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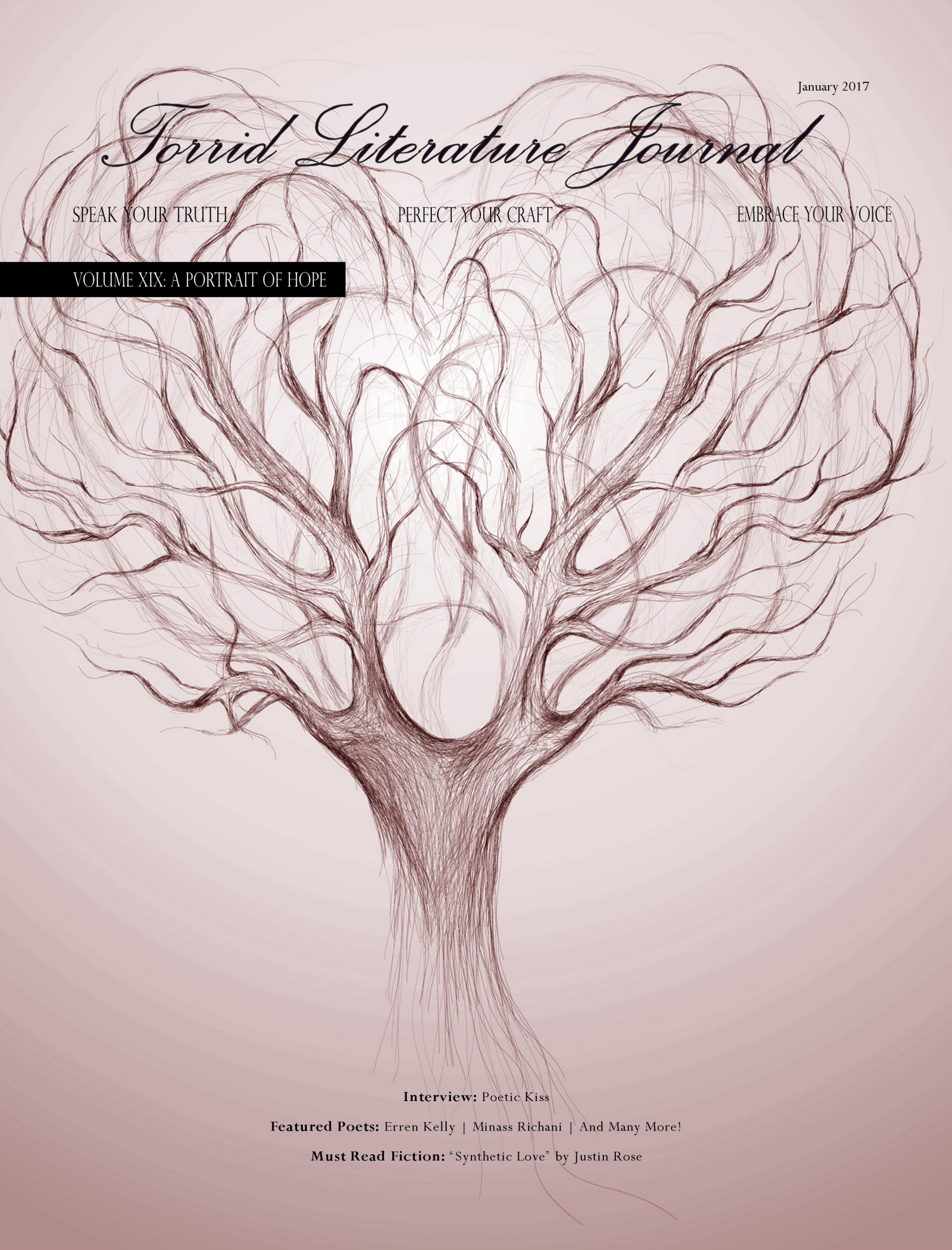
Torrid Literature Journal

SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

PERFECT YOUR CRAFT

EMBRACE YOUR VOICE

VOLUME XIX: A PORTRAIT OF HOPE



Interview: Poetic Kiss

Featured Poets: Erren Kelly | Minass Richani | And Many More!

Must Read Fiction: "Synthetic Love" by Justin Rose

TL Publishing Group LLC

ALICE SAUNDERS

EDITOR

asaunders@tlpublishing.org

ANNE MARIE BISE

POETRY EDITOR

ambise@torridliterature.com

AMANDA GAYLE OLIVER

CONTENT WRITER

agoliver@torridliterature.com

Official Website: <http://www.torridliterature.com> | <http://tlpublishing.org>

Facebook Pages:

<http://www.facebook.com/torridliteraturejournal>

<http://www.facebook.com/tlpublishing>

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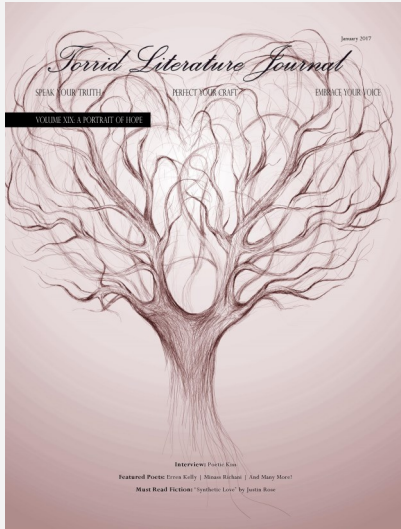
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CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

All members of our team will be listed on the Masthead section of our website. In addition, members of our team will gain valuable experience while making an impact on the literary community. If you plan to apply for a position, please keep in mind that your time commitment will vary depending on your position and the project you are working on. However, please plan to spend a minimum of 2 hours a week with a 6 month to 1 year commitment to the position. Everyone on our team will need to be familiar with the products and services we provide, as this is the best way for people to understand our mission for the culture of literature and art.

All positions can be fulfilled remotely unless otherwise noted.

We're currently accepting applications for several blogging positions until they are filled. We're looking for bloggers who will create literary content for our blog. Successful candidates will be expected to create at least one post per quarter, although more is encouraged.

Minimum length of participation is 12 months. Please take this into account before applying.

Questions? Please send an email to jobs@tlpublishing.org. Please visit http://torridliterature.com/Careers_Opportunities.html for more information.

FROM THE EDITOR

We're connected to our art which in turn keeps us connected to life. As writers, our roots run deep and our passion for the written and spoken word is not to be taken lightly. When a person is passionate about their purpose, it's hard for him/her to stay away from it for too long. Somehow, regardless of how life gets in the way, we always find our way back to the things we're passionate about. Our love for literature gives us life. It makes our world spin.

We can't think of a better way to wrap 2016 up than with a new issue of the *Torrid Literature Journal*. It's been a while since you've last heard from us but we're back with a new release. Volume XIX presents new literary content created by writers who are eager to share their truth and the fruit of their labor.

Personally speaking, I love to write because I love to live. Writing gives me life. Moreover, writing saved me. My love for writing is a byproduct of my love for living. When I face challenges I often turn to my own writing or someone else's work which in turn gives me the clarity, understanding, relief, and/or correction that I may need.

Writing gives sustenance to the roots that give us life. One could also say that life gives sustenance to our literary roots. There will always be something to write about or speak out on which in turn gives birth to new creative content. Some days it spurts out in abundance and at other times its progress is much slower but regardless of the speed of development, creative content comes forth like a blossoming new flower that is worthy of attention and admiration. While we labor to nurture our work into maturity, our end result is confirmation that our efforts were not in vain.

Through the *Torrid Literature Journal* we have the opportunity to share with you fresh new creative material written by writers from around the world. Their work gives our journal life. Without them, our journal would be a collection of blank pages. Our platform exists because they exist.

In addition to the new literary material, our latest release contains a new eye opening interview with Kissha Tiana, artistically known on and off the stage as Poetic Kiss. We had the pleasure of having her feature at one of our open mic shows in 2016. Her bold edgy style embodies strength and inspiration. We love to learn what makes an artist tick so we've asked her to participate in an interview. If you're looking for personal insight into performance poetry, then you don't want to miss this interview.

Staying on the topic of spoken word, we're equally excited to share with everyone that our next open mic show will take place in January. We have Wally B. Jennings spotlighting as our feature for our show that evening. Many of you may remember him as our interview feature a few issues back in the *Torrid Literature Journal* – Volume VI *Erosion*. This show is special in that it will be our five year anniversary. If you're located in (or near) the Tampa Bay area, please come out and help us celebrate. For those of you who live outside of our city and state, make sure you follow us on Facebook for videos and photos of our performers for the evening. Additionally, since our audience extends beyond our location, I want to continually encourage every writer to get out and share their work at an open mic show or poetry reading in their town. Sharing your work with others will help you become comfortable with your literary voice and style. It will also help you to perfect your craft.

Another exciting feature in this publication is the announcement of our winners for our annual literary contest that took place earlier last year. We're excited to share their award winning work with our readers. Our annual *Romancing the Craft of Poetry & Fiction* contest runs every year from March to July. We want to thank everyone for submitting their work into our contest. We're already looking forward to this year's contest.

As we gear up for a whole new year of releases, we're looking to

refill our queue with new literary submissions. We're looking for unpublished poems and short stories for our literary journal. We're also looking for editorial content to publish in our literary journal and on our blog. This includes interviews, book reviews, and articles. Specifically for our blog, we're looking to spotlight authors and their new/old releases. Moreover, we have a special call for submissions. We're now accepting submissions for our third Christian anthology of poetry, *The Other Side*. This forthcoming anthology is seeking Christian poetry that inspires other people who may be going through a difficult time in their life. Our submission window is open until further notice. Please visit our website for detailed submission guidelines for our blog, the *Torrid Literature Journal* and our Christian anthology. We thank you all in advance and we're looking forward to the reading pleasure.

I love to read just as much as I love to write. It is my understanding that they go hand in hand. With the New Year upon us, please make sure you make time to read. Set healthy reading goals. Read to study up on your craft. Read to stay familiar with your genre. Read for general research purposes. Read for pleasure, because we all need to escape every once in a while. While you're at it make sure you support your fellow writers in your community. Don't forget to leave constructive reviews as well.

Another goal you might want to consider is one that pertains to new creative content. If you live a busy life due to your career, school, or family then setting small attainable goals for your writing is important. Just look at where we are now. 2017 is already here and it's a perfect time to examine last year in comparison to where you want to be twelve months from now. How many fiction manuscripts do you want to write in 2017? What about poetry? How many poems do you want to write and how often do you plan to submit them to publishers and literary journals? What about shows? Do you plan to perform your material regularly at poetry readings or open mic shows? Will you create a reward system for each goal you meet? These are all questions I hope you will consider when planning out 2017. It goes without saying though that sometimes life throws multiple curveballs at us. Sometimes plans change midway.

Life happens. However, don't get too stressed out. As the saying goes, yell 'plot twist', then adjust and keep moving forward. Don't let shame, condemnation, or guilt steal your joy or disrupt your drive to be successful with your craft or life in general. Just hold on to everything that gives you life. As long as your roots are in the right place, you will never be too far gone. You will continue to bear good fruit.

I want to leave you with this thought: there are seasons to everything. Don't let a few lost leaves or branches throw you into panic. Remember that a tree will always bear fruit in its appointed season. Don't worry about the periods of drought that may occur within your life. All you have to do is stay in a position to receive that which you have sowed. Your harvest is on the way.

Be you. Be blessed. Be torrid.

Sincerely,

Alice Saunders

Follow me on Twitter:
[@lyricaltempest](#)

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL CORNER

1...*Interview: Poetic Kiss* | Alice Saunders

POETRY

- 5...*Tolstoy Waiting for a Train* | James Hercules Sutton
6...*Dog Box* | Craig Evenson
7...*Her Eyes* | Minass Richani
8...*Alone* | Milt Montague
9...*Chaos Calling* | Scott Thomas Outlar
10...*Harbor Bum* | Thomas Piekarski
11...*Disregard* | Gary Beck
12...*Blood Washed* | Jason Kirk Bartley
13...*Near Estancia* | Tom Montag
14...*Marianne Moore Mitigating Loss* | James Hercules Sutton
15...*Out of Darkness* | Nicholas Froumis
16...*One* | Debra Wendt
17...*Season's End* | Robert Joe Stout
18...*The Janitor Says* | Danny P. Barbare
19...*Zion National Park* | Dave Darr
20...*Straight* | Wayne Burke
21...*Axis* | Carl Scharwath
22...*The Fight of the Century* | Scott Lauditi
23...*Heron Taking Off* | Maggie Hess
24...*Live Oak* | *One Kingdom* | Patrick Theron Erickson
25...*IV* | *V* | Nathan Smith
26...*Take Five* | Erren Kelly
27...*Renting Amens Without Saddles* | Jacob Erin-Cilberto
28...*Adam's Rib* | Charles Kerlin
29...*And You Will Go West* | J.H. Johns

FICTION

- 30...*Farewell* | S. F. Siddiqui
33...*Synthetic Love* | Justin Rose
36...*The Women of Westhaven* | Matt McGowan

ANNUAL ROMANCING THE CRAFT OF POETRY & FICTION CONTEST

42...1ST PLACE WINNER

43...2ND PLACE WINNER

1 ON 1: POETIC KISS

By Alice Saunders



Photo Credit:

Would you please tell us about yourself and your work?

