

Volume XIV ~ April 2015

# *Torrid Literature Journal*

# CHAOS

**Featured Poets:**

Carolyn D. Elias | David Rutter | And Many More!

**Must Read Fiction:**

"Road Trip" | By Chris Negrón



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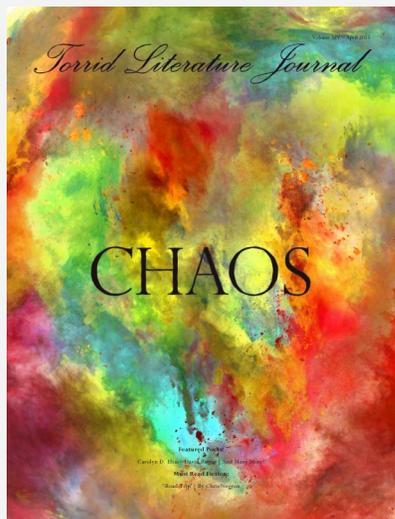
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# CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

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](mailto:jobs@tlpublishing.org). Please visit [http://torridliterature.com/Careers\\_Opportunities.html](http://torridliterature.com/Careers_Opportunities.html) for more information.

# FROM THE EDITOR

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Sometimes art will take us where we're not ready to go, but curiosity is a powerful feeling. This is especially true when we're deep in the middle of writing a new poem or story that hits too close to home. Epiphanies don't come with a warning label. However, we're curious as what comes next. Even if we have a good idea what the next line or paragraph will be, we're never really 100% sure. At some point our writing takes on a life of its own and we're just the guardians nurturing what was entrusted to us until our artful creations have reached full maturity. This is when we release them to the world. We release them when we know they can speak for themselves without needing any type of explanation on our behalf.

With this being said, I'm humbly excited to present you with Volume XIV of the *Torrid Literature Journal*. Our *Chaos* issue is filled with beautiful creations crafted and polished by writers from around the world. Writers understand that sometimes, things in life become undone. We've all experienced this at one point in time or another. Sometimes, when we write, we do so because a thread has come loose. We tug on that thread and eventually, we're left with a pile of string. This tangled mess is connected to memories, dreams, and moments in time. What do we do at this point? We sort it out. As writers, we take that string and use it to chart our way around life. It becomes our geographic tool. It reveals something that is bigger than us. This is the reason why we feel compelled to share our work with others. We know that creating art is just the first step. It's our response to something we have experienced, something we have felt, dreamed about, and desired. The follow up to this is sharing our work with others. An exchange needs to take place.

This is why we do what we do. This publication is not about TL Publishing Group or our editors. It's about platforms. It's about creating a place where we can elevate writers and put them in the spotlight for the readers who are looking for what only artists can provide. In life, it's easy to get lost. Our writers (and their art) are the beacons that guide the lost, bringing them to the shores of revelation. A poem can humble you just as much as it can strengthen you or calm the furious storm within you. In my opinion, this is the process of art. Poetry saves lives, figuratively and literally speaking.

This is also why we celebrate poetry and its important place in society. The release of Volume XIV *Chaos* coincides with the start of National Poetry Month. Needless to say, April is a busy month for the literary community. During the coming weeks, writers, readers, editors, publishers, librarians, teachers and others will spend the next thirty days participating in a wide variety of activities in support of National Poetry Month. April is the best time to rediscover your passion for literature. It's also the best time to introduce the diverse beauty of literature to others.

Keep in mind that this isn't the only reason for celebration though. April 1<sup>st</sup> also marks the start of Camp NaNoWriMo, a popular (and less severe) thirty day novel challenge. In this challenge, writers get to choose not only their word count, but the type of challenge (i.e. novel, poetry, screenplay, etc.). As a frequent participant of NaNoWriMo, I strongly encourage everyone to give this a try. Not only will you have an abundance of resources to help you write, you'll receive large amount of encouragement from other writers in the same position as you.

Furthermore, during this period, we'll have increased blog activity as we celebrate National Poetry Month. We'll also provide our writers with encouragement as they tackle this exciting literary challenge. Follow our blog as we share inspiration, support, updates, and breaking news.

