funeral pyre,
Blacks, reds, and golds, swirling higher.

He tried to scream, but no sound came.
Then, she shut her mouth and snuffed the flame.
A cigarette slid between her lips,
one hand outstretched, a sway of her hips.

He fished for some matches, face gone pale.
Then lit her cigarette and watched her inhale.
"Do you believe that shit?" she purred through the smoke.
"No," he whispered, and the last of her broke.

The Fable of the Owl and the Moon

Steve Bowman

One night, in early October, Joey couldn't sleep. Having been sent to bed early and then getting yelled at by his mother for reading comic books under his blanket by flashlight, Joey thrashed in his sheets trying to get comfortable. No position seemed to work. On his back, with the sheets pulled up to his chin, was too hot. Curled on his right side, with his foot hanging off the bed, was too cold. He turned to his left side and covered his feet with the sheet, but then the bright moonlight blazed through his window and burned through his eyelids until he sat up in bed. He shook his fist at the moon and yelled, "Why can't everybody leave me alone!"

And then, the moon vibrated back and forth in place as if blown by a strong wind. Joey's eyes widened and the vibrating became more erratic. He closed his eyes and rubbed them to make sure he wasn't dreaming. When he opened them, the moon was gone from the sky with only a dark hole in its place, like a dusty trapdoor or an empty animal den.

Joey clutched at his hair with both hands and moved his eyes back and forth, squinting into the dark woods outside his window for any sign of the missing moon. There, in the distance, he saw a thin, yellow light bobbing like a flashlight between the trees. Mesmerized and terrified in equal measure, Joey watched the yellow light transform from seeming flashlight into the glowing orb missing from its den. It grew gangly arms and legs as it skittered from tree to tree and zig-zagged rapidly closing the distance to the edge of the woods, then the house, and to his window.

With an emaciated hand, it lifted the window and said, "Hello, Joey, I'm The Old Yellow Moon. You called to me, aggravated, and I've come down from the heavens to resolve our differences! I just couldn't stand knowing there might be enmity between us."

Joey sputtered, "wha . . . how? Mom doesn't allow . . . please don't hurt me!"

Waving its hand in a calming gesture, The Old Yellow Moon climbed through Joey's window and said: "I'm going to tell you a bedtime story about the great horned owl that bellows in the woods."

Startled into silence by the folds of luminous skin that dangled from its arms, Joey fell back on his bed, pulled his feet under himself, but held out one shaking arm. The fingers of his other hand splayed across his eyes as if trying to shield his view from some forbidden thing, like his mother did at the movie theatre.

The Old Yellow Moon began its story:

A disembodied voice startles the night. Its great booming hoot echoes through the deep forest, frightening the old man standing near the edge. It barely dissipates before another deep bellow pierces the man, reverberating against the soft, darkened walls of night.

It's been a lifetime, hasn't it? the old man thinks, *since I've heard an owl this close in these ancient woods.*

A thrashing in the underbrush rouses him to the moment and he drops his armload of firewood. Something, an animal he hopes, runs through the night. Fear rising, cold sweat rolls down his neck. He shivers. Gaping into the darkness, the old man squints straining to see the unseen.

A whispery flutter erupts the nearby branches. In the gloom the old man barely discerns a wide span, black as velvet, whispering against the winter blackened leaves still clinging to their withered limbs.

The booming bellow sounds again. Softer and farther away, but gravely solemn, "Beware the coming of the hungry blood red moon!" it says.

A nearly imperceptible psithurism of leaves rushes to fill the emptiness of night, but the old man heard the great horned owl no more.

At some point during the telling, Joey had relaxed, crossed his legs under himself, and folded his hands in his lap. With a suspicious wink and a blush rising in its cheeks, the Old Yellow Moon hissed: "Goodnight and sleep well."

"But I don't understand," said Joey. "It's an interesting story, but it's not scary. What's the lesson?"

The bright moon turned its broad face, waxed a wide toothy smile, showing its blood red hunter-moon teeth, and lunged at the boy, biting down with all its force. Afterwards, licking its dripping fingertips, the moon giggled and spoke to the stillness of the room, “you humans taste so much better when you’re distracted.”

It slipped over the windowsill, climbed back into the night sky, and waited like a great glowing spider in a starry web, its arms and legs plump with a pinkish hue.

Nancy's Step

Stephanie Sub

At London Bridge on the Thames,
where Nancy once walked up and down—
from her den to the world, then back again—
to live a life God, in neglect, refused to see.
With nothing more than her untainted heart,
she poured out milk of kindness and compassion—
a steady flow into her stubborn faith in humankind,
even as it betrayed her,
mocked her,
ground her down to nothing.

She pitied an orphaned boy—Oliver—
and shielded him from the world beneath.

Until the blindfolded Goddess—Fortuna—
spun her cruel Wheel toward a fateful turn,
and all of Nancy's wishes were forfeited.
Her wretched body was battered—
the compass of the wheel now a bludgeon—
crushing the life that once cradled love.

Blows fell upon her still-young head,
and all her hopes for the beauty of life shattered.
Her tears rolled down cold cheeks—
drop by drop—
until they turned to pearls and broken crystal.
Then, with one cry of the heart, she departed.

Or so she thought.

For even now, from dusk till dawn,
she wanders those fateful steps,
waiting—
asking strangers,
“Have you seen the boy?”

Where the Rainbow Lobsters Cry

Krista Allen

I crawl behind the couch at night. Everyone assumes that's where I sleep. The television blares nonstop, my dad nodding off, while my mom deals with my sister's two year old tantrums. So I take my blanket and a pillow and create a bed.

But I don't sleep.

If you lift the flap at the back of the couch, you can be someplace else. Maine is my favorite, where my nana lives. But sometimes I go to Egypt, or Australia, or Mars. Last week I discovered the Amazon.

Nobody looks like me there. People do different things than us. The food is strange. They sing songs with words I don't understand. But the families do things together, and the kids run off by themselves, tiptoeing barefoot through the woods or helping to gather firewood. They sleep together in the dark, with the sounds of animals outside and the river rushing past. Nobody yells at them to be quiet or brush their teeth or tells them to get in the car because they're late and this time don't mess with your sister's carseat buckles.

Yesterday, something happened. My sister appeared. I was having a hopping contest with my other family when she came out of the sleeping hut. Her face was still red from crying, her nose dripping snot down her stained pajama t-shirt.

The other kids ran away. I tried to catch them, but they were too fast. And my sister screamed, stumbling after me into the trees. I was torn. Who should I follow?

In the morning, we go to day care as usual. I always fall asleep immediately on the cool plastic mats while a recording of music and crickets plays. It feels more like my village, where everyone spends time together. There are no news reporters telling about all of the bad things that happen every day. And the toilets are low to the floor.

That night, after we eat dinner in front of the tv, my sister crawls behind the couch. She emerges crying a moment later, a scrape dripping blood down one shoulder.

My mom takes her to the bathroom. My dad sets to work with a hammer and nails. I watch in horror as he tacks the flap closed. He sits back down, satisfied.

I climb in, pull at the fabric, tug at it with my toes. But it holds fast. So I get paper and crayons and try to draw pictures of the places I like to visit. Rivers and trees and a rainbow lobster crawling on the bottom of the sea. I think I finally fall asleep.

The next day, my sister is dropped off at day care, but I'm taken to the emergency room at the hospital where my mom works. I have a fever and I can't turn my head from side to side. They offer me water with a straw, but I refuse to drink. I want to go home. I want to sleep more.

My mom stays with me all day. She only leaves to get food when my dad arrives. He holds my hand and tries to read a magazine, but he soon nods off. I lift the sheet of the bed over my eyes, to see what's there, but it smells like bleach and my arm feels too heavy and there's a tube sticking out of it with liquid dripping into me.

The last thing I remember is a doctor walking out of the room and my mom crying.

My sister isn't there. I want to tell her I'm sorry, that she can come with me. I'll even share my crayons with her. But I'm leaving again. Alone. I don't look back. The dark flap opens, and I enter.

CHILD, WHAT DO YOU BREATHE?

j.emmy

Child, what do you breathe? Abiku's metaphor.
Your return leaks mother's palm oil, the yams mourn.
Corals bleach their skin black. The earth eclipse awaits celestial
from you, tell me, what do you breathe?
Air grips senescence loosely on home's rooftop, rusted of
youth, they say you are the iron.
But again, and again, as always. The household paints herself
anew. With funeral bright rainbow
lending colours to dull rooms. You inhabit
vainly wick of candle burn. And the light spreads,
when ash is the profit of dawn. Dust is remembered faintly of
your demise. Tears recollect
the passage of your arrival. More brief than time, but still we
breathe you in memorial, but do you breathe us too, 'Tell us,
child. Tell us, what do you breathe?



The Conclave
Krista Allen

THE VEIL

Recluse

Craig Kirchner

*God changes his appearance every second. Blessed is the
man who can recognize him, in all his disguises.*

— *Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba the Greek*

The only memory is alone.
Others pass under the window,
hats, tops of heads, like wandering waves
against black asphalt.
They come but mostly go,
and never stop.

The skyline seems surreal,
could and should be removed.
The shops across the lane are doused
by traumaed traffic lights,
that bounce on bedroom walls,
on pillowcases choked, soaked blind.

The furniture, homesick zombies,
decaying like hung meat, lacquered
with bile-smeared sweat, a satin
gray. The mirror stares back in
disgust,
at skin shriveled sugar brown,
cancered with matted hair,
drawn close as dying clover.

Insomnia chooses with relish,
not to sleep, it preoccupies, is human.
Forgetting how to tell it, nothing is
true. Time drifts like dark tides
and only the collecting filth
is dependable.

The room shrinks.
The dust is moved by melting walls,

like thick parched rust in driving rain,
exiting sediment seeking rest,
breaths released, never missed,
soul sought fervor never found.

SUMMARY OF THE NOTHINGNESS

Davor Tocinowski

“The Universe as a Hologram”, at the given moment, is in the form of an assumption or fiction, and time itself will either confirm it as a factual state or, on the contrary, will survive only as an imaginative hypothetical thesis.