It's so hard to really say. I'm just Kissha. A poet, a mother, a dreamer, a hard worker....I don't know. I'm just Kissha. #JustKissha #PoeticKiss

What books have influenced your life most?

My Favorite book to read is *Temple of My Familiar* by Alice Walker. It is the sequel to *The Color Purple* (which coincidentally is my favorite movie). The way that she connects the characters together leaves for some good reading! :-). However, *The Alchemist* is a book that inspires me to search for the meaning of life. I read it every year. #FamiliarAlchemist

At what point did you realize this was something you wanted to do?

I was always a poet. I've been writing since I was about 9 years old. I really don't know when I realized that poetry was something I had to do. I didn't really have a lot of positivity poured in the impracticality of what I wanted to do. Everyone said go to school, you're smart. Be a business-woman. I don't think people understand how business and poetry goes together. #IAmPoet

What has been your biggest motivation? Where does your inspiration come from?

The biggest motivation I would have to say is being a mom and striving to be their inspiration. As a parent, you can teach, train, love, and raise

your children, but I really want to inspire them to strive for their dreams and aspirations. So, in a nutshell, I'm inspired to be an inspiration. #BeAnInspiration

What is your creative regimen? How often do you write?

I write when I can. With the busy schedule that I have, I don't have a lot of time to really get down and dirty like I would prefer to. I do however have creative spurts where I have to start something or get out a line or idea. My cell phone is full of notes and voice recordings. #JustWrite

How do you deal with writer's block? What is your advice on how to overcome it?

“Love yourself and your journey. Learn to say no. It’s okay to be assertive and be confident in who you are, what you want, and where you want to go. Don’t listen to the naysayers. They can’t see the beauty of the journey from the sidelines. #YouCanDoIt”

LOL... I’m still trying to figure that out. I have too many works in the making. I’m pushing myself to do better. Any suggestions? Seriously, Sheree Greer once sent me writing prompts and that helps tremendously. Even if you don’t use the work from that prompt, it does get the creative mojo flowing. I use that trick. #WritingPromptsSaveTheDay

Can you describe one of your favorite poems that you wrote? Why does this poem stand out more than the others?

I don’t really have a favorite. I wrote “My Words” when one of my poetry peers told me that when I want to become a better poet, let him know. I was inspired to write that piece and it has become a crowd favorite. #MyWordsAreMyWeapons

Were you ever hesitant when it came to writing or sharing a specific poem? Why?

I’m always hesitant. I am just a very guarded person, so I second-guess what I should share. “Keep in mind I’m an artist and I’m sensitive about my....” As the great Erykah Badu would say. #NaturallyShy

What do you do when you are not writing?

I don’t really know. I’m always thinking ahead and planning my next move. I try to figure out what I need to do. I work a lot right now. I’m a mom, so I spend a lot of time with my family. I love love love to cook. It’s a stress reliever. I’m really a homebody, so my free time is spent at home if I’m not out with close friends or family. #FamilyFirst

Do you have a day job as well?

Yes. I work in the accounting department at a local major dealership. Somedays it’s pretty demanding, but I really like it because I’m a num-

bers junky. I really love to problem solve and use my analytical abilities to balance everything out. #NumbersDontLie

Please tell us about your show, *Sealed With a Kiss*.

Sealed With a Kiss started out as an open mic show in 2012. It has gone on to win Best of the Bay in 2015. Now, it is branching out to present other types of shows and endeavors that I’m very excited about. I wish I could tell you all about it, but a lot of it is in the works. I’m working really hard on it. #HoneyBeeWithButterflyWings

As a performer, what is your experience like behind the mic on stage?

It can sometimes be an out of body experience. I am really guarded, so to bare my soul on stage can be a bit nerve racking at first, but getting lost in my element makes for an amazingly surreal experience that leaves me craving the stage. #GreatNervousEnergy

Do you memorize your poems or do you read from a journal? Do you have any tips for memorization?

I usually memorize my poems. I have nervous hands so I don’t really like to hold a journal and read from it. However, I think reading brings sort of an authentic feel to the performance that a lot of times is missing when poets perform poems. It allows the reader and the author to connect in a more authentic way. I think sometimes that is more so for the reader’s benefit. #AuthenticAndReal

Tell us about an example of a conflict you’ve experienced in putting together a show. How did you overcome these challenges?

LOL... Can I plead the fifth??? I would say that

personally the most challenging part of a show is not letting it stress you out. It is VERY demanding, especially if you want to put on a stellar show. It’s even more of a headache/heartache if you are doing it alone or don’t have a lot of solid genuine support. However, I recognized that I needed to lean on the people that were there to help. In essence, it takes a team to build a dream. #ItTakesATeamToBuildADream

What advice would you give to future hosts who are contemplating creating an open mic show?

Stay focused and don’t give up. If it is something you want to do, then do it. You don’t need approval from anyone to be you. Just stay the course. Earlier on I allowed some things to deter me and Lord knows I regret it. If it’s in your spirit to do it, then do it. Nevertheless, put in the work. No one gave me a formula I just put in the work and worked with some great people. Don’t depend on anyone to give it to you. Lastly, don’t take offense if people don’t come to your show. Entertain the people who did come. Sometimes, it’s just that people can’t come or don’t want to. Just be grateful and appreciate the ones that do. They will appreciate you for that. #JustDoIt

How would you define success as a poet and spoken word artist?

It’s hard to say. I think success is defined by an individual. One person’s journey and destination can’t look like someone else’s. For me, I always wanted to reach people. The underdog. The unheard. The slow to speak. The voiceless. I am drawn to those types because that is me. #BeTrueToYou

Do you have any advice for aspiring poets?

Go to open mic shows and perform, perform, perform. Hone your craft and give to it what you want to take from it. Do it for you. If you do that,

you won't ever get lost in the "politics" of the spoken word community. Stay true to the art. #HoneYourCraft

Can you please tell us about Purple Kiss Entertainment?

Purple Kiss Ent is a company that I have had the privilege to be a part of. It was started by my partner in rhyme and laughter, Barak Amen, a rising comedian in the Tampa Bay area. I first met him and did a few shows with him, but we soon started partnering with various shows, like Poetry and Punchlines. However, it was started well before I knew him and I guess it just meshed well with my journey. Besides, my favorite color is Purple and my nickname is Kiss. I think it was just meant to be. I'm extremely grateful for the opportunities and lessons it has afforded me. I'm a better poet, host, and business woman because of this partnership. #PurpleKissesAreTheBest

What would the ideal job be for you in the field of poetry?

That's an interesting question. I'm not sure. Of course, it would be nice to perform and travel the world doing so. However, I am also interested in putting things in motion to build opportunities for poets and local artists. I don't think it can stop at just performing. There are a few things that are in the works and that I have on my vision board. I think that they can be accomplished. I'm working on it. #BeyondThePen

What is the hardest part of writing for you? What's the best part?

The hardest part of writing for me is actually having the time to write. I don't know how to say no, so when I do have free time and someone asks me to do something, I usually do it. Then I'm drained when there is a little time to get something out. Still, the best part is the finished product. Being able to experience what your imagination can spill onto paper can be quite awe inspiring. #WritingsIsTherapeutic

Are there any other genres or creative avenues you would like to explore (i.e. music, singing, painting, etc)?

I used to sing and play the flute. I want to pick up the flute again. I don't know about the singing part though. I think I will leave that to the professionals. One of my absolute loves is to dance. I really wanted to be a professional dancer. I've always loved the movements and the expressions that I can make. I wish I could have explored that more as a child. On the other hand, I'm absolutely in awe of dancers and can watch with quite delight. #NotThePoleDancersLOL

Are there any noncreative avenues you

would like to explore?

I'd love to delve into design (oh wait, that's creative). However, I'd love to have my own shoe line. I think I can do it. LOL...I'd love to build businesses in our own communities that give back to the communities they serve. Meat markets, gas stations, hair stores. I would like to be a part of making that happen. However, honestly I have so many aspirations, I have to pass the ideas on for someone else to do. #ManyTalentsManyAspirations

Would please tell us about the Poetry Is radio show?

Poetry Is...Is a radio show that I have had the privilege of being a part of for over 3 years. It plays different tracks, mostly poetry, on the radio station 88.5 FM WMNF. It is a show that is definitely one of a kind. I really enjoyed my run there. #PoetryIs...#Awesome

What project are you working on now?

I'm STILL working on my debut CD that has been in the making for what feels like forever, but I want it to be an epic display of my artistry as well as my life. I really want it to be a great representation of who I am and what makes "Poetic Kiss" There are a few other projects under my belt, but I just have to pace myself. Nevertheless, there is definitely a lot more to come. #WorkHard

If you were writing a book about your life, what would the title be?

"Honeybee with Butterfly Wings" That's my motto right now. #HoneyBeeButterflyWings

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Love yourself and your journey. Learn to say no. It's okay to be assertive and be confident in who you are, what you want, and where you want to go. Don't listen to the naysayers. They can't see the beauty of the journey from the sidelines. #YouCanDoIt

What are your views on social media for marketing?

I think that it is a good tool. However, I think that people (me included) have put too much stock into it and I think that we should always do more. I always do more. #SocialMediaJunkies

Any tips on what to do and what not to do?

I don't really have any tips, because I'm still learning. #ImNotAPro

What have been some barriers to achieving your goals of writing and performing?

There have been a few, but I think I allowed them to deter me. So my biggest barrier was me. I could have handled a lot of things differently. I think that what people say about you is none of your business. You can't please everyone so don't try. You can't help everyone. Moreover if you feel depleted, drained, or used...STOP...It's all about the art and the love for it. I lost sight of that once and got lost in the "politics" of the poetry community here. Don't do it. Just do you. It'll fall into place. #RememberWhyYouDoIt

Can you share with us some of your goals for 2017?

There are a lot of things in store. I think you just have to stay tuned. I think I want my work to speak for itself. I don't want to talk about it I just want to be about it. #Watch

What motto, quote, or saying do you live by? Why?

I don't really have one I particular. Lately I've been saying I don't care because I let the weight of what people did or tried to do to me weigh me down. As soon as I let go, I felt free and more inclined to build something great. #JustBeGreat

Do you have any upcoming projects, tours, events, or announcements that you would like to share with our readers?

Tentatively, I will be completing my CD Road to Poetic Kisses in 2017. It will be a journey to say the least. #StayTuned

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. What final thought and/or message would you like to leave with our readers?

LOL...No...I think I have said too much. I'm just grateful to all of you and the support you give. Support is everything. Being asked to do this interview has been an awesome experience. Thanks for reading about little old me. #ThisWasHard #IveSaidTooMuch #StillJustKissha #ThankYou

Can you tell us where people can find you? Website, social media, blog, etc.

My website is PoeticKiss.com. You can find me on Facebook as Poet Kiss. I'm on Instagram and Twitter as PoeticKiss813. I can also be found on the corner selling dinners on Fridays. LOL... I'm just kidding. #TheHustleDoesntStop



Join TL Publishing Group and the Tampa community as we celebrate poetry and the arts with our open mic event. Our open mic events are always family friendly and provide an open platform that welcomes all types of artists. In the past, numerous singers, musicians, bands, comedians, poets, spoken word artists, and storytellers have blessed our stage, leaving the microphone in flames.

At our upcoming event, we have R.J. Kerker as our special host for the evening. R.J. is a member of the American Song Box band and a long time supporter of the arts community in Tampa, Florida. He also co-hosted open mic night at Café Kili for several years before retiring to focus on other musical projects. Visit his band page to learn more:

<http://facebook.com/american-song-box>
<http://reverbnation.com/amersongbox>

Visit us during open mic night to learn more about the performers for the evening. There is no charge to attend this event. All performers, emerging and experienced artists, are encouraged to come out and participate.

Please visit our website and like our fan page on Facebook to receive important updates regarding this upcoming event:

<http://www.facebook.com/tlopenmic>
http://www.torridliterature.com/Open_Mic.html

If you are interested in being a featured poet at one of our events, please contact us at events@tpublishing.org.

ODE TO LITERATURE

TOLSTOY WAITING FOR A TRAIN

By James Hercules Sutton

He reads a line and, reading, soon forgets
that he's its author. Suddenly, it seems
that it was someone else who dared to set
a speck of substance to the stuff of dreams.
The passions that he finds are pitched so high
he's drawn to think the author's someone new.
He cups his heart & offers up a sigh,
jealous of what that younger man can do.
Phrases he reads bring tears into his eyes;
passions that they release claw at his brain.
Caught by emotions that he can't disguise,
he cries while reading, waiting for his train.

At last, he mutters, "That young man has talent;
his words are true, his heart is also valiant."

James Hercules Sutton is a graduate of Iowa Writers Workshop. He studied with John Berryman, George Starbuck & Marvin Bell. This poem is from his 17th book of sonnets, *Love, God & Country*. Worked as organizer, lobbyist & senior policy analyst for Iowa teachers union. Sutton lives in Des Moines with his true wife & cat.

Craig Evenson is a school teacher. His poems have appeared in such magazines as *Lost Coast Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *Lalitamba*. He lives in Minnesota.

DOG BOX

By Craig Evenson

Lies breathed
I come sweating to bed,
inebriated
by something that comes
from changing back
into something
clean and fitting.
The unimportant way I'm known
that gives me room
to wake up on the cold spot
where the dog leaked
in her sleep.