In addition to our blog, we always have quite a few projects ongoing at one time or another. This July, not only will we release the next issue of the *Torrid Literature Journal*, but we will also announce the official inductees for our Hall of Fame for literary excellence. In addition to this exciting news, our next Christian anthology, *The Effects of Grace*, will make its debut. Moreover, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that we now provide editing services for poetry related projects. These are just a few of the projects in our queue. We're merely scratching the surface. We're on a determined path to fulfilling our goals for writers and the culture of literature.

We appreciate all of you for joining us on this journey. Have you found your platform, the driving force behind your actions? Have you found your voice, the cause that compels you to speak up and speak out? During this celebratory period we hope you will find the answers to these questions. We hope you will discover the powerful asset and tool that is poetry. We hope you will stumble upon an abundance of inspiration and other positive vibes.

On a more personal note, I also hope you will find a reason to rejoice over every day you wake up to see. Don't get me wrong, I love April and everything this month represents. However, I believe every day should be celebrated. Each new day gives us another opportunity to take our dreams and goals to next level. It's my desire that you find the inspiration and motivation necessary to get up and do something positive and life changing. Things around you may look a mess but sometimes, if you adjust your perspective, you will discover that there is beauty everywhere, even in chaos. Just sort out the puzzle pieces until they make sense. When we step back and look at the bigger picture, we see what we initially missed.

Therefore, I want to reiterate my point. Find your voice. Find your strength, or more importantly, the source of your strength. When you do, hold on tight, step out on faith and move forward with full understanding that although you may trip or stumble, you won't quit. You won't shortchange yourself and forego the luxury of victory. You deserve the best. So chase the best. See yourself as the best. Be the best.

Be you. Be blessed. Be torrid.

Sincerely,

*Alice Saunders*

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

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# national poetry month

By Alice Saunders

*“Poetry is ordinary language raised to the Nth power. Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words.” – Paul Engle*

**A**lmost everyone involved in the literary community is familiar with National Poetry Month. This month long celebration highlights poetry’s vital place among society. In connection with this overall purpose, this celebration is also aimed at highlighting the accomplishments of past and current poets, while making a way for the poets of the future. This dynamic undertaking is executed by many of various activities that take place during April.

NPM encourages the reading of poems. Many artists will jump on this opportunity because it gives them a chance to host a poetry reading and/or open mic show. This is a wonderful way for poets to share their work with others. If you have a poetry CD, then consider connecting with an online poetry radio show. You can also connect with your local community and attend a poetry reading. If one isn’t available, then I encourage you to start one of your own. Many poetry readings are held at places such as libraries, coffee shops, restaurants, and book stores. If you’re a high school or college student, seek permission to start a poetry reading series on campus. If the demand is appropriate, this may turn out be a regular show that continues long after April has ended.

An equally important aspect of

NPM is that it helps teachers bring poetry into the classroom. There are a lot of resources available online that can assist teachers with exposing poetry to their students. The Academy of American Poets has free lesson plans available on their website. In addition to this, they’ve started a special Dear Poet project where they invite youth to write a letter to one of the Chancellors on their Board. This isn’t the only resource available though. There are many other websites that offer free resources to teachers.

Outside of this, many communities also have local writing workshops. Writing workshops allow poets to come together in small intimate gatherings where they can share their work and receive valuable feedback. If you’re looking to fine tune your skills or a particular poem or project then I encourage you to look into the workshops available in your area. Again, if one isn’t readily accessible, start one of your own.

Lastly, this entire celebration serves as a wonderful means to support poets and poetry. During this month, a great deal of new people will be exposed to poetry and its unique beauty. Therefore, this is the best time to launch a new poetry book or a new blog tour. If you’re not a poet but you still want to show your support, you can host a blog tour and allow other poets to come and share a guest post on your blog. You can also

interview a poet or review one of their books. You can host giveaways, share a teaser post, etc. The possibilities are endless and this is the perfect time to increase support for yourself and/or another artist.

Poetry is universal. It is whatever we need it to be. It heals us, soothes us, and it gives us the outlet we need when experiences become too heavy to bear. We must nurture and care for it in return. During this month, I hope that you become more familiar with the benefits of poetry. If you’re a writer, then I challenge you to increase your skills and explore different poetic forms. I also challenge you to share your love of poetry with others. If you don’t write poetry but you love to read it, then do a writer a favor and share your review online. Writers love reviews. Don’t forget to support libraries and publishers during this period also. Consider purchasing a literary journal or poetry book and donating it to your local library.