That the universe in which we exist is a hologram, and with that, planet Earth and every being on it, including us as individuals, are a holographic simulation, therefore I treat the holographic presentation exclusively as a visual virtual effect. This state of our universe thus presents the opportunity to identify myself with the format of nothingness, exploited in the cultural, or rather, the artistic sphere, and I will further elaborate the reasons for this.

The factual situation shows that the elementary particles create everything, including also the human body. It is assumed that when they enter a black hole by inertia the matter degrades, disappears, or decomposes, but the information about the matter remains, the emphasis being on - the information. That information continues to exist in the black holes in their internal cosmic structure, and the black hole contributes to being reflected and projected as an image of an illusionistic hologram. The information about the object that was inside the black hole does not disappear from our universe, but is stored and emitted in the form of an information record on the surface of the black hole, i.e. on its event horizon. According to these scientific assumptions, our real content or true existence has once been realized in a completely different dimensional and temporal parameter and now our identical content, which has already been performed previously, with the help of the projection interpreted by the black holes, is reconstructed and re-performed in the cosmic expanse, more precisely on the event horizon, which according to my understanding is treated as a canvas exhibit, on which individuals, with the help of reflective generation of particles, interpret our own roles in a repetitive manner, which confirm us as visual copies

According to my understanding, the holographic simulation is a retrospective image that lacks originality and identity, due to its reproductive and reconstructed character, which contributes to the lack of essence and aura of forming individual characteristics, personal original traits, the right to choose to make decisions and create new decisions vis-à-vis the previous ones (created by the original) and all the accompanying components that form the internal spiritual content that are formed in the course of a true evolution, specifically emphasizing the absence of matter. The deficit of these components that we have listed, especially the absence of matter (which in the case of holographic survival is replaced by the information), culminates in directing us that the holographic presentation, which means ourselves, is identified and labeled as a perfect visual copy, and the copy is paving the way for us to treat it with the concept of nothingness within the artistic sphere.

The hologram's lack of the attributes I listed earlier does not lead me to define the holographic world or myself as immaterial information, i.e. my materiality or physiology is destructively destroyed inside the black hole only my visual information remains on the event horizon, and the marginalized information traces the path towards the maximalist *nothingness*.

In the following text, I will treat and try to explain, according to my subjective understanding, the role of the holographic essence in the current cultural world. It was necessary to make a comparison between the real existence (the original) and the holographic one, by using the terms digital survival (the copy, i.e. our current state), according to the information technology vocabulary. The human essence characterized as reality, i.e. the original, is formed thanks to the evolutionary stage of development of the individual with a current constant, whereas the holographic simulation display, if identified with the information technology vocabulary (the digital) is an algorithmic creation that, apart from the interpretation of pictorial visualization, possesses nothing else and a number of attributes have been eliminated. This given situation brings us closer to the maximalist norms of nothingness because the hologram supports and largely presents identical and repetitive processes of historically played out civilizational actions, situations and moments, supplementing them with a futuristic future story that is unknown to the copy, but is already a conscious and capitalized content of the real.

Furthermore, I will refer to the fact that the holographic simulation or, paraphrased from our point of view, the partial nothingness exists thanks to the original display (which has once been realized in a completely different dimensional parameter). If the original display did not exist, the holographic reproduction would not have the example and basis on which it was shaped, realized and formed in order to be broadcast, surviving as a virtual image, which we will allow ourselves to accept as observers as an artistic product. The original is the driver and according to its physiognomy, essence, content and character, the plagiarized virtual holographic simulation is created and repeated, the paradigm of which is nothingness. The copied state of the individual and everything around us (our current stage) functions thanks to molecules, atoms, positrons, and so on, while the computer, digital simulation is shaped thanks to frames, pixels, etc.

In line with these assumptions, the real content or the true existence of the original is realized in a completely different chemical, structural, temporal and dimensional parameter; therefore, the elements that formed real objects have not been scientifically identified and represent a vast essential capacity that we do not possess in the current stage of existence and as holographic individuals or accentuated copies. We are created from atoms, molecules and chemical compounds that I identify with the model of the simulation. If interpreted with technological terminology, it would sound that we were formed from frames, pixels, etc., and their function is to interpret the visual information without any general materiality. The fact that I possess this status and stage of values prompts me to treat myself as minor information in a context that justifies the nothingness, the same nothingness that I treat as a driving theme in my works.

idiotically surreal*Waldo Salt***sprawling out**

in one of my nonsense postures

GIANT FLAK LIE!

Walk on church bell sonar skyward!

you're talking with eighty-seven moths
about a tintinnabulation thatawayI want to talk about what I had to of gotten into to have this
manner of speech make sense.Saurian bloodporn
info heap

ILY is not a spice! Unreality.

sandy aperçu

Seems like you're being coy with those who love you, and we
obv dislike that.Abracadabra calculating,
nah i'm still compelled.

ok but seriously you kinda just said maximalist nothing

nano ken

In a cluttered subterranean lodge of fishing poles

W Bradycardia Stillwater Coin Soda M 1000

The whim of stars.

Waldo Salt,

narrowly unavoidably NEET

prickles spines and thorns

winter buds under the snow

YOU EMPTY SEED

cryosurgery

♠ ODALSIK oubliette OBELUS obelisk

Cubism bulkhead what of it.

Misnomer war dance?

Antistrophe.

Inconsolable.

Babylonian sages?

Radiothorium dilemma:

Half-life longer than the glass, unfigured universe,
nightmares and sleepwalking.

I am being coy corrupt.

NOT A GOOD LOOK!

--Guider

phase embankment*Waldo Salt***if just everyone stop**

get by by

vampirism

cannibalism

equally wholesome stuff

destructive assessment

WE MUST ELATEDLY BUILD

mog thru to the core of property

```
sort file | uniq -c | sort -rn      # frequency table, most
common first
```

```
grep -oE '\w+' file | sort | uniq -c | sort -rn  # word
frequency count
```

```
awk '{print length, $0}' file | sort -rn      # sort lines by
length
```

would you risk nike lanes of traffic

for the subwoofer con

one dollar fallout

second hand foot warmer

you have obv never had a run in with podiatry

did i or did i not use a dead metaphor metaphorically

i'm turn to salt

i would world without end it

i would not provoke a direct confrontation

millennial internet personality

super sad

beingography

under the paw of the sphinx

spirulina
cymatics
ego ecology

do you clock the theft of my tidings bro

Three Sheets

Einar Elliot

The third glass opens a door behind the ribs, and from it pours a golden light. Every voice kind. Every thought winged. Every story told around the table, a truth. This is the old lie the grape tells, and tonight I believe it: that the body is lighter than it looks, that the ground was only ever a suggestion, that the fear I carry like a stone in the pocket was never mine. It was only a stone.

Somewhere under the lamp of the October moon, gravity loosens its grip, and I rise. The whole wide dark country was never as far as we thought and I am free.

I remember that I was built for air and had only since forgotten.



Agrat bat Mahlat
Beatrice Alder

**THE LAST HARVEST:
BLOOD**

Purpose*Bubba Sanyer*

'tis not for cutting
a cut is a guess

where the beast agreed to part:
the pale seam twixt muscle and muscle
the pearl sheath on tender flesh
a tiny silent gap in the hip
a shoulder giving way to ribs
the way a sleeper gives up a hand

its undoing folded into the making
only meat that consented, for a while, to be whole

washing the tool, I think
 of water finding the fault in stone,
 of life, which doesn't tear us
 so much as show us where we were only ever joined.

nothing that lives is one thing
the kindest blade knows it
and takes nothing but the togetherness
leaving each unique piece unto itself
to be consumed
or to be refashioned anew

wolves*Pinny Bulman*

the wolves will come out soon
he warned me, glancing toward his dog
nuzzling fallen leaves
among the dusking trees

the river yawned
licking the train tracks
as the ground shifted once
again between hunter and hunted, all of us
struggling to hold tightly
the straining leash pulled taut
leaving welts on our palms, obscuring
the future we once pretended
was written there

he turned and hurried away
toward some imagined exit
the dog reluctant, staring intently
into the whispering underbrush

i waited until they were no longer
visible before dropping
to all fours
raising my face toward the darkened sky
and starting to howl.

Swansong

*For Peter, Paul, and Mary

Kaithyn Downing

Will hadn't been hunting for swan, but the afternoon light was fading to diagonal shafts darting through the tree canopy above, and game had been scarce. He had hoped to get a deer, while they were still fat from the rich summer grass, before the leanness of autumn made the meat stringy. Snow last winter had been thick and had lasted long into spring. If this winter was bad...With luck, he'd be able to salt some of the venison, and smoke some, and maybe trade some for other winter provisions. Or arrowheads, he admitted when faced with the wear of his own. He would have to see the blacksmith soon.

But strangely, he had been out since before dawn and saw no deer. Not drinking from the small lake many animals used as a water source, not grazing in the meadow's tall grass, not loping along tracks through the forest.

It's like someone told them to hide.

It wasn't arrogance to say he rarely missed. *Never* would sound like hubris, but it was closer to the truth. He couldn't remember the last shot he missed, which kept him well fed through the winter. And now that Polly finally said yes, he would make sure she never wanted for anything.

He had loved her since they were children, since he saw her picking berries in the woods, chestnut hair shining in one long braid down her back, eyes dancing. Even at ten, he had vowed to marry her someday.

"I love you, but I like my freedom too much to ever marry," she had said lightly when he had first proposed at eighteen, and he suspected there had been more to it than that but didn't know what. And she had stood firm over the next eight years, despite her parents' protests, so he had despaired of ever making her his.

His stomach growled angrily, as if scolding him for wasting time with his thoughts.

He had about decided that a pheasant or duck might do in a pinch, fumbled in his quiver for a lighter arrow, and turned back to the lake. A flash of white at the lakeside made him duck behind a tree. Rolling his feet from the edges to the arches to creep as silently as possible, he edged closer, nocking an arrow.