Room to crawl inside her box
let it attach the welcoming scent
the funky dog softness
let it turn my sickness three circles
curl me into a hefty crescent
an open door
an Ellis Island if you like
for any dream
but mostly ones from which I wake
with room to feel the fading grip
of coming back to life

Minass Richani is a young Australian Poet aspiring to not only tell her story but to enthrall you, to have you experience your deepest fervors within her words; to tell your story.

HER EYES

By Minass Richani

Her eyes sometimes so blue like the ocean as darkness cloaks it
And just like the depths of the sea you'll never know what hides beneath them
Floating on the surface of her identity and as you dive her persona will split
She wondered why I had not reassembled her into verses and appellations
But how do you write poetry about a combination of depression and whiteness

It's when her eyes are green that you should savour up her presence
They light up like a silver maple after rainfall in the late spring
And she's not looking at you or through you but as though she's your sustenance
But tread softly because you maybe be unwinding in the calm of a stream
She will, as does a stream suddenly plummet into a waterfall of crashing nonsense

Her eyes her eyes, they are not windows to her soul
They are not an ocean nor a river, a pond or a stream
They need not be understood to make her whole
And she is not her eyes
She is simply a story untold

ALONE

By Milt Montague

Stumbling along the water's edge
Seeking solace in nature's bosom
Alone, save for the crashing waves
Seabirds screeching at the tide deposit
Circadian rhythms of the universe

The dance of the waves
Advancing noisily in a show of strength
Quietly retreating under a cloudless sky
Twice daily as they have done
For countless millennia

This lone guilt ridden survivor
Sobbing to the elements
Why she ?..... Why she ?.....
And not me ?
Bemoaning his sorrowful existence

Once they frolicked amongst the stars
Dashing gaily across the heavens
In a golden chariot with Apollonian steeds
Carousing with other plenipotentiaries
Nibbling ambrosia, sipping nectar

Out of nowhere came the lightning bolt
Daily sucking out all her life force
As she slowly slipped away
Until she was gone
All too soon

Leaving him so terribly alone
Alone and miserable
Bewailing aloud
To heaven

He slowly turned
Walked into eternity
Surcease.....at last

Scott Thomas Outlar hosts the site *17Numa.wordpress.com* where links to his published poetry and fiction can be found. His chapbook *Songs of A Dissident* was released in January 2016 through Transcendent Zero Press, and his words have appeared recently in venues such as *Yellow Chair Review*, *Section 8 Magazine*, *Of/with*, and *Tuck Magazine*.

CHAOS CALLING

By Scott Thomas Outlar

My sound sleep is suddenly stolen
as I'm violently shocked awake
by a screeching source of confusion,
shattering the crystalline visions
of a peaceful paradisiacal dreamscape
where I had been safely stationed in hiding
as I sought the faceless beauty
of an unknown angel
from the other side
who could possibly fall
from the graceful arms of heaven
and save my sinful soul
from this dualistic rift
that constantly creates a schism
between the warring hemispheres
in the back of my brain.

Now the maddening echoes of the chaos fields
reverberate with pulses of white lightning
through the closing circle
of my slashed consciousness,
corrupting the cycle of dreams
and disrupting the circadian rhythms of my rest
while rupturing my spirit
with a knife to the side of my psyche
as the Judas Goat offers a final betrayal
and ushers me unceremoniously
back to the here and now of this broken reality.

A silent crash whistles through the window,
singeing the humid night air with an ominous warning
whispered from the trickster gods of this perilous world,
painfully piercing the tortured memories of a thousand almos
and a million not quites
that still linger in the spaces of blacked out truth
that I refuse to face head on;
and so I cover my head and cower in bed,
tossing and turning as the lies
sing their circus song of despair,
waiting for the blissful release of sleep
to once again wash over
and return me to the realm
where all such concerns simply melt away
and vanish
as swirling abstractions
of a life forgotten
on the far side of the looking glass.

Thomas Piekarski is a former editor of the California State Poetry Quarterly. His poetry and interviews have appeared in *Nimrod*, *Portland Review*, *Kestrel*, *Cream City Review*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Boston Poetry Magazine*, *The Journal*, *Gertrude*, *The Bacon Review*, and many others. He has published a travel guide, *Best Choices In Northern California*, and *Time Lines*, a book of poems. He lives in Marina, California.

HARBOR BUM

By Thomas Piekarski

He's totally unsupportable, his lame concepts
corpses, worse than rust rotting
iron struts. And yet

he considers himself unstoppable, excessively
insouciant, even though hounded by
unbeatable odds.

But then his esprit ebbs as he realizes he's
ineligible to walk life's lit tightrope
unless blindfolded.

And since today no steel ships bob on an oval
ocean, and the harbor is motionless
he praises steady rain.

Random Access

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks. His poetry collections include: *Days of Destruction* (Skive Press), *Expectations* (Rogue Scholars Press). *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways* (Winter Goose Publishing). *Perceptions*, *Displays*, *Fault Lines* and *Tremors* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. *Conditioned Response* will be published by Nazar Look. His novels include: *Extreme Change* (Cogwheel Press) *Acts of Defiance* (Artema Press). *Flawed Connections* (Black Rose Writing). His short story collection, *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). His original plays and translations of *Moliere*, *Aristophanes* and *Sophocles* have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City.

DISREGARD

By Gary Beck

Dreams of falling
from perilous heights
snap us awake
just before impact.
Dreams of pursuit
by malevolent hordes,
snap us awake
just before capture.
Unconscious activity
denies nature's mandate
for refreshing rest,
designed to prepare us
for demanding tomorrows.

Jason Kirk Bartley is a Christian poet who loves writing for the Lord. Bartley is from Chillicothe, Oh. He will have a Master's degree in Ministry by the time this comes out. Bartley is a 40 year old single male, who loves reading the gospel, attending church, and watching sports when he can. Bartley loves to go door to door evangelizing. The Lord loves the lost.

BLOOD WASHED

By Jason Kirk Bartley

Christ has died.
He set me free.
I am free.
Yes, free Indeed.
Washed in the blood of the lamb.
Pure in heart before my God.
Laying aside those things that so easily beset us.
There is a heavenly host that cheers us on.
In a race that,
We must finish.
I want my crown of life.
I'll toss it at the Savior's feet.

Tom Montag is most recently the author of *In This Place: Selected Poems 1982-2013*. He is a contributing writer at *Verse-Virtual*. In 2015 he was the featured poet at *Atticus Review* (April) and *Contemporary American Voices* (August) and at year's end received Pushcart Prize nominations from *Provo Canyon Review* and *Blue Heron Review*. Other poems will be found at *Hamilton Stone Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Third Wednesday*, *Torrid Literature*, and elsewhere.

NEAR ESTANCIA

By Tom Montag

from
NOTEBOOK: NEW MEXICO
January, 2016

These roads to nowhere,
these are my roads.

The miles no one wants,
they are mine, too.

Where am I going?
I'm going to hell

the long way around.

James Hercules Sutton is a graduate of Iowa Writers Workshop. He studied with John Berryman, George Starbuck & Marvin Bell. This poem is from his 17th book of sonnets, *Love, God & Country*. Worked as organizer, lobbyist & senior policy analyst for Iowa teachers union. Sutton lives in Des Moines with true wife & cat.

MARIANNE MOORE MITIGATING LOSS

By James Hercules Sutton

Work that's aborted lurks within the mind
& haunts the heart, like an abandoned foetus.
Poets prefer to speak of "the road not taken,"
but roads that lead from nothing to nowhere are more
like driving in fog. And if an antidote exists
for regret or remorse, it lies in knowing that fog
dissipates either in sunshine or strong wind.
Knowing ev'ry departure adds something
to the hand now on the wheel teaches the heart
to be brave; trains the mind to anticipate danger;
prompts an eye threading uncertain vistas
to rely on light. Knowing is what reminds us
that learning to drive with skill is more important
than any choice of road or destination.

Nicholas Froumis practices optometry in the Bay Area. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Right Hand Pointing*, *Dime Show Review*, *Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing*, *The Penwood Review*, *WestWard Quarterly*, *Ground Fresh Thursday*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Balloons Lit Journal*, *Level Renner*, *TWJ Magazine*, *The Society of Classical Poets Journal*, *Calvary Cross*, and *Touch: The Journal of Healing*. He lives in San Jose, CA with his wife, novelist Stacy Froumis, and their daughter.

OUT OF DARKNESS

By Nicholas Froumis

The darkness was all I had ever known,
apparently reaping what my ancestors sown.
Mocking for my perfectly formed ears,
a steady companion for all my years.
What could I possibly hope to offer
to an audience of a cruel scoffer?
So I settled for a life of self-pity,
begging on the outskirts of the city.
Until one day my heart was stirred,
and I simply could not be deterred.
For on this oft-desolate road,
approached one who would not goad.
This man who speaks like no other,
and receives the lowly as his brother.
There was great commotion amidst the throng,
my calling to him berated as wrong.
But that made me cry out all the more,
to see what the son of David had in store.
He gently questioned what might make me right,
so I pleaded to be given my sight.
And despite the request of so wretched a man,
indeed I could see to fulfill his divine plan.
I praised God above in all of His great glory,
and wondered how His son might finish the story.

Debra Wendt was born in and educated in Wisconsin. She is a former textbook author.

ONE

By Debra Wendt

We want to be connected
cared for
loved
It is a pull of the heart
a desire of the spirit
the mind knowing
there is something
besides us
More than human longing
God
From the beginning of time
people have sought
unable to articulate
driven to form an image
Until you spoke

Robert Joe Stout writes about Mexico, people, life experiences, politics, baseball, being young, growing old. He has spent his literary career among journalists, drop-outs, indocumentados, softball players, actors, mechanics, liars, editors and artists. He currently lives in southern Mexico.

SEASON'S END

By Robert Joe Stout

Migrating birds' songs sprinkle
the morning. From the yard
I watch flights intertwine
above me. Rain clouds
cluster, a damp growth
on the mountains; the trees
nearby bend inward, shedding leaves.

Inside the house
I hear other voices
pulling me

past this contrivance
spun from our guts
and labeled love. (We do not
migrate nor do we
stand against the storm

that sweeps mankind
across this century.) We are leaves;
we are sharks; the myths
that guide us
fail our daily needs. I brush
the music

from my countenance
and close the door:
Inside there are no birds.

THE JANITOR SAYS

By Danny P. Barbare

When I feel like a fool in a
lonely world
happiness is like polishing
the sun in the sky
and the silver lining on the
sill
is like making a window
somewhere out there shine.

Dave Darr has been journaling and writing poetry since a very young age, mostly as a personal creative exercise. While in college he owned and operated a small music magazine and printed 40,000 copies over the course of 5 years, distributing them mostly by hand throughout the South. He considers this part of his life story humorous, getting paid peanuts to write reviews for death metal albums. Not exactly poetic but it was an amusing start in self-publishing. Dave's poetry and writings involve his love of nature and how it cooperates with his internal journey for God. Dave grew up in Nashville TN but now resides in the Ozark Mountains with his wife, two daughters and golden retriever. He holds a BBA in Business and works as a marketing consultant for a number of businesses.

ZION NATIONAL PARK

By Dave Darr

There is nothing more reverent
so elegantly written
and as doctrinally sound
as Zion National Park.
It is the holy of hollies
designed in the heavens
every detail, so gently laid
exactly where it's suppose to be.
If one could enter Zion
and exit unchanged
then there stands a man with no soul
and no spirit to be freed.
For Zion is a baptism
a reminder of our brevity
an omen of our Creator
our kindred to the heavenly.

Holiness in Nature

By Dave Darr

If to seek holiness,
is to seek a deeper relationship with the Creator,
to seek freedom from the bondage of sin,
and to seek isolation from the material world,
then what a better place to start but in nature.

Wayne Burke has published his poetry in a variety of journals, online and in print. Burke has 3 published poetry collections, all published by Bareback Press: *WORDS THAT BURN* (2013), *DICKHEAD* (2015) and *KNUCKLE SANDWICHES* (2016). He lives in the central Vermont area, USA.

STRAIGHT

By Wayne Burke

The Italian stone cutter
30 feet high
in his element
in Dente's Park
after dark
warm Spring air
crossroads leading right,
left, back and
straight up
the freeway
seems best to me
but unfeasible
at this time
unless I were out to ruin
my life
which
I am not
I am just in a bad place
feeling apart
red green and white
lights the gas station
on the corner OPEN
the stone cutter is looking
to the freeway too.

Carl Scharwath, has appeared globally with 80+ magazines selecting his poetry, short stories, essays or art photography. He won the National Poetry Contest award for Writers One Flight Up. His first poetry book is *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press). Carl is a dedicated runner ("that's where his art ideas spring from").

AXIS

By Carl Scharwath

The passion shall escape
While the past,
 Flickering hungry
 Is Bleached invisible.

You gaze at
The unfeigned light
 Walking out determined
 From the world.

Knowing how it feels
To be broken
 And have a black hole
 On your time-line.