These are just a few of the ways people can participate in NPM. You can visit the Academy of American Poet’s website ([www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org)) for more information and tips on how to celebrate National Poetry Month.

Alice Saunders  
Follow me on Twitter:  
[@LyricalTempest](https://twitter.com/LyricalTempest)

# CAMP NANOWRIMO

## ARE YOU READY TO ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE?

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Do you want to write a novel?  
Do you have an old story that needs revision?  
Is there another literary project that you want to create, such as a poetry book or screenplay?  
Do you want to become a writer?

If you've answered yes to any of these questions then you should seriously consider participating in one of Camp NaNoWriMo's writing sessions that occur during April and July. Camp NaNoWriMo is a flexible version of the popular November writing challenge. Writers get to choose their word count goal and the type of literary project they wish to undertake. Hundreds of writers around the world will be participating in this challenge. There will be virtual and local write ins, launch parties and more.

In addition to this, writers will have access to all of the resources available on Camp NaNoWriMo's website including prep talks and cabin buddies.

While the threat of a thirty day deadline may seem frightening, please keep in mind that there's a story inside of you waiting to come to life. Your literary project deserves attention. It deserves a chance to become more than just an idea. Don't let the entire writing process intimidate you. You can do this. Write one word and then another. Break your entire goal down into weekly and daily goals. Set up your reward system ahead of time and create a plan to overcome word droughts.

You can do this. We'll see you at the finish line.

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[WWW.CAMPNANOWRIMO.ORG](http://WWW.CAMPNANOWRIMO.ORG)

# ODE TO LITERATURE

## LOSING TOUCH

By Richard Spilman

There are days I do not think of her,  
weeks when the standard prayer  
for souls of the departed on Sunday  
is the only thought I muster.  
No need to blame age or memory.  
Sooner or later we orphan ourselves—  
the ego gives birth to this sad ruin,  
parentless and childless,  
clutching the present like a man  
lost in dreams who hears familiar  
voices calling but cannot awaken.

**Richard Spilman** has published two collections of poetry: *In the Night Speaking* and *Suspension*. His poetry has appeared in a variety of journals, from *Poetry* and *The Southern Review* to *Gargoyle* and *Main Street Rag*.

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**Dean K Miller** is a freelance writer and member of Northern Colorado Writers. His work has appeared in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Parenthood*, *TROUT magazine*, *Torrid Literature Journal IV*, and other literary magazines. His essays won three separate contests at [www.midlifecollage.com](http://www.midlifecollage.com). His first poetry collection, *Echoes: Reflections Through Poetry and Verse* was released in November 2014 by Hot Chocolate Press. For 26 years, Miller has kept the skies safe as an air traffic controller for the FAA. In his spare time, he enjoys fly fishing and volunteers for the veteran's support group Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing. He lives in Colorado with his wife, Laura and their two dogs, Bear and Snickers.

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## SURVIVOR

By Dean K Miller

A hand breaks the ocean's surface  
Grasping at air-searching for life.  
Connected to what I cannot fathom.  
Scattered in the foam, covered by a swell.  
It disappears and I am alone.

Overhead a gull screams-  
Anguish? Despair? Hunger?  
No morsels to be found.  
Poisoned food killed his flock.  
A hand breaks the ocean's surface.

Two thousand miles up the coast  
The gull's cry cannot be heard.  
My hope is broken, my skin tears as  
I claw over urchin covered rocks-  
Grasping at air-searching for life.

Somehow I have survived.  
Against the odds and  
Against my wishes.  
Something knows I am here.  
Connected to what I cannot fathom.

The searing sun bakes my skin.  
Now cracked and peeling,  
I bleed from salt encrusted wounds.  
My dreams are lost.  
Scattered in the foam, covered by a swell.

Nights and days; I lost track.  
Now in the distance  
A ship's horn or the  
Rumbling of an engine above.  
It disappears-and I am alone.