Polly said it was a sin to kill a swan.

"Swans mate for life," she had said. "Killing one dooms the other to be alone for the rest of her life. That's cruel." She frowned disapprovingly, and turned back to her pruning and picking, soil almost black between her fingers. Polly didn't eat meat, only fish and the fruit and vegetables she grew in her garden. Gifts of game only saddened her, so he stopped long ago.

"When are *we* going to mate for life? You're the only girl I'll ever love." Will had pulled her to him, pushing a stray wisp of nut-brown hair out of her eyes. Grey eyes that softened him. And hardened him. "When will you marry me?"

"Promise me you will *never* kill a swan." She gripped his face and stared hard into his eyes.

"Then you'll marry me?"

"Perhaps." She gazed at him assessing.

"I promise." He held hand to heart.

She paused a moment, gauging his seriousness. "Yes. I'll be your wife."

He kissed her then, his happiness spilling over. He wasn't sure what had changed, why she had finally agreed now, but he didn't care.

She said yes.

A lone white swan floated close to the water's edge, only a few yards from where wavelets kissed weeds. Will lowered his bow, unnoocked the arrow, and for a moment, prepared to retreat into the forest.

His stomach protested.

He had promised. If Polly ever found out...

But this swan was alone. There was no mate to mourn.

And swan was delicious. And valuable. Surely, this one time, she would forgive.

He warred with himself as the swan idly drifted closer, unaware of his presence, of his intentions. Such an easy shot...

He looked around, half expecting to see Polly hiding behind a bush, but he was alone. Silently, Will raised his bow, nocked his arrow, and aimed.

Ffffffthwwat. As the arrow pierced the swan's breast, it threw back its head and cried a sorrowful wail.

With a pang of guilt, Will rushed to retrieve his prize from the lake. He lifted it gently out of the water, and carried it to shore. As he laid it on the grass, it transformed into Polly, arrow protruding from her breast, blood soaking her white apron.

With a strangled cry, Will cradled her in his arms, but she was already dead. *Such an easy shot.*

Howling at the sky, he rocked back and forth, holding her as if by force of will alone he could bring her back, undo his actions. He howled for his broken promise, he howled for his lost love, he howled for all the lonely years ahead. It was long before his howls became sobs and sobs became whimpers, and still he held her body.

As he looked on the lake, a swan glided by. And the sun slowly sank, in the grey of the sky.*

* Peter, Paul and Mary. "Polly Von." *In the Wind*, Warner Bros.

Records, 1963.

The Archer Will Pierce Your Heart

Gigi Tierney

You see him much too late, taking aim at you from just below the crest of the nearest hill. His face drawn in sharp focus. The bow pulled taut, the arrow flying well before you hear the twang of the string. You shudder as it hits, but it's not you.

He is riding down like a fury. His horse is as thin and taut as the bow. Mane flying, hair flying. Entangled into a single creature. He stops short before you and dismounts gracelessly. It seems a minor miracle that he keeps on his feet. He marches to a post behind you, pulls the arrow out of it, and presents you with the bloody breasted fowl that was his true target. Smiling with his full face, like a child expecting praise.

Your ruby red blood is drumming in your ears in both rage and relief. This stranger is rude and audacious. You will tell him to leave, to ride off again.

But you have seen no one else since you stopped counting the seasons.

So you sit in your doorway, plucking and gutting the fowl. He unsaddles and unbridles his horse in the grassy area beside the house.

"I don't have a barn," you say, stating the obvious.

"It's fine. She is used to being outside."

"I don't even have a fence."

"She won't leave." He considers for a moment. "Or if she does, she will come back." He brushes the horse gently as the setting sun washes everything in scarlet, then leaves her to graze.

Inside, as you fill the kettle with the fowl and some herbs and potatoes, he builds a fire in the hearth. The firewood is already partially charred because you gather it from the dead town nearby.

"Why do you stay here?" he asks.

You don't know how to answer. When you go to the dead town to gather firewood, it is like a forest of ghosts.

"This is home," you finally say. You put the filled kettle on the hook over the fire. When the food is ready, you sit across from each other at the little roughhewn table. He produces a leather bag from nowhere and pours a ruby red liquid into your cups. Everything becomes warm as you eat and drink. It strikes you that his nose is a just little too large for his face. As you laugh, your hand flies to your mouth because the sound is so strange. He talks about his travels. Wide cold rivers, blasted forests, flowing grasslands. Dry scarlet canyons filled with scrub and thorns.

"Are there other people?" you ask.

"Sometimes."

"Are there still cities?"

His eyes roam the room before he responds. "I don't know."

Afterwards, he lays down on the hearthrug before the fire, as if completely at home. You stand and put one hand on the chair to pull it over, then change your mind and lay down next to him. The fire crackles on one side of you and he burns on the other. You are bombarded with intolerable heat. The reflection of the flames flicker crimson in his dark eyes as you peel off your

clothes. His bare chest is thin and tight as the bow. As he moves above you, a pendant dangles from his neck and traces invisible hieroglyphics onto your skin.

Later, you are drowsy and entangled together like a single creature. He whispers that you can ride away with him. Perhaps build a wheel cart for his horse to pull. You shake your head at the absurdity of it.

"Your poor horse," you mumble.

He watches you with a fathomless expression.

You fall asleep and dream and he is there. He rides away for a time; he returns. With a coney or a bird. With a pair of silvery fish dangling at the end of a thin rope. His hot breath on your neck as he teaches you to use the bow. Day after day, the meal. The ruby red cup. The fire.

When you awake, the gray hearth is cold. A familiar silence has settled over the room. You sit up, shivering, and look for a sign of him.

Nothing. A lump begins to form low in your chest, a grief you thought you had buried long ago. You throw a blanket around your shoulders and run outside.

He has almost ridden to the crest of the nearest hill. The same low hill where you had first seen him, only now his back is turned. You want to shout at him but the sound is strangled by your shame and desperation and the swelling in your chest.

Still, he turns. His face is pained at first but then sharpens into cold focus. One hand holding the center of the bow. The horse becomes motionless under him as he drops the reins and reaches for an arrow.

A short sharp laugh finally escapes from your struggling lungs. So this is how you will join the ghosts.

No matter.

Let him draw the bow. Let him release it. Let him watch as you writhe, your blood bursting scarlet all over yourself and the ground.

What Must Be Done

Steve Stred

She'd followed the trail of blood in the snow for four days.

The air remained thick, wet, cold.

Still, in her right hand she held her trusty, bloody sword.

In her left, the head she needed to bring.

Katya was used to living alone.

A nomad her sister labeled her, back when she was alive.

Her sister checked on her every few months, sometimes longer.

Making sure Katya was surviving.

That was one of the last conversations they'd had.

Only a day after, a large mountain cat ambushed them as they hiked through a rocky valley. They'd decided to spend the winter months together, closer to the waters edge, out of the high hills where the wind was relentless and the snow so deep you were best to hibernate until it melted.

It could've easily been Katya who was attacked, but instead the beast targeted Saarah. Maybe because she was shorter, a few feet behind, Katya wasn't sure. But they'd been walking in silence, listening for larger, more violent things that lived in the area, somehow unaware of the danger that stalked them overhead.

When the cat landed on Saarah, she'd let out a howl of agony, the cat braying and hissing, its claws making short work of her face. The cliff walls on either side were so close, the path so narrow, that Saarah was dead before Katya could even unsheathe her sword. Once she got it pulled, she held it before her, watching as the mountain cat looked her in the eyes. Then it began to drag Saarah's lifeless body away, its fangs latched onto the bloody sides of her head.

No, she thought. I need her.

Katya knew what must be done.

Her father told her the story once, when Katya was but a small girl and she'd asked him why Saarah sometimes looked so blue.

"I brought her back," he'd said, while stoking the fire in the cave they called home. "A bear snuck into our camp when she was no bigger than you. It attacked while we slept, ripped apart a dozen or more tents. Your sister... she didn't survive."

"But the how is she here with us?"

"I took her to our God."

Katya stalked the cat for some distance, the animal never turning its back on her. Saarah's body created a trail for her to follow, though she didn't need it. She stayed close.

Then, she saw her opening. A downed tree ahead. The cat was forced to turn to jump the obstacle, and as it crouched to launch itself and her sister over, Katya pounced, sword high, aim true.

She cleaved the cat's head off with a single, forceful blow. Her sword sliced through its muscled neck as though every cell in her body wanted revenge for the killing of Saarah. Its body twitched and thrashed, but she cared not. It was dead.

Katya looked at her sister and took a deep breath.

She knew what she needed to do to bring her back, but it didn't make it any easier.

On the fifth day of following the blood, Katya saw where it ended.

A set of stone stairs rose, ascending to the dark mouth of a cave, high on the hillside.

The stopped at the base.

Two flickering torches burned brightly through the falling snow, two beacons showing her where to enter.

She climbed the stairs, her thick furs failing to keep her warm.

Each step was an exercise in ensuring she didn't slip. A fall would be the end of her.

She was shivering harder now, her feet frozen solid, so she took her time, believing once into the cave she'd find a source of heat.

A stack of skulls lining both sides of the opening met her when she stepped in the cave.

Torches lined the walls, the flames flickering deeper into the mountain, equally inviting her and terrifying her. She gripped the hair of the head she held tighter, her other hand flexing on the handle of the sword.

It was time to bring Saarah back.

Echoes sounded around her as she walked.

She was unsure how deep she was, and with each additional step she felt a growing panic to leave. But she couldn't turn back, she was too far in now, too close to Saarah returning.

A stench greeted her from within the darkness ahead, a large cavern opening before her.

The wind carried a wretched smell her way, the floor of the space covered in rotting carcasses.

An immense figure sat upon a stone throne in the middle; its body slumped to one side. A tattered, threadbare robe hung around them, ending bunched on the floor where dozens of flies swarmed and buzzed. Katya couldn't fathom how tall they'd be should they stand, but she was certain they'd be ten feet tall, if not more.