THE FIGHT OF THE CENTURY

By Scott Laudati

if you can take
one more hit
let them hit you

if the stage is cold
but you can still stand
let them laugh at you

if your mom still loves you
after all your shit
let her hug you

if your eyes haven't shut
and you can still type
get one more sentence down

if you look out the window
and still notice the birds, the sun
don't jump

your dog will never stop loving you
this shouldn't matter
let her lick you anyway

if your words sound like rants
and your soul
is still a mystery,
if love started your pilot light
and
never took your god away,
if you have any fight left
then don't sleep
don't stop
don't yawn
don't blink

there's something they don't tell you about life,
i don't know if it's a curse or a gift
but you've got to own all of your time
or someone else will.
don't ever stop swinging,
keep sweating,
keep bleeding.
the thing about all this is,
once you step out
you can't always
get back in the ring

In college, **Maggie Hess** won the Leidig Poetry Prize awarded to her by the former poet laureate of Maryland, Linda Pastan. Maggie self published her first chapbook, *The Cracked Nut* about the struggle of Appalachians to fight Mountaintop Removal. Since then, Maggie has been published in 15 small presses and magazines. Because her heat bill is too high, Maggie's poetry writing mantra has become "chop furniture, carry deep symbolic meaning." So Maggie remains toasty.

HERON TAKING OFF

By Maggie Hess

Alone on a road in winter.
Shoes over gravel.
Dogs on the trail of something.

Singing to the woods thanks.
Listen to the reply of eternal impermanence.
White water cascading over growing rocks.

Lichen takes the tree.
The tree takes lichen.
Great blue without trying lands again in a poem.

Moss is budding in the leaf litter.
Christmas ferns and maiden hair ferns spring up.
Tan beech leaves still cling to their branches.

Since last week the trees shuffled.
Broken trunk wading in the water.
Two does dashing across the road.

Thirty degrees over normal this winter.
Earth with a fever.
Who can heal it?

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. Secretariat is his mentor, though he has never been an achiever and has never gained on the competition. He resonates to a friend's notion of change coming at us a lot faster because you can punch a whole lot more, a whole lot faster down digital broadband "glass" fiber than an old copper co-axial landline cable. Erickson's work has appeared in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Oddville Press*, *Danse Macabre*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Cobalt Review*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Red Fez*, and *Poetry Quarterly*, among other publications, and will appear in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Former People*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Futures Trading*.

LIVE OAK

By Patrick Theron Erickson

Standing in the long shadow
of a live oak

thankful for its shade
in summer

the dog days
and no leash

thankful for its shelter
in winter against the wind
cutting both ways

cutting into the tops
of the evergreen

cutting off the winter wheat
from the ground up

pity the babe
in diapers

but for the Babe
in swaddling cloths

the Live Oak

the long shadow
sheltering us all.

ONE KINGDOM

By Patrick Theron Erickson

One kingdom
now begun

And how
is it enlarged
except by inspiration

In each believer's breast
that ruby-throated bird
with sapphire crown
and emerald plumage

was never meant
to be contained
in any earthen chest

for all its worth

but lives
to sing its love
its mirth

and that
at its monarch's pleasure

one kingdom
now begun

until king and kingdom come.

Nathan Smith started writing back in high school when a friend convinced him to write a zombie survival story. From that moment he was hooked. He moved on from the zombie genre and became fascinated with Latin American literature and authors like Paulo Coelho and poets like Pablo Neruda. Their literary style was his first major influence. His second was his faith. When he was seventeen, Smith encountered Jesus in an unfinished church in Brazil. Since then, Smith has sought to serve Jesus in his writing and his vocation. His first book *As the Sun Rises* is set to release February 1st 2016. Nathan and his wife Jessica live in North Carolina with their dog Riah. Connect with Smith at: Nathansmithwriting.com and [@nathanswriting](https://twitter.com/nathanswriting).

IV.

By Nathan Smith

Over dinner
You make me a promise
You'll make time for me
But the real truth is
I can't make time for you
And that fact grinds me
Nags at me
And won't let go

Life pulls
And I chase
Every worthless thing
Believing
That it might be
Enough
And by the time I've been let down
Too many times by
Things
I'm too far gone to go to you
I'm poisoned
But for some reason
I won't seek the cure

V.

By Nathan Smith

I'm no good with fragile things
Like little glass objects that
Crack
In
Your
Hand

People,
Relationships,
All fracture when I can't hold them
Gently enough
I'm a breaker, not a fixer
A builder, but not of fragile things
And you, you put yourself,
Your little glass self in my hands
Knowing
Knowing what I am
And now we're both getting cut up
Trying to put back together the
Little
Broken
Pieces.

Erren Kelly is a Pushcart nominated poet from Seattle. He has been writing for 25 years and has over 150 publications in print and online in such publications as *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Poetry Magazine* (online), *Ceremony*, *Cactus Heart*, *Similar Peaks*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Poetry Salzburg* and other publications. Kelly's most recent publication was in *The Rain Party and Disaster Society*. He has also been published in anthologies such as *Fertile Ground*, and *Beyond The Frontier*. Kelly's work can also be seen on *Youtube* under the *Gallery Cabaret*, links. He is also the author of the chapbook, *Disturbing The Peace*, on Night Ballet Press. Kelly received his B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He also loves to read and travel, having visited 45 states and Canada and Europe. The themes in his writings vary, but he has always had a soft spot for subjects and people who are not in the mainstream. But he never limits himself to anything, Kelly always try to keep an open mind.

TAKE FIVE

By Erren Kelly

last time i was
with dad
i was playing jazz cd's
in my stepmother's computer
he came into the room, his body
running on fumes
but smiling like a young man
as the piano notes
did a percussive dance
through the room
" you know, erren, for 70 years old
i look pretty good," he told me
daddy was impressed that
i liked jazz
he told me he loved dave brubeck
later, i went into his room
and he gave me a watch
the last present he ever gave me

if dad ever meets up with
dave brubeck in heaven
i hope he doesn't bug him
to death by asking him to play
alot of jazz tunes

Jacob Erin-Cilberto, originally from Bronx, NY, now resides in Carbondale, Illinois. Erin-Cilberto has been writing and publishing poetry since 1970. He currently teaches at John A. Logan and Shawnee Community colleges in Southern Illinois. His work has appeared in numerous small magazines and journals including: *Café Review*, *Skyline Magazine*, *Hudson View*, *Wind Journal*, *Pegasus*, *Parnassus* and others. Erin-Cilberto also writes reviews of poetry books for *Chiron Review*, *Skyline Review*, *Birchbrook Press* and others. He has reviewed books by B.Z Niditch, Michael Miller, Barry Wallenstein, Marcus Rome, musician Tom MacLear and others. Erin-Cilberto's latest book *Demolitions and Reconstructions* is now available through Water Forest Press, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Goodreads. His previous three books are *Abstract Waltz*, *Used Lanterns* and *Intersection Blues* are also available through Water Forest Press, *BarnesandNoble.com* and *Amazon.com* as well as Goodreads. Erin-Cilberto has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in Poetry in 2006-2007-2008 and again in 2010. He teaches poetry workshops for Heartland Writers Guild, Southern Illinois Writers Guild and Union County Writers Guild.

RENTING AMENS WITHOUT SADDLES

By Jacob Erin-Cilberto

pray for the transient lovers
they never stay in one heart for very long
always that urge to run
to find a new town to cry in
or laugh in
and a significant other willing
to let them move in with a temporary lease

on life's affections

pray for the transient lovers
surprisingly settled for emotional nomads

they take a drag on the Camel
and then ride off to the sands of change
emptying their canteens of emotion,

then dying of a thirst for acceptance.

Charles Kerlin wrote his poem, Adam's rib, after his wife died of complications of ovarian cancer. Charles continues to write about his wife Eileen's seven year struggle with cancer in two short stories, Harvest Moon and Sunday Morning. Charles Kerlin teaches creative writing and American literature at Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. His Ph.D. is from the University of Colorado. He was in the Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate program for two summers. He's published half a dozen stories in *The Hopewell Review*, *The Flying Island*, and *From the Edge of the Prairie* and won the Hopewell prize for best fiction judged by Alan Cheusse, book editor for NPR. His piece, "And One Fine Morning..." about the difficulties of reconciling science and religion appeared in the Dec. 13, 2013 edition of *Atticus Review*. "The Last Dream Song," a fictional poem about John Berryman's suicide appeared in the 2015 September 24th issue 164 of *Crack the Spine*. "You can be anything you want to be" will be in an upcoming issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

ADAM'S RIB

By Charles Kerlin

We used to laugh at the audacity of those old patricians
Declaring, in their unshakeable, paternalistic way,
That woman were merely a part of a man
And not much of a part, at that.
Only a rib.

We'd laugh and joke about what other parts
Might have been chosen --
A kidney or liver or heart or a nose, perhaps.

Then last month, a month ago today, she died,
And I woke the next day with a pain in my side
That gradually overpowered all other pains.
Then my side collapsed and I saw, there on the right,
A gaping hole that oozed a bloody, yellowish steady stream
Out of me.

We'd been wrong, and she'd been wrenched out of my body
Like a planted flower pulled out of a pot.
I put my hand in the hole, touching nothing,
Then, when I tried to get out of bed,
I realized that I had to do something
Or I'd weaken so badly
I wouldn't be able to go on.

I stuffed some of the gauze in it
That she had used
To fill the holes in her incision after it infected.
It soaked up more fluid than an IV bag,
But the bleeding never stopped
Or healed the wound, in any way.
I'd bought lots of gauze at Walgreens,
Hermetically sealed squares,
I had to open with my teeth.
But after all that,
And after stuffing two boxes in,
They fell through the wound
And stained the sheets
On the bed I was sleeping in alone.

Somehow, I made it to her funeral, even got through
The Irish party everyone insisted she'd have wanted.
I covered the hole with a sweater vest,
And I stuffed a beach towel in my side
She had bought in France and used to dry herself
After an afternoon swim in the pool
I'd built for her last summer.

When I finally stumbled into bed after the party
The towel fell out on the floor and dried there.
The next morning it disintegrated
When I attempted to pick it up.

I tried other things – a dress of hers and the sweater
I'd just bought her for Christmas.
They stayed in the hole and staunched the bleeding some,
But soaked and scabby, they sickened me.
I had to pull them out
Like she had pulled off the gauze from her incisions.
I stayed in bed, too weak to care, too feverish to move,
Except to grope on the nightstand
For the pain killer our doctor had sent over to me.

Then the day before yesterday, I struggled outside.
I stuffed the hole with bark off the river birch trees
That grow on the bank of the creek
Next to our house.
I tried dead sycamore leaves, handfuls of compost,
Then in utter desperation,
I stuffed in some barbed wire that had rusted off
Under the wild grape arbor
That grows on the fence
Between our house and the park.
The pain was greatest then,
But the bleeding and the fever stopped,
And gradually the wound began to heal,
Though pieces of the barbed wire stick out
Through the transparent, blue new skin
That is starting to grow.

I can move around now.
This morning I walked to her grave
On the other side of the park
In the new part of the cemetery.
I found some dead flower petals and stems on her grave
And Rubbed them against the scar that is beginning to form.
That seemed to help,
But I walked there and back bent over
Trying to compensate for the emptiness
Still there under the skin,
Still there under the skin; still there under the skin.

J. H. Johns “grew up and came of age” while living in East Tennessee and Middle Georgia. Specifically, the two places “responsible” for the writer that he has become are Knoxville, Tennessee and Milledgeville, Georgia. Since then, he has moved on to Chicago- for a brief stint- and New York City- for a significantly longer stay. Currently, he is “holed up” in a small town where when he is not writing, he tends to his “nature preserve” and his “back forty.” His goal is to surround his house with all sorts of vegetation so as to obscure it from the gaze of the “locals.” He is assisted in this task by his coonhound buddy and companion, Roma. Most recently, Johns’ has been appeared in *Ygdrasil* (Canada), *The Poetry Super Highway E-Book* (Chapbook) *Free-For-All*, *The Rain, Party & Disaster Society*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Pour Vida Zine*, *The Potomac*(2), *Foam:e* (Australia), *Literary Juice*, *The Lost Coast Review*, *Syndic Literary Journal - Publisher’s Favorites*, *Fishfood Magazine*, *ken*again*, *The East Coast Literary Review*, *Exercise Bowler*, *Four and Twenty*, *Commonline*, *Danse Macabre Du Jour* (2), *The West Wind Review*, *Syndic Literary Journal* (7), *Smokebox*, *Word Slaw*, *Wizards of the Wind*, and *Alura*, and is forthcoming in *Syndic Literary Journal*, and *Parody Poetry*.

AND YOU WILL GO WEST

By J. H. Johns

And,
you will go west
to meet your end
and discover
your new beginning;

in an air
you hope to find
and under a sun
you failed to see;

or embrace-
or feel its warmth-
changed now
so as to be gone,

growing distant-
perhaps even growing cold-

receding
on the eastern horizon,
becoming faint
before turning into a memory;

of certain flavors
and hues;

but you were
always going west-
away-
someplace, anyplace

where you could
be a star on the horizon
of the fragile fiction
you called your life;

and you will
continue to journey west
until you reach
the edge of the world
and then,
simply,
disappear.

FICTION

FAREWELL

By S. F. Siddiqui

S. F. Siddiqui was born and raised in the Washington, DC area and returned to Maryland after earning a BA in English from Amherst College and an MA and MS Ed from the University of Pennsylvania. After several years as teacher and English department chair in local high schools, she now teaches writing at Montgomery College and is developing her own fiction and nonfiction prose. Her personal narrative, "May 8, 2015," appears in *REFLECTIONS*, an anthology by Telling Our Stories Press. She lives in Maryland with her husband and two children.