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**Monica Lynn Moraca** enjoys writing poetry and short stories when time is on her side. In September 2004, she received honorable mention for the “Your Assignment” contest sponsored by Writer’s Digest. Winning this contest inspired Moraca to move forward with her writing. She was no longer afraid to share her feelings with the world.

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**SHE WAS ONCE A CHINA DOLL**

By Monica Lynn Moraca

Perched between two burly men  
her bony fingers clasps a red  
bag full of unwashed fruits.  
Eyes half closed, she drifts away, far  
away from the noise of sewing machines  
and the dingy smell of raw fabric and  
cigarettes.  
Licking her thin lips she begins to envision  
rice paddies, standing barefoot among  
grains of life, straw hats sheltering the delicate skin  
of her family as they waddle in the tepid marsh.  
The touch of her mother against her young  
skin as she whispers the names of all  
the lost sisters and stories of many moons  
that have past.  
But that was long ago, in a far away land.  
Twitching with sadness, the wrinkled flesh  
gently rocks to the rhythm of the moving train  
cradling her to sleep as the oranges fall from her bag.

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**Marchell Dyon Jefferson** is from Chicago Illinois. Her poetry has been accepted and/or published in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*, *Full of Crow Poetry Magazine*, *Rainbow Rose Ezine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *A Little Poetry*, *Medusa's Kitchen*, *The Stray Branch*, and *Strange Horizons*. She has also won Torrid Literature's Romancing the craft award for 2012. She also has been published in Torrid Literature's Christian anthology 2013.

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**ALL DRESSED**

By Marchell Dyon Jefferson

All dressed she waited.  
She was then seven years old.  
With blue ribbons in her neatly braided hair,  
A classic tomboy, her jeans cuffed,  
Her checker blue shirt rolled at the sleeves.

She was ready in a flash  
On the promise of circus feat and cotton candy  
Her daddy promised so she believed.  
She watched for his truck to turn into the dirt road

That led to the farmhouse where she lived.  
She waited till the sun fell behind the corn.  
Till crickets began their brassy serenade.

She was sweet at sixteen her dad had told her so.  
"You and me kid, a night on the town,  
And dinner at the finest restaurant in the city  
Just the two of us," her dad said.

So, eagerly she waited.  
All dressed she felt like a queen in her emerald gown.  
A gown that matched the blue green color of her eyes

She waited quietly on the stairs passed dinnertime.  
She waited for her dad  
Until midnight struck and the spell was broken.  
She waited a forgotten Cinderella, all dressed and nowhere to go.

On her big day, her father promised to give her away.  
A promise he vowed the day she was born.  
She stepped into her white gown.

A gown that could sparkle even in dim candle light  
She waited as she watched for him through painted glass.  
She pulls her veil over her face.  
A veil that seemed to her as light as butterfly wings

She hears the playing of the wedding march.  
She takes her mother's arm.  
For her father she takes one last look,  
Through the rose stained colored windows.

She turns her eyes now looking forward.  
Finally she smiles.  
"All dressed a summer's bride, she said,  
And my groom waits for me."

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**William Doreski** lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and teaches at Keene State College. His most recent book of poetry is *The Suburbs of Atlantis* (2013). He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's *Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals.

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### FINDING A DIAMOND

By William Doreski

Finding a tiny cut diamond  
on the winter beach thrills you.  
Shed by someone's engagement ring,  
surely. How you spotted it  
amid a billion grains of sand

puzzles me. The sea gnashes  
and heaves up ice floes big enough  
to crush a whale. One has cut  
the pilings beneath a cottage,  
leaving the building askew.

We lived there years ago, weeping  
over primal sunsets and drinking  
vodka until our noses bled.  
You don't remember those months  
of storm? Don't remember ships

brimming with containers from China  
smashing aground and spilling cargo?  
Maybe that quarter-carat diamond  
has dazzled me out of memory  
and muddled the many books I've read

without the slightest understanding.  
You clutch your treasure so firmly  
it squeaks like a trapped animal.  
We never got engaged or married,  
never had children or careers.

We only occur to each other  
on winter beaches, in icy rain,  
or in cafes in Riga and Lodz.  
Maybe finding that diamond means  
that at the ends of our lives

we're about to merge like prophet  
and religion. Or maybe it means  
that the mastication of the sea  
has ground the planet fine enough  
for some larger force to swallow.