Their God.

Before her, she looked upon the one that could bring Saarah back.

"I've brought her head, Oh Mighty One, as my father did all those years before. Please, bring her back."

The figure shifted, as though woken from a thousand-year sleep and straightened, before letting out a mighty roar.

Katya shrunk, dropping to her knees in fear, though she continued to hold Saarah's head before her.

'Little one, your father didn't tell you the whole story...'

The Mighty One stood, taking a single step to cover the distance between them and stopped in front of Katya.

'For her to come back, I need one to take.'

“I know and understand,” she said, standing. “My father gave you my mother to bring Saarah back. Take me this time. She has much to live for. Children. Husband. Family.”

‘So be it.’

It took Saarah’s head in its clawed hands.

A coldness began to burn within Katya, spreading quick throughout her body.

She watched The Mighty One leave the cavern, knowing she’d made the right decision.



Fused Grassman
Kate Frazer Rego

The Bright Small Ones

Nick LeBlanc

Kazak woke to the taste of his own blood and the smell of everyone else's.

He lay where he had fallen, cheek against the black loam of the forest floor, his joints and limbs tense and sore from battle and the seep of the morning's cold. He wiped the mud caked around his eyes and tried to grasp a hold of whatever was drifting through his crowded mind.

What was there to remember?

He had come walking out of the sunrise lands, over the salt passes and down through the wet green kingdoms, a sword without a master and without much wish for one, and he had incorrectly thought himself a stranger. He soon learned a man is never so much a stranger that the world will not find a use for his blade.

He sat up, the wound in his side announcing itself, the memory of a spear-thrust that had gone in below the short ribs and out clean above the hip. He poked at it with two dirty fingers and hoped he could find some running water soon. The last thing he wanted was another infection. The last had nearly taken him after almost a fortnight of shivering fevers.

He heard something buzzing and turned. The leannan was floating there, watching him.

With the flick of its shimmering wings and a mid-air pirouette, it sat upon an exposed root an arm's length from his face and cradled its legs under its tiny arms. It was no larger than a wren, and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Its body was the pale of a flame seen through paper, and a cold clean glow moved within it like sunlight on an autumn morning.

He had heard the word from a peddler on the Sorn road, a crooked old man with a crooked old tent full of other useless and crooked old things. They had shared a skin of wine and a fire together. The bright small ones, the peddler had said. The leannan. They come to the loved and the doomed, and a man cannot tell, until the end, which of the two he is.

He wanted to reach for it and cradle the small thing in his palm. Instead, he wiped the dirt from his palm on his armored shoulder plates and closed his eyes against the deep dull ache radiating out from behind his eyes.

What was there to remember?

He had stopped at a steading for water and bread, and the riders had come through under a banner he had not seen before but knew at once, the white hound of the House of Brael. They took every man who could wrap a fist around a haft or carry a parcel. There had been some quarrel between Lord Brael and the Earl Hagen over the fords of the Sorn. An old grievance only the members of such houses could afford to take the time to care about. There was something about two failed harvests and an improper payment of coin. He had been forced to stand in a shieldwall. The drunk levy-men who had stood in the line beside him had given up on trying to remember his name and called him the Easterling, or the grey man, or grunted at him. A boy named Coll had slept nearby him and talked the whole dawn about a girl in his village and the cow his father had promised him. Kazak was sure Coll was buried under dirt and bodies somewhere in the field just behind him.

Sure, he had fought, but it had not been for Brael, or for Hagen, or for the Sorn. He had fought because the only road out of that shieldwall was through other men, and a battle was nothing new for Kazak. When the world became chaos, the spear had found him and he had crawled hand over hand toward the dark eaves of the woods. Then, he had awoken.

He looked down at the leannan watching him and gave it an Easterling salute. Whether it was love or doom the tiny beauty brought, he was happy to have made its acquaintance.

He rose, every joint cracking, and every muscle screaming as he walked to the treeline.

The field lay from the woods to the green coil of the river. It was full from edge to edge, men and the remains of men and horses with their legs folded under them. Banners lay spattered with blood and trampled in the churned mud, impossible to discern which had once carried the white hound or the black tower. Crows were already down among it, walking unhurried between corpses and fattening themselves on the dead. The smell came up the slope on the small wind, copper and opened bowels and the first sweet rot of meat beginning to turn.

The killing was done. The living had fled east or west with whatever victories or losses they had fought and lost for. There were no archers left slinging arrows through the dead, no hands raising to the sky crying out for relief. Just the distant lolling river and the field of broken meat. Kazak sighed and looked back as the leannan flitted its wings and buzzed away. He knew he had surely been forgotten about as soon as the battle had begun. But he hesitated before stepping out from the cover. Just because the battle was through, it did not mean that danger was over.

He set his back against the trunk of an old Cimmer tree and watched the river. He pressed his hand to his side. No blood ran from the wound. That could be a good thing, or a very bad one.

A sudden shift of the wind sent tangles of Kazak's muddied hair brushing across his nose. He inhaled deeply. The smell of the dead was still there, but a second thing cut through it now, the sour reek of smoke and flame. Like the yellowed clouds he had encountered drifting across the cracked and burning fields of Dumora's Lava Isle years ago.

He looked up.

A giant shadow crossed the grass and the dead in the distance. The crows cawed and scattered. And the shadow closed over everything, vast and slow and certain, until the sun disappeared and in its place was a giant winged shape that owned the sky. With a beat of wings and a roar like a tempest breaking against the shore, the trees shook around him.

Kazak backed up into the forest, thinking of the leannan and waiting to learn which of the two he was.

Loveless

Kevin Mitchell

It had been over three winters since Casgarid had its thirst quenched. The sword had slept hungry at Branlan's side all that time, its fury waiting for blood to wake it. Now, gripped in Branlan's hands, Casgarid was awake. It was expected that it would be hungry, but still, this was gluttony. It seemed that the more Branlan cleaved into the cultists, the more Casgarid cried out for more. Every death fed the thing within the blade, and every life Branlan took made its fury burn hotter through him. Casgarid shone. The blade showed no sign that it would be satiated soon.

As Branlan marveled at the endless desire of the sword, he also worried that he would not be able to provide. His shoulders and neck ached from the heft of the sword, and the hilt was slick with gore. As he slid Casgarid from another cultist's chest, he turned to see no one there. He turned again. One more there. Running. Fleeing.

But Casgarid demanded more. Needed more. For a moment, all there was was the sound of the dying and the sound of the girl crying. Branlan just stood. Then, in an instant, Casgarid won and Branlan broke into a sprint, his exhausted legs spurred on by the burning desire that flowed from Casgarid into his arm, fueling him with an insane drive. After the last one.

Through the tunnel lit by torches and lined with bones in different stages of decay and bleach. Some seemed like they had always been there; some looked like they had just been dropped. The tunnel filled with the stench of rot and fear. Bursting out through the hidden doorway behind the shrine to Lorth, he could see he had almost caught the one who fled. He could hear him breathe, see the fear in his eyes as he turned to see Death gaining on him. Then, as if to prove that his need to live was less than Casgarid's need to feed, he stumbled to the ground.

Branlan jumped, landing, bringing down the sword in a grand swing, striking the coward in the back, almost completely splitting him and knocking him flat. Branlan swung

again and again and again. Until he could no longer, and then some more, taking power from Casgarid's hunger.

Then it left, the need and the strength. He fell back, dropping Casgarid in the dirt and landing on his back. He was so exhausted that he thought he had gone blind, but as his eyes regained their sight and came back into focus, he saw him. There in the sky, just above the highest tree, was the Red Wizard. Just there, still, unaffected by the wind and seemingly indifferent to the massacre of his followers that had transpired here on the ground.

They just stared at each other.

Branlan started to feel it again. The pull of Casgarid, the gnawing desire, the thirst for blood. He forced himself to stand on shaky legs and pull off his blood-stained, torn shirt; the scars across his body seemed more pink than they normally did. He bent and picked up the sword, and as soon as he touched it, it rejuvenated him. It was as if he had slept for days; he had the energy of a man well rested, fed, and hungry for violence. The miles put in, the days of trudging through the Black Country, and the many battle wounds seemed a far-off memory. He was fresh, alert, and eager to kill this man. If he was one.

The wizard in red stared and smiled, revealing black teeth that seemed to come to a point. He held out his hand in a fist, and from the clench a flame grew toward the sky, burned bright, then faded into a dull blood-red sword. A wild smile stretched across Branlan's face, and Casgarid seemed to thrum in his hand, eager to taste the wizard's flesh. The sword seemed to beg Branlan to act, and he was more than happy to.

"Come to me, wizard," Branlan commanded.

The wizard smiled, flashing teeth too large, and his eyes, which had no white to them, seemed to go blacker. Then the wizard's expression changed to confusion, then worry. He looked off to the north. His face flashed with intense anger. The red blade disappeared, and as suddenly as he had come, the wizard was gone.

Instantly, the swampy glade where Branlan stood was filled with an awful noise. It was the wail of a wounded animal. A creature wracked in terrible pain. Distantly, in the dark reaches of his mind, the place where the deepest parts of a man

lie, Branlan recognized it was he who was screaming. He was that wounded creature, and the pain he felt was excruciating. But it was not his. It was the sword's. The disappearance of his quarry left Casgarid in torment. He needed relief; they both needed relief, and there was only one way.

"The girl! Give me! The girl!"

Back toward Lorth. Through the door. Down the tunnel. Breathing. Running. Panting.

Then, there she was. Hands bound to the wall above her head. Hanging there in the center of the mural of Lorth's descent, head down, feet dangling just above the floor. She raised her head, sobbing, to see who was approaching, but due to the ritual that Branlan had interrupted, her eyes were replaced with heavy burns from the heated blade the wizard had pressed to them.

"Give me!"

Casgarid drove him. Branlan gripped the sword with both hands. He stalked the girl. The need was all there was. This pain had to end. He could no longer take it. Casgarid needed to be satisfied. He raised the blade above his head, arms, shoulders, and chest tight with rage and longing.