The Ahmeds' small brick rambler looked as it always had—even the cluster of creamy white peonies Nadia planted with Leena five years ago still surrounded the entrance. But the voices coming from beyond the doorway seemed to transform the house that had been shrouded in quiet for the past year.

As Nadia approached, she saw the shiny black sedan with Connecticut plates parked in the driveway, behind the large truck with *Pioneer Valley Moving Co.* painted in blue across. In the porch windows, she saw the silhouettes of figures gathered in conversation, leaning in toward each other. Nadia thumbed the book in her hands, its pages soft and malleable with use, giving in to twists and pressure from her fingers. Sudden shared laughter escaped from the beyond the walls, and Nadia considered turning around, returning home, spending the rest of the evening with her notes for tomorrow instead. Perhaps she could try to see Haaris and Sara in the morning, before her airport shuttle arrived.

"Auntie Nidi!"

Nadia looked up at the familiar call, remembering a time when "Nadia" was too hard for the young mouth to pronounce, and Sara would say "Nidi" instead. It was Leena who had taught her to add "Auntie," and Nadia was surprised to find how much she liked the sound, so the name had stuck. "Sara has no khala," Leena had said once, as Nadia held her hand after a particularly bad response to the chemotherapy. "And her phuppos and chachis and mumani are so far away. But I know she'll always have her Auntie to count on." Nadia had changed the subject quickly, not wanting her to complete her thought, to imagine a time when Leena herself would not be present. As Leena drifted in and out of sleep, Nadia focused instead on telling her about the new green energy initiative she was working on with her engineering students, the work that had finally gained her such acclaim.

Now Sara appeared from the back garden, running toward Nadia, away from a group of children chasing each other. Sara's dark hair was twisted with ribbons and bows, topped with a tiara. Nadia knelt down in anticipation of the embrace. "Have you grown taller already? I think you're taller than I am now!"

Sara laughed and pulled away enough to see Nadia's face. "I'm an Egyptian queen about to board my ship and sail down the Nile with my pet snake!" Nadia gasped as Sara lifted up the rubber reptile and shrieked with giggles.

"Kids, stay away from the fence!" a voice called from the porch. Nadia quickly loosened herself from Sara's embrace and looked up to see Haaris' cousin Parveen leaning out of the doorway, her paisley printed dupatta slipping off one shoulder. "Dr. Burney!" she added, noticing Nadia and readjusting the dupatta. "So good of you to make it. Sara *jani*, why didn't you tell Parveen Phuppo we have a guest." Sara looked at her *phuppo* but said nothing.

"Go on and play," Nadia said to Sara, rising. "I'll see you in a bit." Then, she turned to Parveen and added with a smile, "Call me *Nadia*, please."

"Will you join us for some tea?"

Too late to change her mind now. "That would be lovely, thank you," Nadia said, stepping closer just as Haaris appeared from behind Parveen, opening the door wider, smiles and lamplight bursting forth. His fading grey flipflops matched his shorts, making his yellow college t-shirt even more prominent in contrast.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it! When do you leave for the conference?" he asked, ushering Nadia past several cardboard boxes.

"The shuttle comes in the morning, at six—"

"Bright and early!" Parveen said.

"Yes, Nadia is the keynote speaker at a conference tomorrow," Haaris explained.

"That's wonderful," Parveen said. "Quite an honor." She peered out the door once more, craning her neck toward the side of the house where the children played, then slowly let the screen door shut as she stepped past the foyer.

"Sorry for the mess," Haaris said, as they walked into the living room. "This is our neighbor Cathy," He gestured toward the sofa where a tall woman in denim shorts and a loose sweatshirt was rising from her seat. "Her daughter Janie is a good friend of Sara's."

"Of course, hello," Nadia greeted, shifting her book into her left hand and then leaning forward to shake Cathy's hand. "I think I saw Janie in the group playing out back," Nadia added, remembering the other little girl wearing a crown.

"Haaris, I couldn't find any tea cups!" a voice called from the kitchen. Nadia recognized it as belonging to Ali, Parveen's husband.

"I must've packed them away," Haaris called back, then turned to Cathy and Nadia. "Excuse me. I'll need to have a look."

"You stay and chat," Parveen said, patting his shoulder. "I'll handle it," she said and headed toward the kitchen.

Nadia began to look around the living room, bending down by the nearest stack of boxes. "Actually, I think I noticed some mugs in a box here the other day."

"I thought I remembered packing them," Haaris muttered as he and Cathy joined Nadia in searching the boxes nearby. When the search proved in vain he straightened and said, "I'll go have a look again in the kitchen. You two make yourselves comfortable."

Nadia settled on the loveseat, Cathy on the chair opposite. “Are you nervous about your talk?” Cathy asked.

Nadia smiled. “You know, I thought I would be. But now I find these large group presentations much easier than small gatherings. The first time I spoke at a conference, I rehearsed so much, afraid of standing up in front of the crowd, but once I was up there, it wasn’t all that different from being at the front of a classroom – or at least that’s what I told myself!”

“What’s that you’ve got there?” Cathy asked, gesturing at the book rolled into a tight cylinder in Nadia’s hands.

Nadia loosened her grip, letting the pages unfurl, resting in a comfortable curve in her outstretched, open palm. “Oh, it’s a copy of *Walden* Leena leant me a long time ago. I thought it was time I returned it.”

Cathy smiled. “Ah, that is lovely. I haven’t read it since college,” she said, taking the book gingerly in her hands, running her fingers along the softened edges. She stopped at one of the dog-eared pages and flipped open the book. After a pause, she read, “To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone.” Nadia recognized the passage as one she had marked during her own first read of the book.

As Cathy returned the book to Nadia, Parveen entered from the kitchen, carrying a tray of cups and saucers, tea rocking from the movement, visible through the translucent bone china. Nadia recognized the cups as being part of Leena’s wedding set. “Here we are!” she said, bending to offer Cathy a cup. “These are lovely, aren’t they? And only one missing from the set, after all these years!” Parveen walked over and lowered the tray in front of Nadia. The white china was adorned with a deep indigo filigree across the top of the teacups and along the edges of each saucer. “I told Haaris we might as well use them. It’s a special occasion after all.” As Parveen spoke, Nadia added a little more milk from the matching creamer and a teaspoon of sugar. She lifted the cup in her right hand, saucer in the left, and took a sip.

Haaris and Ali entered the room, carrying their own cups. Ali nodded a greeting to Cathy and Nadia then turned to Haaris. “Your new place is near your sister’s?” Ali asked. He stood, hunched a bit forward, holding the cup away from him as he sipped his tea, as if he was afraid some tea would spill on his white collared shirt or black slacks.

“Yes, just a few miles.”

“It’s good to be near family,” Parveen said, taking a seat next to Cathy. “When I went back home last year, I told Haaris’ mother—you know she’s my aunt,” Parveen added, leaning in toward Cathy. “I told her that I would look out for him and Sara after Leena’s passing. Even though Greenwich’s not that close, Ali and I try to come regularly.” Cathy smiled in response. “But now they’re going so far, I was worried. But at least he will be near his sister and her family. It will be good for Sara to be near her cousins.” Sip. “Away from this place.”

“Sara will miss Janie and her other friends from school, I’m sure,” Nadia said to Cathy.

“I’m not sure how Janie will handle it,” Cathy remarked, taking another sip. “Really, I’m not sure how much she understands at six, but she will certainly feel the absence. In many ways she seems more attached to Sara than she is to her sisters. But I’m sure it will be good for Sara to be near family.” She turned to Haaris. “How’s the packing going?”

“Pretty much all done, but—” he added, gesturing around the room. “There are still lots of odds and ends lying about. The movers will come back tomorrow afternoon to do the rest.”

“Can I help with anything?” Ali asked Haaris.

Haaris thought a moment. “Maybe we can just move some of these boxes out of the way, into the garage. It would be nice to open up some space here and in the kitchen.” They set their empty teacups aside, and Ali followed Haaris down the hall and out to the garage.

As they left, the front door was suddenly thrown open. “Auntie! Auntie!” a voice cried, and Parveen rose in response before hearing, “Auntie Nidi!” Sara ran to Nadia, “Can you help me take these things off?” she asked, pulling at the extra ribbons and scarves she had wrapped about her. “We’re trying to catch the fireflies!”

Janie came in making a similar request, followed by her older sister Mary and Parveen’s children Beena and Bilal.

“We should be heading home soon, girls,” Cathy said, untangling the tiara from Janie’s hair. The resounded noises of disappointment made her laugh. “Okay, okay, a few more minutes while I finish up my tea,” she said. She picked up her cup as the children ran back out the front door.

“Sara seems very attached to you,” Parveen remarked as Nadia settled back in the loveseat, cup in hand.

“Yes, I suppose we’ve seen a lot of each other in the past year in particular. Tuesdays and Thursdays Haaris had a late lab, so the bus dropped her at my house down the road.”

“You’re normally all alone, right?” Parveen continued before Nadia could respond. “Spending so much time with Sara this past year, especially after Leena’s passing. That must be nice for you.” Sip.

“I... Yes. We all miss Leena very much. I was happy to help in any way I could.” Nadia stared at her cup, heat flooding her cheeks though the tea was cold by now. “Excuse me,” she said, rising. “I forgot I need to return something to Haaris.” She grabbed the book from the end table.

“I’m sorry,” Parveen began. “I only meant—”

“It’s all right. I know what you meant. I’ll just be a moment,” she said, rushing from the room. She reached the entrance to the garage just as Ali was leaving it.

“Is he still in there?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ali said. “I’m just grabbing some boxes from the kitchen. Be right back.”

Nadia nodded and entered the garage. The air was warm and still. A few cardboard boxes sat open along the edges. Haaris was walking back and forth, placing a blanket in one, a carton of tennis balls in another, a stuffed teddy bear in a third. He turned as she entered. “Sorry. I just saw these things lying around, and I got distracted.”

“It’s okay. There’s one more thing here.” Nadia handed him the book. He looked at it carefully. “Walden?”

“Yeah, actually, it was Leena’s. She leant it to me.”

“I don’t even remember—”

“It was years ago. When I first moved here. I really should’ve returned it earlier.”

He reached his arm out to hand it back. “You should keep it, really.”

“I couldn’t.” She stepped back. “But I did really enjoy it. Anyway, I just wanted to return it to you.”

He flipped it over in his hand, then thumbed through the pages. “You’re sure? She’d want you to keep it. I was never the great reader she was.”

She smiled. “Maybe Sara will read it in a few years.”

He returned the smile. “Thanks,” he added, placing the book into the open box next to him. Ali returned then, carrying a large, noisy box filled with pots and pans.

As she slipped out of the garage, Haaris called after her, asking her to check on Sara. Nadia found that Cathy and Parveen were no longer in the living room, empty tea cups the only signs of the earlier gathering. When she stepped out on the porch, she noticed the boxes labeled “Kitchen” tucked into the shadows. The open flaps on the top one revealed roughly a dozen mugs. She thought to bring the box to the garage, then wondered if the contents were intentionally placed outside to be discarded. But the mugs seemed carefully placed, cushioned with dishtowels and t-shirts. As she lifted the box, the bottom gave, and the contents came spilling out.

“Oh no!” Initially Nadia thought the little startled voice had somehow come from her own body. “Did they break?” She was surprised to find Sara there, slipping off the porch swing to inspect the damage.

“Sorry! No, I think they’re all good,” Nadia said, readjusting the tape on the box, pressing it firmly. As she placed the box on the floor, she glanced at Sara and noticed the tear-stained cheek.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Nadia knelt down and began gathering the scattered mugs. “I like to sit quietly on the swing too,” she said. “It helps me think.”

Sara nodded. “And I wanted to be alone.”

Nadia started to get up. “I can go, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s okay.”

With Sara’s help, Nadia returned the mugs to their box. There were several in blue, white, and yellow with the college insignia, a pair from a nearby art museum, one for the “best father” and another for the “best teacher,” and a few more marking various national tourist sites. Mismatched though they were, the mugs fit neatly together in the single box, ready once more to accompany Haaris and Sara.

Nadia took a seat on the swing, and Sara settled next to her, twisting her fingers through a silver beaded chain at her neck.

“This is very pretty,” Nadia said.

“Janie gave it to me.” She lifted it up, so that Nadia could see “best friends” engraved on the heart-shaped pendant. “Only Beena said Janie and I couldn’t be best friends any more.” “Why not?”

“Because I’m moving, and I will have a new best friend at my new school or my cousin Lila can be my best friend because she also lives in Pennsylvania.” She said the last word slowly.

“I think that you and Janie could still be best friends, if you like.”

“But Mary said Beena was right. And they’re in fourth grade.”

“I see.”

“Do you think Janie and I can still be best friends?”

Nadia thought for a moment, considering questions she herself could not answer. There were so many labels to tell us to whom we belong and to whom we don’t. Too many. A barred owl call interrupted the quiet before Nadia spoke. “I don’t know. I’d like to think so.” She watched Sara fumble with the pendant, little familiar fingers pressed against cold metal. “Sometimes we give each other special names like ‘best friend’ to help us feel safe and sure about who we can count on,” she said, a little to herself. “Friends like each other and care about each other and have fun together. Is that how you and Janie are?”