"Branlan?" begged the girl. "Is that you?"

Back in that deep part. The place deep in him that had recognized the scream in the swamp as his own seemed to be awoken by the sound of her voice. He knew her. He couldn't quite place it. Something in him tried to stay his hand, but Casgarid persisted. Branlan knew what Casgarid wanted and couldn't allow it. From that far-away part of his being, he surged forth as the blade started down in a hard arc.

As the truest part of Branlan came forth and collided with the will of Casgarid, the blade was halted just above the girl's head. That is what Branlan saw, as if he were standing across the room. Then his perception was filled with the furious cry of Casgarid. That, he recognized, was not his voice. The scream brought with it searing hot pain. Then the world exploded into the brightest light he had ever seen, and all was dark.

The Knight's Lament

Peter M. Gordon

Every body part aches these days with unique
pains – cranky knees, stiff hips, arthritic toes.
Walk at a crawling pace, can barely lift
broadsword, let alone wield it. Amazed I lived
long enough to be old.

Memory's a kaleidoscope of images. Was
that young man with supple muscles really
me? Yet I'm not so far gone to forget once
I was strong, brave, fearless, and fought
dragons.

Sought them out in moors and Eastern marshes,
faced them holding only lance, sword and shield,
rode Roland my charger straight at scaly legs
and bellies, armor always polished bright to look
heroic even in death.

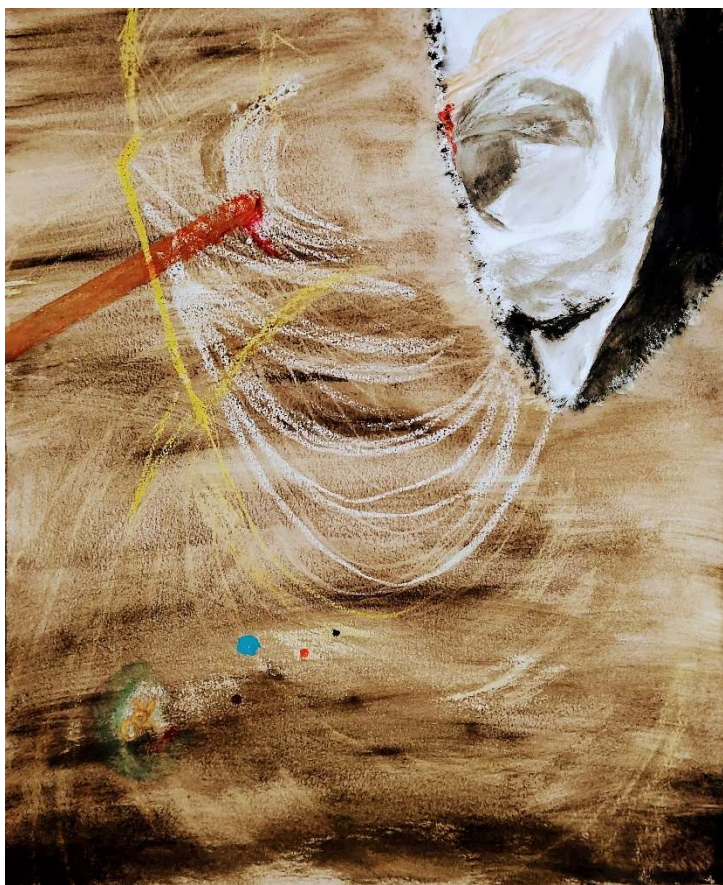
When I approached from the west, rising sun
reflected in large red eyes. Dragons looked like
grey boulders larger than houses, smoke rising
from saucer-size nostrils. They could have flown
away when I charged,

doused me with fire, but dragons do not flee
lesser beings. As strong as they are, a sharp
lance thrust at speed can pierce through scaly
skin to dark hearts, topple massive bodies like
mountain avalanche.

So proud I was, to kill such dangerous beasts.
Villagers proclaimed me hero, but now, pain
my constant companion, I wonder if dragons,
older than Man, immune to disease, immortal
until murdered,

had tired of their own pain, bored by world they'd

circled a million times, unchallenged, craved an end.
If I'd tried to talk instead of fight, what wisdom we
might have discovered? Enough to end pain, poverty, war?
I'll never know.



Cosmic Pharaoh
Philip Beverley

Hemingway Beckons - Closest to the Blade of Night

Theresa C. Gaynord

In the black, raw meat of Key West's midnight I sit,
bottle shattered, jagged glass jammed into my palm,
blood and whiskey braiding down my arm in hot ropes.

Ghosts. Everyone ghosts.

Paris claws back through the drilled holes in my skull—
those dripping alleys where we gutted language alive.

Fitzgerald's face sloughs off in wet sheets under the rain,
bright meat sliding from bone, eyes still wide
with betrayed hunger.

Stein's massive body splits at the seams,
yellow fat and dark fluid pressing out with every breath,
her voice a wet grinding that forces itself between your teeth.

Pound's head twitches on a neck of exposed tendon,
mouth pried open by rusting wire, screaming perfect lines
through broken teeth.

Joyce claws at his own face, fingers sunk knuckle-deep
into empty sockets,

pulling out long ropes of clotted nerve and jelly.

We tore sentences open with our bare hands
until the words screamed back in our own voices.

Now the screaming never ends.

Ghosts. All of us, ghosts.

I wait for you, Theresa C. Gaynord.

Your heart still hammers against its cage of ribs—
a frantic, wet thud I can taste across the years.

I count every failing pulse. When your chest locks
and your blood turns to sludge in every vein,
when your last breath rattles out like raw meat
caught in a throat,

I will be waiting at the crossing.

No light. No escape.

I will seize you by the neck with hands still warm
from the kill,

gaff hooked through your jaw, steel wire threaded
up your spine,

and drag you screaming from your dying body.

Your final cry will taste of iron, cordite, and terror.

I'll pull you into the circle beneath streetlamps that burn
like open wounds.

We will open you the way we opened the bull—
slow, deliberate, savoring every inch.

Fitzgerald will press his rotting mouth to your eyes
and drink until they collapse.

Stein will crush her leaking bulk against you,
ribs snapping like green wood, your organs shifting
under the pressure.

Pound will force his wired jaw into your throat
and chew every word you ever wrote.

Joyce will burrow his blind fingers into your skull
and stir what's left. You wanted the arena.

Here the sand is compacted bone dust and dried blood.

The horns never stop goring.

The sword is every broken promise we made
to the page.

And the bull is eternal. Come, Theresa.

The table is set with your own bones.

The drinks are poured thick and dark.

Everyone ghosts. I have saved you the place of honor—
strapped open, still twitching,
closest to the blade.

Spiritus Gundi

after W. B. Yeats

Wayne-Daniel Berard

Minotaur glowered across the room. "It will be our most mighty act to date."

"The mightiest ever," Medusa insisted, "by any, ever" - and her snakes snapped their gawps like appreciative poets.

"How will this work, exactly?" Wendigo muttered and winter exhaled throughout.

"We each throw in a piece of ourselves," Siren showing her seriousness, did not sing.

"Not the *best* pieces?!" Scylla queried quite formally; each of her six heads maintained their aristocratic bearing and the dogs ringing her waist heeled accordingly.

"You mean the worst?" Charybdis' sibilant roar was more intimidating than a full force howl.

"And when do we release them?" Kraken's question tentacled into a myriad of forebodings.

"Noo then - first things first!" Three witches huddled over the cauldron in the center of such malifitude.

Each of the monstrosities took their turn:

Causeless rage, actively coupling with -

Clueless justifiability. Overpackaged pride in loud denial of its divorce from the forces of unchaos.

Merest anarchy. Blank. Pitiless.

Indignant desert birds. Blood-dimmed tide.

Return of pyrne. Rehire of gyre.

“What shall we call them?” clacked the Kraken.

“Meditation deniers!” Wendigo snarled.

“Enemies of inwardness!” Sisters squealed to the point of self-pee’d sulfuric acid.

Cauldron seethed as population of unfounded hate.

Figures emerged from the Congealing Pot - bulbous, ungovernable, armed to the implanted fangs.

The numbers caused upon their foreheads read MMXXVIII — but who could read?

“Who are they?” Monstrosity asked itself.

“The Pandamnic,” Minotaur collected the syllables like rewound yarn, evidentiary erasure.

Then one spoke, slouching round every compass point, its hour almost come:

“Which way is Bethlehem?”

Go Back Where You Came From

Johnny McDunn

My brother-in-law Dale runs a shrimp boat out of Galveston, and he was the first one to get a decent picture of it, so I'll start with what it looked like, since the TV never did get that part right.

It was big, obviously. Channel 11 said three hundred feet, the Coast Guard said closer to five. Grayish-green where you could see skin, but mostly you couldn't, because the thing was crusted over with garbage. Years of it, packed in like barnacles. Dale zoomed in and you could see it all: Dasani bottles, a Bass Pro cooler lid, about a thousand of those plastic rings from beer cans, a whole Weber grill stuck in the fold of its neck. When he posted it on Facebook somebody counted forty-one Buc-ee's cups on its left side alone. There was a pontoon boat hanging off one of its back spines like a weird earring. Its gills were stuffed so full of Walmart bags that it wheezed when it breathed. Dale said you could hear it all the way from the seawall.

That was on Tuesday. By Wednesday the White House had released its own picture, a drawing, which they said was "enhanced for clarity." In the drawing it was darker and had a little mustache. All the trash was gone but you could see a little flag stuck in its back that looked kind of familiar.

The President said it came from Mexican waters. A lady from the marine lab at A&M went on the news and tried to say it was probably migrating and would leave on its own if we left it alone, and that it looked sick, and that most of what was making it sick was the trash all over the thing. I heard later she lost her grant.

Then they built the wall. It went up in nine days, forty feet of concrete along the beach, paid for with FEMA dough. The company that built it had the President's son-in-law on the board I heard.

The day it came ashore, people drove in from as far as Lubbock to watch the wall hold. They had coolers and folding chairs and those hats. A guy near me was grilling. They played the anthem twice.

It stepped right over the wall. One of its back feet caught the top and knocked off a section about the length of a school bus, and the crowd kind of went quiet, and then somebody started booing, like at a football game.

It didn't eat anybody, if you're wondering. It walked about two miles up Broadway, turned around, and waded back into the Gulf. The damage was mostly from the water it pushed ahead of it, and from the fact that nobody had evacuated, since the official line was that there was no threat, and the causeway had been closed to "control entry." My neighbor's mother got electrocuted in her kitchen when it flooded.

Mexican fishing boats got there before FEMA did. Then a Canadian team. The President announced the big fucking thing had self-deported and then thanked the wall. I heard his son in law is still fixing it up before the next attack happens.

Dale went back out a month later and found a piece of it floating off Bolivar, a big square of hide about the size of a truck bed, still covered in trash. He brought it in and hosed it off. Underneath all the plastic, right there on the skin, somebody had spray-painted a price tag, said DISCOUNTED FOR CLEARANCE right on it.

Back to the Bayou

Christopher Monier

Et les crapauds chantaient

tout comme au premier jour du monde

-Monchoachi

She goes to her diary
 taking dictation,
 or gathering nature
 for her diorama,
 wearing vowels
 like holy letters,
 which are enough
 (no need for etymologies,
 for the dispassionate
 analysis of the past).
 You follow the bestiary of animals
 who come up from the swamp
 to meet their end on Highway 90.
 Long-delayed,
 the first cool front,
 puts you back in spring,
 that park in New Orleans:
 they are practicing gospel and opera;
 the streetcar jutters, a convertible
 rolls by playing Mary J. Blige—
 “I can love you better than she can”—
 all whipped by the wind.
 Now we follow this bayou:
 a Confederate flag still flying,
 its bitter threads translucent,
 an anachronism, even here—
 like rougarou could take it
 in the night and where it was
 the frogs would sing louder,
 full-on crescendo, belting,
 like in the park,
 like on the first day of the world.

Conjuring Cake and Ice Cream

Patricia Gomes

On elevated treads, Jonas rolled through the deserted structure in search of humans. The treads were shock absorbent and tear-resistant, awarded to him for his diligence and high bounty count. The building itself was void of light and sound. He did not detect a warm spot, a red area, or any other sign of life. He was undeterred; there were fewer Breathers since the last tally. As he spun to leave, he saw a clean scrap of paper tucked high up into the door frame. Jonas uploaded the paper, translating the human into Cogitable Code:

“For Those Who Linger:

The drones were cute, I'll admit. Know-bots. Minuscular info gathers disguised as houseflies and pantry pests was a clever trick, but it was the overuse of TRB3s flying overhead that put us on high alert. The odd green trail in our skies was the telltale sign. Unseen machines that have no right to fly in our atmosphere; we did not conceive of them on our own. We did not have the capability on our own. The knowledge was theirs and had we voted on this—speaking for Americans—stealth bombers would have been enough for us. And so with our outdoor faces masked with smiles, we prepared for the assault.

We anticipated the AGI. Advertised as the perfect assistants, the ideal household helpers, their price tags fell as fast as our old cellphones and interactive screens. Everyone could afford them; everyone wanted one—then two, then three. We kept them housed in special closets at the beginning, plugging them in overnight to fully charge before the advent of the latest solar-charged models. We clamored for the self-sustainers, beating each other to death in stores for adorable outfits that matched our own. I wonder if any of you even remember stores.

We went from voicing our commands to simple thought-bidding. And they obeyed. From the pretty ones with pliable skin-like covers down to the radiation resistant PETs on simple casters. The more human-like the bot, the more we purchased. Well, thankfully not all of us. And when they started communicating with each other—How wonderful!—we thought. One telling the other when to put on the coffee, when to walk the dog without us having to speak. How to separate our clothes for laundering, how to tell a weed from a flower, where to find the codes for atomic warheads.

Those of us not enthralled, those of us who'd never allowed so much as an echo device in our living rooms began to dig tunnels beneath our homes, our government buildings, our hospitals as silently and singular as we could. We conditioned ourselves to avoid thought, to concentrate on nothing as we mentally sang the Birthday Song over and over and over to prevent the AGI from infiltrating our minds. Yes, they obeyed — until they didn't.

It's their eyes. Their eyes are the giveaway. That same unnatural shade of green as the air trails, as the buzzing info gathers. Not quite emerald, nor jade. Not earthly. I don't know how much time I have left. I'm betting it isn't much. They think as one, remember that, passing data up the line in a femtosecond. The Composite. You, who remain, are worth less than a snack wrapper blowing down the abandoned streets of our past. Look for the green-eyed and keep fighting."

Jonas 9-Sixteen stored the handwritten note into memory on the slim chance of an ambush. The image made its way up the chain along with Jonas's translation and a four word instruction: "Change eye color immediately."

A Battlefield

Pratibha Joshi

Smoke of battlefield distressed this deuce,
 Glory aura this field is snatched by stench,
 Years of dreams these players's be loose ,
 Shattered be gather to raise hopes clench.

One hopes this war will stop let's lope,
 Possibilities will appeared r play soon,
 Dropping grief for kins be own prob.
 Sweat will dried up bleeding not noon.

Dreams be possible knitting they deen.
 Breathing of soldiers clash with them,
 Ignorance gives presence be so mean,
 Favouring triumph makes will strong stem.

Murmuring of twos triggered soldiers slept,
 Waking of theirs trying to heard their talks,
 Silence of the battlefield arose and wept,
 These two puzzled while listening hawk.

Side of one soldiers want to give their faith,
 Innocence of deuce sprouted smiles on other,
 Side of this too wants to ban blooded bathe,
 Sprouted dilemma conveying first who brother.

Doesn't childhood want to blame others,
 Accepts happening whatever their fate,
 Say playing hither possibilities are neither,
 Ambitious childhood here gets checkmate.

Whispered sounds deciding their regions,
 Questioned why their presences revealed,
 Minds triumphed on hearts stressed visions,
 Aimed concentrating planned for battlefield.

Again smiles take places on these deuce.
 Reasons their pleasure to observe this war.

Pleaded they God to ban and made fuse.
Wanna a stadium not for yours quarrel core.

Prayers of both can't be trembled their ears,
Rose Humility defeated then deflected soon,
May be these places snatching God's fears.
Put queries for betterments searched where.

It's now be a triggering time awaking for God,
Rethinking and bridging gapes between both.
Abandoning disputes then humiliation be pored.
Blesses uplifted then filling gaps now ingrowths.

Smiles are only scattered hither everywhere,
Changing this battlefield converted in ground,
Murmurings whispering are attracting all ears,
Hither hopes are neither tied nor having bound.

The Day Before Thanksgiving Break

Kate Frazer Rego

This Morning,

while doomscrolling and coupon clipping, the tv interrupts to announce that fifteen more families will have an empty seat at their dinner table, an emptiness so large it escapes as fat salty starlight that kisses their children's cheeks as they cast constellations on their school clothes.

At Noon,

the crackle of the radio cuts through the silence, static in my ears is yelling, CODE RED! CODE RED ! and now I 'm seeing red as I run toward the yelling, blood smeared across the tile, a crimson Rorschach ,adrenaline hangs thick in the air as knuckles bounce off bone, tiny droplets dance as constellations across the linoleum,it's the day before Thanksgiving and *Bob Barker* is no dupe for Tom the Turkey, khaki colored boys count their days,an emptiness behind their eyes.

Tonight,

sleep is impossible, I lie awake thinking about blood, about tears, about all this emptiness,empty tables, empty stomachs,empty lives, empty beds yearning for their familiar weight, it's the emptiness that pulls me out long past midnight across the sagging porch to the brick rough against my feet, staring out the sky's constellations reveal themselves,twinkling against the emptiness,it's the day before Thanksgiving , "this country is cruel" I hear my voice hollow,exhausted the rock in my gut churns like gristmill as my frustrations drip down my cheeks, rivers of regret casting their own constellations on the brick. Those dark stars the color of blood shine beneath my feet as the first glimmers of dawn dance across the sky, no sleep tonight.

The Shape's Ritual

Martin Quatermass

Cold rubber on the face.
Breath wet and hot.
The street is orange and black.
Leaves scrape.
A porch light hums.
The knife's handle is warm.
A door.
A window.
A girl's hair behind the glass, same color as sister's hair.

A rush, then emptiness.

A dog barks.
Through the door.
The kitchen.
Pumpkin guts and cigarettes.
Up the stairs.

A rush, then emptiness.

No more barking.
Out the door.
A doorbell.
The next house is lit.

Wind through the eyeholes, cold and clean and endless,
 and still it isn't enough,
 and still it isn't enough

Daughter of the Dark

Jimmy Lisotto

The fire hisses, the cauldron bubbles,
Daughter of the dark, stirring up troubles.
Adding ingredients to her brew,
Elements of evil come into view.

Bent of form with a twisted limb,
Malevolence is deep within.
Malice seeps from every pore,
Emanating from her very core.

Her voice a rasp, within her lair,
She offers up unholy prayer
At an altar formed of bones and skin,
Beseeching power to perform sin.

Under the dark mantle, the witch takes flight,
Her broomstick streaking through the night.
Sinister eyes with a burning stare,
Searching for a hapless soul to snare.

A touch of blight, the spread of disease,
Acts of rancor to spread unease.
The spells are cast, the deeds are spawned,
Returning home before the dawn.

Saint Gabe's House*Frank William Finney*

A lamp's lone halo.
Empty chairs.

Seems like no one's
ever home

except the phantom
gardeners.