Sara nodded.

“Then I don’t think it matters what you call each other or where you live.” Nadia hoped that she sounded as certain as she wanted to. “You can always count on each other.”

They sat silently together for a while, Nadia letting her sandals dangle off her toes and graze the ground as the swing rocked. Soon after she heard the barred owl for a second time, Nadia heard Sara’s breathing slow into a gentle, consistent rumble, and felt the weight of Sara’s torso against her arm.

When Haaris found them on the porch, she pressed her finger to her lips then scooped Sara into her arms. Nadia carried her, cradled, to the front door, and, with one final squeeze, she handed Sara to her father.

“Thank you,” he whispered, as Sara wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. Nadia smiled, and with a quick wave, she stepped off the porch and found her way home in the warm descending darkness.

SYNTHETIC LOVE

By Justin Rose

Justin Rose is an emerging author from northern Wisconsin with a bent toward literary speculative fiction. You can find his first fantasy novel *Ariel's Tear: A Tale of Rehavan* on Amazon. To learn a bit more about Rose, visit him on Facebook or check out his author interview on Smashwords.

2073: Chicago

"I've always found this musical just divine," Rachel said, tilting her head back and smiling at the man beside her. "Isn't it marvelous?" Her brown curls fell loosely around her shoulders with each turn of her head, shadowing her pale skin in the dark theater.

"Oh, yes," the man replied. His fingers slid softly along the straps of her dress. Their voices came in rapid whispers, quiet lest they disturb the other viewers around them. "Valjean and Javert draw upon such separate sympathies, forcing us to love mutually exclusive ideals." His eyes flashed brightly over his large smile as he spoke, his angular features accentuating his refined voice.

"Nonsense. Don't talk like that. It's 'murder to dissect,' you know. Somebody famous said that, didn't they? Somebody smart. All the famous people are smart, don't you think, Adam?" She spoke hurriedly, her sentences striking at each others' heels, like the boxes of a halting train, shot quickly from pouting lips.

"Perhaps, of course you're right," the man replied. "It is a lovely play." His voice held the tiniest hint of placation, but this hint was drowned in a wash of practiced sincerity. He was accustomed to indulgence, not to self-indulgence but to that quiet resignation of one's own thoughts to another's expectation that so often the high minded must fain for civility.

"Ah, yes, just divine," Rachel replied. "It's all divine. And you're divine tonight. So agreeable. I love that word—*divine*, so chic and old-fashioned." She lent her head on his shoulder. "You think I'm foolish, don't you? You think I'm a silly girl."

"Never," he replied, planting a light kiss on her hair. "You're a gem."

"I talk too much,"

"I like to hear you talk,"

She paused. "Do you? Do you really?" She hung on the question with a kind of hunger, her posture indolent but her eyes and voice tinged with independent fires.

He wrapped his hand around hers. "Of course, you know I do. What's wrong?"

She nestled closer, still staring at the stage. "Nothing. Ignore me, I think I'm drunk. I talk too much. Imagine, drunk at the theater. I'm awful."

"You're perfect," he replied.

They grew silent and watched the play again, seated in the balcony of Chicago's Auditorium Theater. The arches over the stage swam in a swirling golden glory of stenciling and raised patterns. Beneath them, on a darkened stage, Javert stood upon the precipice of an imagined bridge, preparing his final escape.

Rachel glanced to the left at a massive painting of dreary trees by a river. It hung, set beneath a gaudy golden arch, its somber colors clashing with the glittering wealth of its surroundings.

"I always cry at this part," Rachel said.

"It's very sad," Adam replied, "the only option for a man whose purpose has been invalidated."

"I think it's beautiful," Rachel said. "Is that morbid? I feel it's terrible. But then again so much that's sad is beautiful. Perhaps we're all morbid. I think that beauty is what makes me cry. The play will always be beautiful, but I only have a time. Will you love me when I'm not beautiful?"

"You'll always be beautiful. Gray hair won't hide your heart."

The song ended. The lights dimmed. And Javert's beauty ended in suicide.

"Such a pity," Rachel said. "Every time, I wonder if he'll pull back at the last moment."

Adam laughed. "The actor would be fired."

"But wouldn't it be amazing? Think of it, a century of Javerts redeemed by one rebellious actor. So much tradition shattered. I would cheer until my voice went hoarse."

"I'd never thought of it," Adam replied. "I guess it would be a fine twist."

"Have you ever thought about suicide, Adam?"

"No, of course not. Why should I?"

"I don't know, I like to think about it. It's such a grand thing, so big and permanent. Like a shout from someone who's lived their whole life mute."

"Darling, that's terrible," Adam replied. "Don't talk that way. Our life is wonderful."

"Our life . . ." Rachel said and laughed quietly under her breath.

Adam eyed her strangely but stayed silent.

"Oh, don't sulk," Rachel said. "I'll stop being morbid. Don't mind me."

When the play ended, Adam held out his arm to help Rachel from her chair. "Come along, Dear," he said. "Shame to end such a lovely evening though."

She stood. A tiny smear of mascara threatened to mar her nose, the trail of an idle tear shed for Victor Hugo's Hecuba.

Adam gently dabbed away the mascara with his fingers. "Your empathy will be the death of you, Dear," he said. "I sometimes wonder if you

feel their pains more than your own.”

Rachel laughed lightly, a spark of life coming to her eye. “Sometimes we feel almost real,” she said.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Nothing, a childish thought.” She kissed his cheek. “Let’s head back to the house. You can lecture me on the play’s finer points as we drive. I’m sure your inner critic needs to vent.”

Adam laughed. “Well, perhaps this time I’ll spare you the inner critic and let everything be, how did you put it? *Just divine.*”

Together they shuffled along in the line of finely dressed couples, Rachel’s scarlet dress bathed in the reflected light of a golden arch, her dark hair softened in the glow. Adam’s silver cuff links glimmered at his wrists, and his tie pin shone, accentuating the image of donned splendor that accompanies anyone engaged in overly formalized events.

Outside it was drizzling. Adam held his umbrella, and Rachel pressed against his waist as they tried to hail a taxi. Around them, puddles glimmered under the bright lights of the theater. The air smelled of rain and petrol, a sickly, unnatural meld of nature and industry.

“Cars are so ugly,” Rachel said, grimacing at the flashing metallic bodies that clogged the road, windshield wipers scrunching against glass shields and engines puttering beneath moist hoods.

“I don’t know, I think they’re pretty convenient,” Adam said. “Bet you’d miss them if they were gone.”

“Perhaps,” Rachel replied, “but they’re so bland. Metal and gas. So human.”

“Still beats feeding a horse,” Adam said with a laugh.

A taxi stopped then, and Adam opened the door. “Hope it doesn’t offend you too much to sit in one of these bland things,” he said.

Inside, the taxi smelled of cologne and mechanical grease, the signatures of its former occupants.

Adam gave the address.

The driver smiled. “Be there in twenty.” He was pleasant looking, young and normal aside from a missing tooth. The gap was obvious and somehow blasphemous on an otherwise beautiful face. It seemed to signal decay, the fact that it had never been repaired speaking to a resignation before the inevitable. It made Rachel sad.

Adam put his arm around her shoulders. “Well, that was lovely. Now we can head back, maybe light some candles in the living room. I’ve got a bottle of Syrah waiting.”

Rachel nodded. “My favorite,” she said.

“Of course,” Adam replied, “only the best for the best.”

“They really were thorough,” Rachel murmured.

“Who?” Adam asked.

“Ignore me, I’m raving,” Rachel replied. She laughed. “I’m always raving. I treat you terribly.”

“I love it,” Adam replied. “I love you.”

“Do you?” Rachel asked, “I don’t know if anyone ever has. It’s hard to tell, you know. I’m stuck under my skin, tied up within myself. So dull and singular. Do you ever feel that way, like you’re stuck in your own feelings? Sometimes I wish I could crawl beneath your skin, feel what you’re feeling, know what you mean when you say you love me. It would be beautiful.”

“Well, I mean that I love you. Darling, why are you so contrary tonight? Didn’t you enjoy the play? Did I bore you?”

“No, I’m never bored with you, just puzzled. How many others have you loved, Adam? And do be honest.”

Adam paused, his thoughts stalling. “Well, no one really. I mean, I guess I dated. But we’re different, it’s always different.”

“And you don’t love anyone but me?”

“No! You’re so inquisitive tonight.”

“Promise me you’ll never love another?” Rachel asked, her face pressed to his jacket and her arms wrapped possessively around his chest. “I want you all to myself, just you and me forever. My perfect, flawless lover. I don’t want you to whisper sweet nothings to anyone else.”

Adam nodded. “I never will. It will be you and me till our hair turns gray.”

Rachel leaned forward in her seat. “Rub my shoulders?” she asked.

He nodded and laid his palms on her back, slowly massaging her shoulders.

“What are you feeling right now, Adam?” Rachel asked.

“A little worried, honestly. You’re so moody this evening. What’s on your mind?”

“And what is it like, to be worried? For you, I mean?”

“That’s an odd question,” Adam replied. “I guess I feel nervous, like I’m anticipating something sad. I don’t want you to be sad.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s exactly what it feels like. You’ve got all the right words. But are they only words?”

Adam laughed. “If anyone’s acting detached, it isn’t me. Calm down. I’ll always love you, and I’ll always worry for you.”

A tear ran down Rachel’s cheek. “You must feel it then. You must, to say it so well. Oh, tell me again, Adam. Tell me you love me. It sounds so perfect when you say it.”

“I. Love. You.” Adam announced each word with almost comic sincerity.

“Tell me I’m beautiful,” Rachel whispered breathlessly.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Tell me I’m godlike.”

“Divine.”

“Tell me I’m not an awful person.”

“You’re wonderful, Darling. Where is all this self-reproach coming from? You’re the sweetest woman I know.”

“I’m not an awful person, I’m not. I deserve to be loved,” Rachel said. “I deserve it.”

“You are loved,” Adam said, kissing her shoulder where he was massaging her. “And you do deserve it.”

She sobbed gently where she hung, her throat catching and her lungs gently heaving. She tried to stifle it. “It shouldn’t feel so perfect with you. I’m so weak.”

“You’re not weak,” Adam replied. “It’s natural.”

“It’s abominable. I shouldn’t take such comfort. I don’t want to feel good. I want to feel guilty, dirty. This is wrong.”

“Rachel!” Adam said sternly, “what’s the matter with you? Please, just please, tell me what’s the matter.”

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “You can’t help. Can’t understand.”

Adam drew back, his eyes pained. “Did I . . . do something?” he asked. “Did I offend you?”

Rachel looked into his face, saw the offense, the pain. She shuddered. “I shouldn’t need your support. I shouldn’t feel guilty for the pain in your eyes. Stop, stop making me feel. It’s too real.”

The driver looked over his shoulder. “You two okay back there?”

Adam nodded. “Fine, we’re fine.”

The driver hit his blinker. “Well, we’re turning into your place now. Have a good evening.”

Adam placed his hand under Rachel’s elbow as they walked to the house. “We are real,” he said as they entered their house. “Do you need to rest? We can turn in now. You’re really starting to scare me.”

Rachel glanced at the clock over the false fireplace. “No, we’ve just got a few hours left,” she said. “Let’s enjoy them. Where’s the wine?”

“A few hours?” Adam asked as he entered the kitchen.

“Come to the living room, Dear,” Rachel said, dropping her shoes beside the couch.

He stood by the main table with the wine and a screw. “Just a second,” he replied. A loud pop sounded from the kitchen, followed by the tinkling of glasses. He entered the living room and placed the glasses beside the couch before sitting down.

Rachel lifted one quietly and put it to her lips. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m calm now. You must think I’m mad.”

“I’m sure it’s just stress,” Adam replied. “I know work has been a struggle this week.”

Rachel nestled back into her corner of the couch and let her head fall onto the armrest. “Stress. Guess that’s as good an answer as any.”

Adam smiled. “What are you thinking about now?”

“The future,” Rachel replied. “Is this all there is?”

“Isn’t this enough?”

“Perhaps for you.” She laughed. “I almost envy you. You have to love your life. You have no choice.”

“I think that’s kind of oversimplifying, don’t you? I love our life because our life is worth loving.”

“And the others, are their lives worth loving too?” Rachel asked.

“Others?”

“Forget it.”

Adam leaned forward. “Rachel, do you think I’m having an affair? Is that what this is about? I would never look at anyone else.”

Rachel laughed. “No, I’m sure you wouldn’t. You’re always loyal, loyal to each of us when you’re with us. You would never even think of someone else.”

A tear ran down Adam’s face. “What are you saying? Do you really not believe me? Ask me anything. Where is all this coming from? I’ve tried to be good to you.”

“You’ve been perfect. You’ve been beautiful and supportive and refined. And I hate it. I deserve that kind of love. Why don’t I have that?”

Rachel’s voice rose, trembling and violent. “Why do you have to be so perfect?” She broke down completely, weeping into the back of the couch.

Adam lifted his arms, prepared to embrace her, changed his mind, and paused awkwardly in mid-gesture, unsure of what to do. “Rachel—I—I love you,” he said dully. “I don’t know what else to say. It’s all I have, but it’s true.”

Rachel lifted her tear-streaked face. “Tell me again,” she whispered.

“I—I love you,” Adam said, his voice strained with confusion.

“Again,” Rachel said.

“I love you.”

She leaned forward and kissed him violently, burying her fingers in his hair.

He pushed forward and wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her tightly to his body.

“Tell me I’m not a monster,” Rachel whispered in his ear.

“You’re an angel,” Adam replied.

Rachel ran her fingers softly down the back of his neck, searching for his switch.

“Tell me I’m the only one you’ll ever love.”

“The only one forever.”

She stared into his eyes as she turned him off. The life faded from their orbs, and his body stilled. The breath drained its last stream from his nostrils, and the warmth in his skin cooled.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you, Adam.”

She drank the remaining wine and rested in the living room for awhile longer, still sitting next to Adam’s silent shell. Around one in the morning, two men arrived to pick up the rented unit. Rachel signed off for the transaction at the door.

One of the men smiled kindly. “Hope your evening was enjoyable.”

She nodded. “It was, thank you.”

His name tag shone in the moonlight: “Synthetic Love: The Finest in Android Escorts.”

THE WOMEN OF WESTHAVEN

By Matt McGowan

Matt McGowan grew up in southwest Missouri and attended the University of Missouri. He was a newspaper reporter, and for many years now he has worked as a science and research writer at the University of Arkansas. His stories have appeared in *Valley Voices: A Literary Review*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Open Road Review* and others. He lives with his wife and children in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

In the community room at Westhaven Retirement Village, a jigsaw puzzle lay pretty on a faded red Formica table. The puzzle was finished, each piece carefully snapped into the place, such that the face was true, the surface smooth and flawless. In fact, the result of this nearly perfect execution – it was the first time the puzzle had been assembled – gave the impression that it had never been anything other than a collective whole, one large unit rather than an assemblage of five-hundred illogically shaped pieces.

The puzzle depicted mountains – rugged and snow-capped – lush green foothills leading up to the mountains, flowers of many colors and five wild horses sprinting across an open meadow. Above the purple mountains, three white cumulus clouds dotted an otherwise deep blue sky.

It was the kind of place you could get lost in and stop caring, a thing you could look at all day and accomplish nothing else.

The woman who put the puzzle together was in the room, sitting at a different table, playing Mahjong with three other women. Her name was Helen Comstock. At 69, Helen was young for Westhaven. She had gotten a divorce at an odd time – in her early sixties, which had left her alone to care for two horses, eight head of Holstein cattle, a flock of chickens, two dogs and three cats on a thirty-acre farm south of Kansas City. Less than a year after the divorce, Helen experienced a slew of health problems, and all of this – the animals and then her suddenly failing body – conspired to land Helen at Westhaven.

Although she loved playing Mahjong with the other women, Helen did not plan to stay at Westhaven permanently. But her health had not improved, and each day looked more and more like she wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. Still, she thought of Westhaven as a temporary thing.

Everyone loved the puzzle. They commented on its beauty – the grandeur of the mountains, the clear blue sky, the power and grace of the horses. Ed Holland, a retired telephone lineman, said it looked a lot like the foothills west of Fort Collins, where he had lived as a child. Abigail Worscht, Ed's new girlfriend, smiled and said maybe they ought to visit there. She offered to purchase the puzzle from Helen.

The puzzle had lain on the table for two days already when Jenny Overby saw it for the first time. Jenny had been gone for the holidays, visiting a sister in Knob Knoster and a niece south of Warsaw. The photograph stole her breath, the raw beauty interrupting her own thoughts and words – because she always entered the community room talking.

"I... who... this puzzle..." she sputtered. "Who did this?"

The timing of her question was unfortunate. It coincided with a critical moment in the game, when all four women were talking and laughing, one of them slapping her hand on the table. They did not hear Jenny. In fact, they had not even noticed she'd entered the room.

"Hello!" shouted Jenny. "I asked you all a question."

The women turned toward her. Jenny was glaring back at them. It pleased her that all four had given her their full attention. She felt powerful.

The Mahjong women of Westhaven agreed that Jenny Overby was a piece of work. Like many of Westhaven residents, Jenny weighed about thirty pounds more than she should have. Different than most women, Jenny's fat settled above the waist. In this regard, one could say her body was more masculine than feminine, the girth manifesting itself as an inflated inner tube wrapped around her beltline.

But her legs were thin, almost twiggy, and her shoulders were slim too. In short, she looked like a pear on toothpicks.

Jenny's other distinguishing feature was her teeth. She had none. That's not totally true. Her upper front teeth were gone, but when she laughed or talked with animation, which was often, you could see the remnant of a tooth tucked inside the corner of her mouth. It was an amorphous structure, jagged and sharp-edged, many years beyond salvaging.

Jenny wore pajama pants or tights during the winter, men's cargo shorts during the summer. She wore fuzzy slippers or white leather Reeboks, and rarely did anyone see her without the black leather fanny pack somehow tucked under the tractor tire around her waist. The pack contained her cigarettes, a cigarette lighter, a deck of cards and a battered, worn-at-edges photograph of her niece when she was baby.

Jenny pointed at the puzzle. "Who did this?" she asked.

The women looked at Helen. They didn't want to throw her under the bus, but they had not been prepared for the question.

Helen smiled. "My granddaughter and I worked on it on Thanksgiving," she said.

Jenny's fanny pack had shifted to her flank. With the heel of her right hand, she shoved it back in front and then set her hands on her hips. Staring at the image, she inhaled deeply and hummed out a high, not-unpleasant note.

"Well," she said. "I like it. I like it very much."

Jenny lifted a hand to her face, and like a museum curator or art critic, she caressed her jowls, slowly running her fingers and thumb together at the end of her chin, as if combing the hairs of a Van Dyke beard.

Helen said nothing. She smiled and gave Jenny one more polite nod. The other women, relieved that they did not have to engage Jenny, busied themselves with the game. They scrambled the tiles and pretended to organize them.

"Those mountains..." said Jenny.

She stepped closer to the table and leaned over it, giving herself an aerial view. Her hand was still stroking the chin. The fanny pack protruded downward and almost touched the puzzle.

"Do you know where it is?" she said.

"I don't," said Helen.

"My," said Jenny. "It really is so pretty. Just grand, those mountains are so majestic. And look at the flowers. Is that columbine?"

The other Mahjong women weren't listening, but Helen felt obligated to answer.

"I love the horses," she said

"Oh!" said Jenny, standing straight again, her spine as erect as possible. "They're so beautiful."

When she said this, she leaned back and then thrust her upper body forward, so great was her passion.

"Maybe they're wild," she said. "I once rode on a horse without a saddle."

Distracted now by the game and the women, Helen smiled and turned back toward the table. The others were waiting for her to choose her tiles.

"I really do love it so much," said Jenny.

"Jenny," said Mary Lynn, one of the Mahjong women. "We know you love it. But we're trying to play a game here and you're..."

"It's okay..." said Helen.

"It's just magnificent," said Jenny. "My niece would love something like this."

Mary Lynn sighed. The other Mahjong women turned toward Helen and waited for her response.

"Oh," said Helen. "Well, you're welcome to take it. Work it yourself, I mean."

Jenny gasped. She dropped her hand and stood back from the table. The fanny pack was bothering her, so she pushed it again, this time sliding it to the left flank.

"Really?" she said. "You don't mind? It would mean so much."

"What?" said Helen, her make-them-like-you smile turning into a confused frown.

"You really don't mind?" asked Jenny.

"Uh... no," said Helen, feeling worn down. "I don't mind."

The next morning the Mahjong women met at 10:30, an hour after their usual time, because Alice Monroe had an doctor's appointment. The women played one game and then decided to break for lunch, which was served in Crescent Hall from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

At 11:30, the women stood up, pushed their chairs under the table and donned sweaters and jackets. As they were about to step away from the table, they were greeted by Eunice Britt, another Westhaven resident. Eunice occasionally played Mahjong, but more often she was absent, preferring instead to attend a water aerobics class scheduled during the late mornings.

"Oh," said Eunice, her hair wrapped in a powder-blue towel. "I'm glad I caught you."

The women nodded and clucked and said hello. Eunice pointed to the puzzle.

"Do any of you know who this belongs to?" she asked.

The women turned toward Helen, as they had done yesterday when the same question was raised. Helen, amused by the interest in her puzzle, lifted her hand.

"Oh good," said Eunice. "The reason I ask... my granddaughter is visiting this afternoon, and I thought it would be nice for us to work on a puzzle together. I swear I had one, but I couldn't find it."

"Oh," said Helen. "Absolutely. I think that's wonderful. We did the same thing... my granddaughter and I put it together over Thanksgiving."

"That's so sweet," said Eunice. "Well, we don't want... I'll find a different puzzle. This one's special."

"No," pleaded Helen. "Heavens no. Please. I would love for you and your granddaughter to use it. I hope I get to meet her."

"Yes," said Mary Lynn. "We'd all like to meet her."

"Of course," said Eunice. "Oh, this is so nice... She'll be here this afternoon. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," said Helen. "Please. It would make me happy."

"Well all right then," said Eunice.

As Helen and the other women finished zipping and buttoning, Eunice leaned over the table and started breaking up the beautiful image. At that moment, Jenny appeared at the glass door to the community room. The Mahjong women greeted her, Helen opening the door and asking her how her day was going.

Jenny did not reply. She appeared downbeat and burdened. There was a towel draped over her right shoulder, and a large sheet of cardboard pinned between her right arm and the fleshy side of her torso. Instead of her usual sweatshirt, she was wearing a loose, cotton tank top under a modified t-shirt, the sleeves cut out to make large, droopy holes on both sides. It was the kind of shirt country boys wear in the summer. In addition to the towel and cardboard, Jenny was carrying a roll of wax paper, a paintbrush and a four-ounce container of SunsOut Puzzle Preserver – "Easy To Use" and "Non-Toxic."

When she saw what Eunice was doing, her shoulders collapsed, the muscles and ligaments dragging her head downward. She paused there and stared at the floor before speaking.

"But I thought you said..."

She looked up and found Helen, standing behind Mary Lynn and Alice.

"I thought you said I could have it. I was going to glue it and give it to my niece."

Mary Lynn rolled her eyes. She stepped to the side, closer to the door, so Helen could see Jenny better.

"Oh dear," said Helen. "I'm afraid there was a misunderstanding. I thought I said...Perhaps I misspoke. What I meant was you were welcome to work it yourself."

Jenny sighed. Her hair was greasy and disheveled, errant strands covering one eye. She turned to her left and dropped the items on a chair that Mary Lynn had just pushed under a table.

"Yes," she said to Helen. "There certainly was a misunderstanding. I thought you gave it to me."

"I'm so sorry," said Helen.

Mary Lynn couldn't take it any longer. "Jenny," she said, "I was here when it happened, and Helen said no such thing."

Meanwhile, Eunice had stopped loading the box. "Listen," she said, holding a hand to her chest. "Please... I don't need to... By all means, please take it."

Helen, feeling anxious, touched the side of her head and pushed a band of hair behind her right ear. "Goodness..." she said. "Yes..." But she didn't know what to say. She minced backwards and looked at Jenny.

Who was glaring. "Well?" she said.

"Yes," said Helen. "I don't particularly..."

Mary Lynn interjected. She was frustrated with Jenny as usual, but also with Helen, who seemed incapable of standing up for herself.

"I have an idea," she said. "Jenny, you don't really care to put it together, do you?"

Jenny usually ignored Mary Lynn, because the latter was the only person at Westhaven who didn't put up with her interruptions and perpetual chatter, but this she grunted an acknowledgement. Her eyes widened, but she didn't say anything.

"Am I right about that?" said Mary Lynn.

Again, Jenny grunted.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Mary Lynn.

She looked at Helen. "And you don't care to keep it, do you?"

"Oh, no," said Helen, relieved that she did not have to no to Jenny or Eunice, although the latter had given her permission several times to do just that.

"Okay then," said Mary Lynn, "Eunice and her granddaughter will put the thing back together, and Jenny, you can have it when they're done."

Immediately, as if Jimmy Carter had just brokered the Camp David deal between Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, tension in the Westhaven community room eased. Even Jenny appeared pleased with the arrangement, although if pressed, she would have admitted that she was disappointed that she could not glue the puzzle immediately. Her niece was scheduled to visit later that week, and she was already anxious about getting the work completed. But, Jenny was a realist. What was done was done, and she would have to work with what she had.

"I really don't mind," said Eunice, hovering over what was left of the puzzle.

"We know you don't," said Mary Lynn. "But we're past that now. We have a solution. You and your granddaughter can work on it later."

Jenny gathered her supplies, as the Mahjong women queued at the door and filed out of the room. Eunice returned to sweeping puzzle pieces back into the box. Before she finished, Jenny left the room without saying another word. No "thanks," no "goodbye" and no discussion about when the puzzle would be ready.

What Helen and the other Mahjong women did not know, despite the logic of Mary Lynn's idea and the tacit agreement among all relevant parties, not to mention the peace and ease that immediately followed the community-room summit, was that Eunice and her granddaughter did not work the jigsaw puzzle. They – the Mahjong women, especially Mary Lynn – would have been surprised to discover that this change emerged not because of bullying or some other strong-arm tactic by Jenny.