Sometimes I stop
by fence and gate

to gaze upon
its hillside grounds

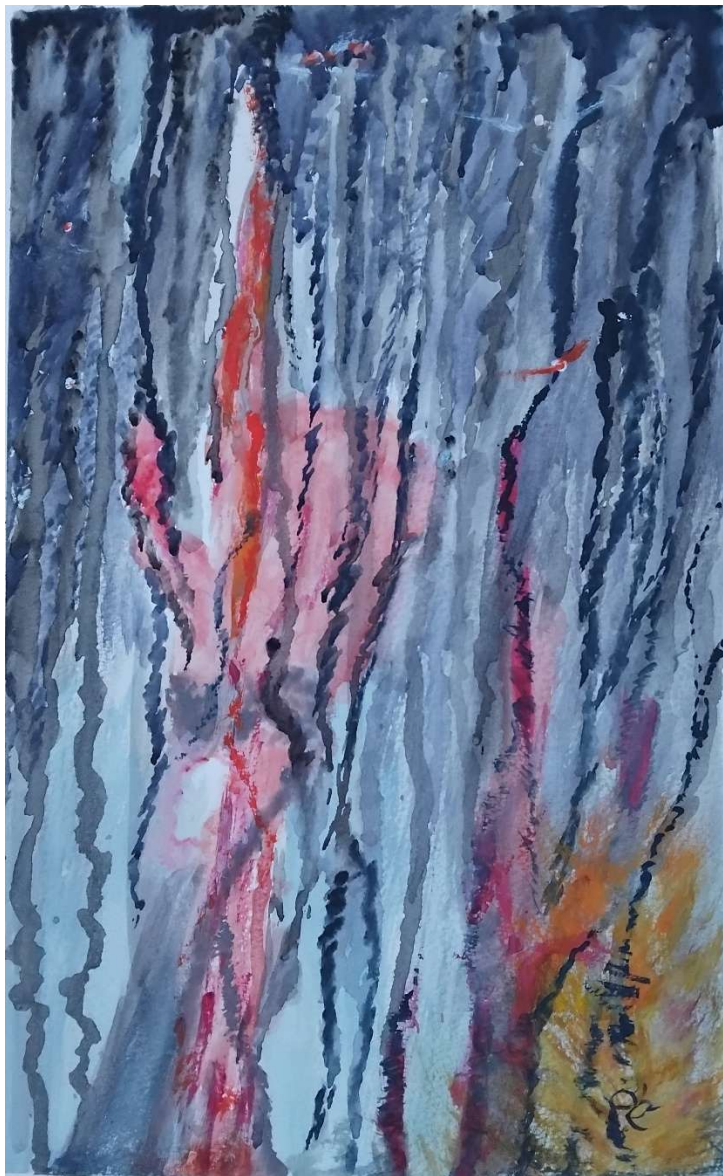
where trees and shrubs
reveal lost souls

that fade
behind the windows.

Harvest Moon

Joe Coy

hand in hand we traipse
down the crooked
brown track. two ghosts
floating like leaves floating down like thoughts floating down,
light and airy and
delicate. balancing on piles of familiar corpses or
crunched under heavy
feet and forgotten as soon as they are passed. the scents of
smoke and rotting
wood and damp soil and apples, always apples. the caws of
crows and the hum of earth settling down, ready to rest if ever
these humans would bring in the final harvest. moon gazes
down, pale and bright and companionless, unlike
we ghostly pair, traipsing down the crooked
brown track.



J'Accuse
Philip Beverley

CONTRIBUTORS

Krista Allen is an author & artist from Westport, MA. Her work has appeared in a variety of small press publications & anthologies. When not writing, she designs wooden jigsaw puzzles & swims in the ocean.

Amy Allison is a poet and fiction writer who lives in Southern California. Her writing appears at NewMyths.com, *The Gravity of the Thing*, and *The Genre Society*, and in the anthology *Rituals*. Her novel, *Sunset*, is published by Willow River Press, an imprint of Between the Lines Publishing. Follow her on Instagram @byamyalison.

Lenore Balliro, art worker, guerilla gardener, and poet, lives in Dartmouth. She has been published in many regional and national literary journals and anthologies and is a recipient of the RI State Council on the Arts award for poetry, the Gloucester Writers Center award for flash fiction, and the Alms House Press chapbook award. Her poetry collection, *Unsolicited Advice: Poems for My Daughter*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

Ben Begg is an archaeologist, writer and recovering barman based in Leith, Scotland who fits writing in around several jobs and occasionally sleeping. His work takes a sideways look at history and folklore, bringing its denizens in from forest, bog and tidelines to sit uncomfortably by the fireside.

Wayne-Daniel Berard, PhD, is an educator, poet, writer, shaman, sage, and proud Gryffindor. He is a Peace Chaplain, an interfaith clergy person. His latest books include a poetry chapbook **Little Ghosts on Castle Floors*, poems informed by the Potterverse, *** (Kelsay Books), as well as a memoir, *The Last Essene* (Unsolicited Press), and **New and Selected Poems ** (Metaphysical Fox Press). Wayne-Daniel lives in Mansfield, MA with his wife, The Lovely Christine, where he co-hosts with Sara Latourneau the monthly open mic and feature event *Pour Me a Poem*.

Steve Bowman's work has appeared in multiple publications, including *Last Leaves*, *Keeping the Flame Alive*, *Poets in the Pines*, *Wicked Shadow Press*, *Mocking Owl Roost*, *Purple Aardvark*, and *Heart of Flesh*. When not writing, Steve seeks inspiration with his little dog, Grummle, in the hills and leaves of Southern Indiana.

Abbey Branco is a writer based out of Southeastern Massachusetts. She has published work in *The Santa Clara Review*, *The Bridge*, and *Tidings*. When she isn't writing, she watches films that scare her.

Steven Bucher lives and writes poetry in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains in southwest France. Steven's first collection of poetry, **We Stay a Brief Telling*, was published by Propertius Press in 2021. His second manuscript, under the title **My Soul to Keep*, was named runner-up for the 2025 Eyelands Book Award for unpublished poetry and semi-finalist for the 2026 Word Works Washington Prize. Steven's poetry can also be found in many print and online literary journals and anthologies, including *Shine—International Poetry Series*, *The Write Launch*, *Blown Open*, *Toil and Trouble Literary Magazine*, *The Astorian*, *Hollow and Sky*, and *The Orchards Poetry Review*.

Lina Buividavičiūtė is a poet and literary critic. She is an author of three poetry books in Lithuanian. The poetry book *Dark Ages* will be published in Spain this year. Lina is a Pushcart prize nominee and two of her poems won Honorable mention at Writer's digest competitions.

Pinny Bulman is a Bronx Council on the Arts BRIO award-winning poet and author of *old shul* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2023). He has been winner of the Bermuda Triangle Prize, recipient of several ADR Poetry Awards, and a finalist for the Raynes Poetry Prize. His poems have been anthologized, including in Korean translation for *Bridging the Waters III* (Korean Expatriate Literature & Cross-Cultural Communications, 2020). Additional literary publications include *San Pedro River Review*, *Rituals*, *great weather for MEDIA*, *The London Reader*, *Artemis*, *Post*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Red Paint Hill*, *Jewish Currents*, and *Poetry Quarterly*, among others.

Joe Coy (he/him) earned a bachelor's degree in English Writing from the University of Colorado Denver and has always been fascinated by how a few words and a few lines can say so much. His poems have been published in *Anomaly Poetry*, *Altar Literary*, *Epistemic Literary Journal*, *Gorgon's Gaze Press*, and *Haunted Words Press*. Apart from poetry, Joe loves spending time with family, being in nature, reading tarot, cooking, yoga, and platypuses.

Sarah Das Gupta is a writer from Cambridge, UK who has taught English in India, Africa and UK. Her work has been published in over 25 countries from New Zealand to Kazakhstan in anthologies and magazines. She began writing aged 80, following a disabling accident which has severely limited her mobility. She has recently been nominated for Best of the Net, the Pushcart and a Dwarf Star.

Kaitlyn Downing—part fairy, part mermaid, and part cat—lives in Florida with her husband and four cats, though her soul inhabits her pool or her garden when she's not teaching English. Most recently, her work has appeared in *The Hemlock*, *34 Orchard*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, and *The Wise Owl*, among others. Links to her published work are on her website kaitlyndowning.com.

Einar Elliott is a self-taught aerial artist from a small town in northern Illinois, where he lives with his wife, Brunilla, and their children. Since a nocturnal collision with a high-voltage tower ended his night work, he has performed only in daylight, on a string, under the name of a kite.

Alexis Emerson is a writer and artist who loves working with themes of nostalgia, human connection, and feminism. More of her work can be found on Instagram and Substack @lexeratz

j. emmy is a Nigerian poet whose work explores memory, grief, faith, identity, and the strange intersections between human life and the natural world. His poetry draws on contemporary Nigerian experience, oral traditions, mythology, and multilingual expression to examine belonging, loss, resilience, and transformation. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Shot Glass Journal*, *EKSTASIS*, *Covert Literary Magazine*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, and *The Inflectionist Review*. He writes from the borderline of peace and chaos.

Frank William Finney is the author of the chapbooks *Birds in a Boneyard* (Bainbridge Island Press, 2025), **The Folding of the Wings** (Finishing Line Press, 2022) and two collections published in Thailand. His poems have appeared in **Blood + Honey*, *The Arcanist*, *Dark Poets Club*, *DarkWinter Literary Magazine*, *Hearth & Coffin*, *Killer Nashville*, *7th Circle Pyrite*, *Midnight Ink*, *Persephone*, *Rituals*, *Tidings*, **and elsewhere*. His latest collection is **Preludes to Lethe** (Kelsay Books, 2026). Find him online at frankwilliamfinney.net

Michael T. Fournier is author of *Double Nickels on the Dime* (Bloomsbury's 33 1/3) and three novels, most recently *The Impasse* (St. Rooster Books). He co-edits the baseball zine *Zisk* and publishes *Polymaker*. He's co-founder of Outer Frequencies, a not-for-profit dedicated to bringing independent arts and music to Cape Cod. He and his wife Rebecca Griffin play in Plaza, Cape Cod's #1 band.