Soon after the women shuffled down to cafeteria, Eunice and Jenny bumped in to each other on the "E" wing of the second floor. Eunice, badly wanting to ensure that she had not stepped on anyone's toes, once again offered to give the puzzle to Eunice now. Nagged by a vague notion that what she was about to do clashed with the spirit of the agreement reached only ten minutes ago – and subconsciously worried that Mary Lynn might find out – Jenny stalled. She stammered and grumbled and fiddled with the fanny pack before finally accepting the box from Eunice.

The Mahjong women did not think it strange that the puzzle was gone when they returned to the community room after lunch. They assumed Eunice and her granddaughter were working on the puzzle upstairs, in Eunice's room. Mary Lynn reiterated that she hoped to meet Eunice's granddaughter, and the others clucked and hummed in agreement, but that was the only thing mentioned related to jigsaw-puzzle controversy.

But the Mahjong women would not meet Eunice's granddaughter, because Eunice, no longer burdened by the puzzle, which her seventeen-year-old granddaughter would not have wanted to work anyway, went shopping instead. Not only had she forgotten that her granddaughter was old enough to drive, but she also forgot that the child actually drove herself to Westhaven. When Eunice realized the freedom this afforded, she asked her granddaughter to shuttle her around. The child was only too eager to accommodate.

The next morning, gathering in the community room, the Mahjong women were surprised to find the puzzle. It was again displayed on the same table, but this time it looked rough. The borders and much of the right side of the puzzle were complete, but there was a gaping hole

on the left side, where the horses were supposed to be. Some of the individual pieces lay on the table. Others were still in the box.

The Mahjong women had questions.

Their answer walked through the door. Jenny again carried the tools and materials for gluing the puzzle. She was frazzled. Strands of hair pestered her nose and eyes, and her lower back was aching, occasionally paralyzing her with sharp stabs. Forgetting about the agreement, the Mahjong women watched her as she bustled around the table, setting down the supplies and pausing briefly to appraise progress on the puzzle, what was done, what was left.

“Jenny,” said Mary Lynn.

Jenny did not reply.

While the others looked on, Mary Lynn said the name again. This time Jenny turned around. Her hair was a mess. She took a deep breath and blew her bangs away from her face. She was panting. Bent over as she was, her lower back threatening to revolt. The entire hulk of her upper body heaved, expanding and contracting with each breath. She did not speak.

“Are you okay?” said Mary Lynn.

Jenny sighed. “My niece will be here...” she looked at her wrist, but her watch was not there. She found it on the table, next to the fanny pack. When she grabbed the watch, she fumbled it and almost dropped it. “Damn it!” she said, securing it in her hand and looking at its face. “... one hour!”

The Mahjong women waited for Mary Lynn to say something. But this time, caught between pity and contempt, Mary Lynn had nothing to offer.

“Well,” said Helen. “What if we...?” She looked at the other women, to gauge their willingness. Their faces were open and bright. “What if we helped you,” she said.

The women slid their chairs back and started to stand.

“No!” blurted Jenny. “I just need to concentrate. And be left alone.”

The women froze, as if they expected Jenny to change her mind. But she did not change her mind. She looked away from them and focused on the puzzle.

She was still working on it when Helen and Mary Lynn walked past the community room on their way back from lunch. They paused long enough to see that Jenny was alone in the room, her niece nowhere to be found. Helen wondered if they should again offer help.

“No,” said Mary Lynn. “It’s fruitless.”

Like clockwork, the Mahjong women convened again the next morning and found the puzzle intact, totally assembled and laid out nicely on the table. But something about it had changed. It seemed tainted, no longer fresh. From afar, it was difficult to tell why, but up close, one could see that it was ragged, the edges of the pieces split and frayed.

The women had started their second game when Jenny came in at 10 a.m. She was not carrying the supplies, and she did not say hello. She walked over to the refreshments counter and opened a cupboard, where she had stored the paintbrush, wax paper and SunsOut Puzzle Pre-server.

“My niece couldn’t make it yesterday,” she said. “But she’s coming today.”

The Mahjong women nodded and hummed.

“Oh,” said Helen. “I’m glad.”

The next time they saw her was again after lunch, standing in the lobby outside the community room. She had left the room and was on her way back to the puzzle.

“Hello,” said Helen.

Jenny nodded toward the community room. Helen and Mary Lynn turned and looked through the window. They saw Abigail Worscht, hovering over the puzzle.

“What’s she doing?” said Jenny.

“Oh my...” said Helen, covering her mouth.

Mary Lynn turned toward Helen, but Jenny kept her eyes on Abigail and the puzzle.

“What is it?” said Mary Lynn.

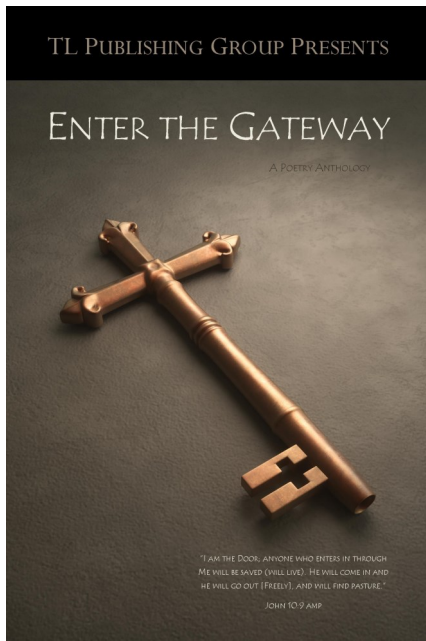
“I forgot,” said Helen. “I told her...”

Helen interrupted herself by lurching forward. Her sudden movement startled Mary Lynn, who then cowered and hunched her shoulders, her neck telescoping down into her chest.

Jenny was yelling: “Nooooooooo!!!! Don’t do that!”

But it was too late. Abigail Worscht was sweeping the jigsaw puzzle back into its box.

GATEWAY LITERATURE BOOKS



Enter the Gateway

Synopsis:

Jesus is everything. He is the execution of God's promise concerning His people. Jesus is the key that gives us access, that brings us into favor and right standing with God. Through Jesus, we receive the Spirit of Adoption where we become apart of God's family, gaining full access and right to His inheritance.

Inside this book readers will find a collection of poetry where the underlying theme is hope, encouragement, and praise. Readers will discover they are not alone in the day to day struggles they deal with. These authors have struggled too, but after the test comes the testimony, which is the message conveyed herein.

These authors had a revelation concerning hope. They realized what would happen if they grabbed a hold of that Hope ("Jesus") and never let go. They knew the access it would provide because they went through the experience of constantly pressing forward with reliance on the Word of God despite the appearance of the situation they were facing. This takes practice and strength so we must constantly encourage ourselves and one another to not give up or lose Hope. We must praise our way through every situation.

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The Effects of Grace

Synopsis:

The Effects of Grace brings together a collection of Christian poetry that offers hope and inspiration to readers. The contributing authors share personal stories of their trials, testimonies, and struggles, through the beautiful gift of poetry. They also reflect on their love and admiration for God and His mighty works. These authors have hope. Moreover, they're standing on the promises of God.

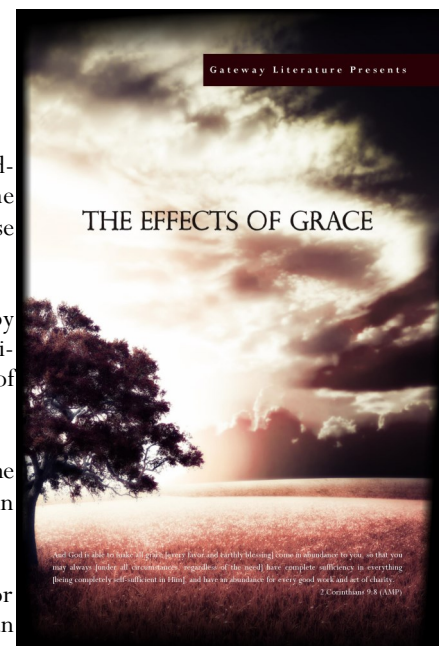
We were designed to operate in the state of unmerited favor. God has seen to it that we are well kept by Jesus, our Grace. Jesus is everything. Jesus is the Grace of God. He is the representation of God's unconditional love. From His birth, death, resurrection, and ascension, His entire life represents the execution of God's promise to us, His children.

Henceforth, we are drawn unto Him because He first loved us. He gave us life through Grace. The same Grace that is the new covenant and that intercedes on our behalf is also the same Grace that is ever present in our lives today.

The effects of living a grace filled life are amazing. The poems in this anthology are proof. It is impossible for us to operate under the law of Grace and not experience the bountiful power it produces in our lives. We can say with confidence that God's love is sufficient for every area of our lives because we are saved by Grace. Hold on and be encouraged.

Contributors: Audrey Burke-Moore; Cardiwel Ebuse; Jordan Legg; Peter Venable; Jason Kirk Bartley; Michelle Bayha; Dionne Evans; John Kaniecki; Philip C. Kolin; Charis Froelich; Christina Mengis; Richard Hartwell; Lisbon Tawanda Chigwenjere; Krista Mallo; Courtney Liddell; Gonzalinho da Costa; James Ross Kelly; Blake Kilgore; Fern G. Z. Carr; Janice Canerdy; LindaAnn Loschiavo; Kathy Buckert; Helen Clark

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Romancing The Craft



OF POETRY AND FICTION

1ST

Michael Hardcastle received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa, and he currently teaches middle school language arts.

HELIUM

By Michael Hardcastle

Yesterday I saw a yellow balloon
strung up in a tree, deflated.
Often, in childhood, I'd wondered
what happened to those
bobbing dumb heads
I let slip through car windows
or up out of swirling carnivals.

Maybe it was resting like a bird
before inflating in the autumn sun
and traveling north to roost. There was a sadness
in that sagging, tree-bound balloon
like a defeated child
or a letter that never arrived.

I want to see a balloon-tree
in full bloom, boughs heavy
with plastic greens and reds and blues—
the most depressing, bright flowers,
trailing strings like stamens
waiting for a child's sticky bee hands.

When I die, tell the mourners
to substitute black for more electric hues.
I want red dresses and purple suits,
pink ties and floppy, yellow hats.
Let them gather with their balloon skin
and buoyant souls and cling loosely
to the rough bark of my coffin.

2ND

James Scott Blackmon is a college educated (philosophy, mathematics and physics) professional semi-truck driver from Kansas. He started out an evangelical atheist (father was a Marxist-Leninist) but he eventually found Christ--or Christ found him--after being trained by Rabbi, Warnick, in kabalistic tree-of-life meditation techniques (he sincerely sought The Truth and THE TRUTH revealed itself). Blackmon has not made much effort at getting published (wanted to build up a body of work first) but one can find his work online at *Kansaspoets.com* (under Kansas poems) including his poem titled: "Kansas Wildflower".

FULL CIRCLE

By James Scott Blackmon

Adam, I'm going to make
you a bride;
but first, we'll need to open up your side.

As Jesus hangs on the cross
his side is pierced
with a roman spear.

Water and blood gush out
in a manger in Bethlehem;
a child is born.

The seventh trumpet sounds;
the savior descends from heaven;
a cloud of witnesses are transformed.

A wedding feast is prepared;
white robes are adorned;
The Shepard meets his bride--

God smiles....

“Hone your craft and give to it what you want to take from it.— Poetic Kiss

“I’ll toss it at the Savior’s feet...” - Jason Kirk Bartley

“They never stay in one heart for very long...” - Jacob Erin-Cilberto

After a brief hiatus TL Publishing Group LLC makes a remarkable return to the literary scene in time to celebrate five amazing years in the publishing industry. Their latest release of the *Torrid Literature Journal: Volume XIX - A Portrait of Hope* starts off with an interview featuring Poetic Kiss, a local artist from Tampa, Florida. Kiss shares personal insights from her journey as a growing artist. This interview sets the stage for the new literary material that follows.

In continuing with the celebration of their anniversary, TL Publishing Group has compiled together a wonderful collection of thought provoking poems and short stories that touch on the different facets of daily life from different perspectives. New and familiar contributing writers return to prove to readers that truth compliments beauty, even its darkest of moments. It also fosters hope, a vital lifeline that determines how people act and react.

What’s life without hope? People should be filled with positive hopes and aspirations at the start of a new year. An optimistic viewpoint is a must when it comes to planning out the year ahead. Furthermore, a new year leaves the door open to new possibilities. Join TL Publishing Group as they continue on their journey to connect writers with readers who are thirsty for literary material that feeds the senses, soothes the heart, and ravishes the mind.

Contributors: Poetic Kiss; James Hercules Sutton; Craig Evenson; Minass Richani; Milt Montague; Scott Thomas Outlar; Thomas Piekarski; Gary Beck; Jason Kirk Bartley; Tom Montag; Nicholas Froumis; Debra Wendt; Robert Joe Stout; Danny P. Barbare; Dave Darr; Wayne Burke; Carl Scharwath; Scott Lauditi; Maggie Hess; Patrick Theron Erickson; Nathan Smith; Erren Kelly; Jacob Erin-Cilberto; Charles Kerlin; J.H. Johns; S. F. Siddiqui; Justin Rose; Matt McGowan; Michael Hardcastle; James Scott Blackmon



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