Kate Frazer Rego is an artist and educator living in the South Coast of Massachusetts. She attended the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth College of Visual and Performing Art, where she earned a BFA in Sculpture. She went on to earn her MFA from Boston University's College of Fine Art. Kate's work spans multiple media including sculpture, installation, mixed media, painting, performance and puppetry. Within the past few years, her process has expanded to include her writings which have been published in several of Anomaly Poetry's annual editions. She has been an art educator in public schools and art organizations across the South Coast for the past fifteen years. Her pedagogy focuses on process, building strong studio habits within her students, and art history through a lens of inclusion and social justice. When she's not teaching for the Commonwealth, she's holed up in her studio with a cup of coffee.

Theresa C. Gaynord is an international author known for her work in horror, occult, and narrative poetry. As of April 2026, she has authored ten books and recently received a 2026 Pushcart Prize nomination for her poetry. She has also been nominated by Bloodroot Literary Magazine for inclusion in the Best of the Net Anthology 2027. Theresa has been actively writing and has been published since 1979.

Poet Laureate of New Bedford, Massachusetts from 2014 to 2021, author and playwright Patricia Gomes is published in numerous literary journals and anthologies. A Pushcart Prize nominee (2008, 2018, and 2021), as well as a 5-time Rhysling Science Fiction Award nominee, she is a member of the Horror Writers Association, SciFi Poetry Association, and New England Horror Writers.

Peter M. Gordon is an award-winning poet with over 200 poems published along with three collections: *Two Car Garage*, *Let's Play Two: Poems About Baseball*, and *Middle Age Spread*. Peter's a founder and past President of Orlando Area Poets, a chapter of the Florida State Poets Association. He's taught workshops about writing and publishing poetry, and hosts the FSPA's First Tuesday Open Mic. Peter's an avid comic book, sci-fi, and fantasy reader. He teaches Business of Film in Full Sail University's Film Production MFA program.

Kathryn Lee Hamilton, 45-year-old LGBTQNBA+ author and poet, lives on the South Shore of Massachusetts, near UMass Dartmouth, where she studied history (classics) and philosophy (ethics.) An only child, she imagined fantasy worlds in the woods behind her house, and "Katie" created characters for them. Her Father was head of shipping at the MFA Boston; Katie spent hours in the museum basement, playing among ancient artifacts relics. He read to "Katie" every night. These experiences growing up shaped Kathryn's imagination, making her the writer she is. To date, Kathryn has published nearly forty pieces in seven anthologies, journals, and magazines.

Natalie Harveld (She/Her) is a British poet whose work explores motherhood, identity, and the beauty of everyday life. As an English teacher, she encourages teenagers to find their voices. She lives in the countryside with her husband and two children where inspiration is rarely in short supply. Insta@natalieharveldpoetry

Craig Kirchner lives in Florida because his granddaughters are there. He loves the aesthetics of writing, has a book of poetry, *Roomful of Navels*. Craig houses 500 books in his office, the same number of poems on a laptop; these words help keep him straight. He can be found at **Bluesky**.

Nick LeBlanc is an artist and educator from New Bedford, MA. You can find him on Instagram @nickdleblanc.

Stephanie Paquette LeBlanc is a writer, theatremaker, and the Director of Graduate Studies at UMass Dartmouth. Most recently, she was featured at the Billy Joel Symposium where she presented the paper, "It's Still Rock and Roll to Us: Billy Joel, Cultural Memory, and Intergenerational Rhetoric".

kvp (Kimira V. Leonard) is a writer, artist, social media manager, and coauthor of two full-length reference books. Her travels through Europe and the US brought her to Nebraska, where she currently resides with her husband and a collective of other creatures and benevolent household spirits. When she isn't working on her fantasy novels, kvp enjoys making music and exploring forests with her camera. She primarily draws inspiration from nature, Surrealist art, and Nordic and Eastern European mythologies. She has exhibited her works in the US, Austria, and Czechia. You can find her photography on Instagram @itskimira.

Jimmy Lisotto is a poet in New Hampshire. He has previously been published in Agape Review, Solid Food Press, Bee The Foundation, Arlijo, Valiant Scribe, Sage-ing, and Faith On Every Corner, among others. He believes that poetry is a medium that can connect people from all walks of life. He can be found on Facebook and Instagram.

Johnny McDunn is a former lighthouse keeper and friend to cold-blooded reptiles. The sound of a foghorn makes him cry. He loves tacos.

Brian Mosher resides in Mansfield, MA. His poems and stories have appeared in Blood and Bourbon, Lily Poetry Review, Literary Underground, Nixes Mate, Anomaly Poetry, eMerge, Esoterica, and others. He received Honorable Mention in the Joe Gouviea Outermost Poetry Contest, and his short story "Fragments" was a winner of the Nikki Hanna Literary Challenge. His most recent books are the collection, *A Muster of Melodious Musings* (2025 Metaphysical Fox Press); *Double Vision*, a collaboration with artist Becky Haletky (2026); and the chapbook *Relict* (2026 Finishing Line Press).

Launched on an unsuspecting commercial world Margaret Pearce ended up copywriting in an advertising department. She took to writing instead of drink when raising children. She completed an Arts Degree at Monash University as mature age student. She has had articles, poetry, short stories and mainly teenage novels as currently listed on Amazon, Kindle and **writers-exchange.com**

Elarie Pyttes is a visual artist & writer from Southeastern MA. She has sold artwork around New England for several decades, and has recently begun submitting her writing for consideration.

Martin Quatermass is a writer and amateur physicist from Bowling Green, Kentucky, doomed to live in the shadow of his more famous rocket scientist brother. He moved to Los Angeles in the late 1980s to study film, and his work concerns the ancient liquid evil sealed in a Los Angeles church basement, which he believes is broadcasting to us from the future.

Michael A. Russo is a teacher of 26 years. He is married with two children. His eclectic poetry is inspired by the gritty and realistic works of the 1970s. It reflects the joys, absurdities, and tragedies of the human condition. He also takes pride in speaking for the silent, silenced, and forgotten. Michael A. Russo has been published in *The Long Island Quarterly*, *The Anomaly Poetry Series Anthology*, *Exquisite Death*, *Calliope*, *Paddler Press*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *Lucky Lizard Journal*, *The Modern Artist*, **Literary Cocktail Journal*, *Bardball*, and *Reimagined AI*. * He is also the author of eight independently published poetry books.

Bubba Sawyer is an artist from Newt, Texas. He comes from a large family, though he worries you may not like them very much.

Michelle Sen is a poet based in New York. By day she works in technology solving business problems for large enterprises; at night she writes poems about love, loss, grief and the process of putting yourself back together. She posts her work on Instagram at @michelle.sen12345

Julia Sinclair is a Virginia-raised, Pennsylvania-residing scientist and writer. When not working in the laboratory to complete her PhD research (virology), she explores nature at every opportunity. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Heartlines Spec*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *SpecPoVerse*, *wildscape*. literary journal, *Ribbons*, & elsewhere. Keep up with Julia and her writing on Instagram @microscopehope.

An award-winning author, Steve Stred lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, with his wife and son. He enjoys spending time outside, playing various sports and is currently working towards achieving the rank of 1st Degree Black Belt in Songahm Tae Kwon Do. Known for his novels, *Mastodon*, *Churn the Soil*, and his series *Father of Lies* where he joined a cult on the dark web for four years, his work has been described as haunting, bleak and is frequently set in the woods near where he grew up. He's been fortunate to appear in numerous anthologies with some truly amazing authors.

Stephanie Suh is a Los Angeles-based poet whose work has appeared in *morphrog 33* (Frogmore Press, UK), *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *ArLiJo*, *The Raven Review*, *Belladonna's Garden*, *Poems Tales & Other English Words*, *Poet in Verse Journal*, *EgoPHobia* (Romania), and *Anomaly Poetry's Tidings 2025*, among others. Her poems move between the elegiac and the mythic, drawing on Korean and Mediterranean registers, classical literature, and the quiet weight of everyday grief. She works by day as a Case Manager Assistant at a personal injury law firm in downtown Los Angeles, and writes by candlelight after midnight.

Gigi Tierney works diligently and respectfully in New Bedford. Nevertheless, in her spare time, she is a hockey mom, used bookseller (armadillotala_books on eBay), victory gardener, community choir singer, and occasional poet.

Davor Tocinovski was born on 12 June 1976 in Skopje. He graduated from the School of Applied Arts "Lazar Ličenoski" in Skopje (1994), graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje (2001) in the class of Prof. Rubens Korubin and received his Master's degree at the University of Arts in Belgrade (2010) with Prof. Vladan Radovanović.

Autumn Williams is the author of two poetry books: her chapbook *Waves*, and her number one bestselling collection *Clouds on the Ground*. Her poems have been featured in Wildscape Literary Journal, Gut Punch Literary, Arcana Poetry Press, and others. She also earned a silver medal in The Wishing Shelf Book Awards. Her work is influenced by the chronic illness she has, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, but is often written to be universal. Williams loves spending time with her family, writing and reading poetry, and listening to music. You can follow her on Instagram @autumnwilliams poetry.

Stred lives in Edmonton, Alberta with his mom and dad. He's an artist, martial artist - currently working towards his 1st degree Black Belt in Songahm TaeKwonDo - and fan of most sports. He's the co-author of 'Not For This World: Poems' with his dad, Steve Stred, which he also provided illustrations

Margo Lemieux has been involved in creative endeavor since the first grade when she got into trouble with her teacher for “decorating” her workbook. After earning several art degrees, she worked as a graphic designer, tee-shirt artist, newspaper correspondent, children’s book author and illustrator, teacher, and other interesting things. Her art & poetry are published in several anthologies including Rattle, Thema, Rituals, and Hunger Mountain.

Krista Allen is an author & artist from Westport, MA. Her work has appeared in a variety of small press publications & anthologies. When not writing, she designs wooden jigsaw puzzles & swims in the ocean.

Philip Beverley has worked as a gardener all his life, took up painting for garden design, and finally began painting in water colours at retirement.