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**Cara Vitadamo** does not have a degree in literature, writing or journalism. However, she loves everything about poetry. She reads poetry, studies poetry, and writes poetry. Cara's poetry has been published in journals and magazines such as *Torrid Literature Journal*, *All Things Girl*, and *Café Del Sol* under her maiden name Cara Frame and married name Cara Vitadamo. Cara is also a mother, registered nurse and lover of animals. When she has time she also enjoys cooking and being in the great outdoors.

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### A KENTUCKY SUNSET

By Cara Vitadamo

The sun melts into the horizon.  
Pooling beneath the trees into an orange puddle  
Extinguishing the fire of the day.  
Fireflies come out to glide on the soft breeze.  
And crickets sing to an audience of stars.  
So peaceful is this moment  
Sitting on the porch.

### A SPIRITUAL WALK

By Cara Vitadamo

I walk on a path that flows around trees  
All quiet and calm in this dense wood  
Except for a slight breeze  
I come to a pond at the bottom of a hill  
Where the path ends  
And look my fill

This is where I come to talk to Him  
Where the cat tails point to the sky  
And the water lilies float and skim

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**Nikki Johnson** is a 21-year-old college senior who loves words in any form. All of Johnson's poems are written from her heart, and she hopes readers enjoy reading them as much as she loves writing them. She lives in Virginia.

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**SERENITY**

By Nikki Johnson

I wish that I could write sonnets  
about the color of your eyes –  
inviting like a warm cup of cocoa  
on a winter's day,  
after spending hours playing in the snow,  
giggling like children as we catch snowflakes on our tongues.  
I wish that I could write soliloquies  
about how your love has wrecked me,  
breaking me down  
only to build me back up into this born-again being,  
hell-bent on worshiping you like the icon that you are.  
But all I can think of to do  
is tell you how you are  
the best thing that has tripped  
and stumbled into my life,  
and the feeling of your hand in mine,  
as we watch the Food Network,  
is so grand.

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**James Sutton** is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop; studied with John Berryman, George Starbuck & Marvin Bell; Has published 14 books of poetry, mostly sonnets; worked as organizer, lobbyist & senior policy analyst for the Iowa teachers union. He lives in Des Moines with his true wife & cat.

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**SHAKESPEARE BEQUEATHING HIS SECOND-BEST BED**

By James Sutton

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

Shakespeare, Sonnet CXXIX

When ruin bids me ask why I repeat  
errors that I have pledged to never do;  
when hard obliged to probe why I defeat  
feelings that I once promised to renew;  
when I consider why I shun this love  
that I have sworn to nevermore forsake;  
when marriage of true minds, decreed Above,  
abuses loving hearts with morbid ache;  
when I am moved to pierce this shroud of hate  
to learn why love has raveled into grief,  
I soon discover why men alienate  
and, leaving doubt behind, find my relief:  
    When lovers have no hope in what they choose,  
    they fear to have that which they fear to lose.

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**Chrystal Berche** writes. Hard times, troubled times, the lives of her characters are never easy, but then what life is? The story is in the struggled, the journey, the triumphs and the falls. She writes about artists, musicians, loners, drifters, dreamers, hippies, bikers, truckers, hunters and all the other things she knows and loves. Sometimes she writes urban romance and sometimes its aliens crash landing near a roadside bar. When she isn't writing she's taking pictures, or curled up with a good book and a kitty on her lap.

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SPOKES IN THE WHEEL

By Chrystal Berche

I stare at you across the yard, the way your flannel shirt flutters in the breeze  
The way the sunlight in your hair brings out all the highlights  
Throwing a halo of orange and red around your head  
Once I could have spent hours watching you with longing  
So when the apathy crept in I don't know  
You scatter grain to the chickens while humming *Forever Young*  
But every line is a lie 'cause the joy in our hearts has died  
And there's never been a ladder to the stars that we could follow  
And I know your secret, even if you won't admit  
Watched you in your pretty little baby doll top and pearls  
Slinking out the back door of Bobby McGee's farmhouse  
Your hair all a mess and your top all crooked  
Watched you go up on tip toes to kiss him, your heels digging divots in the dirt  
Like the divots my fists left in his face when I saw him at the bar  
And lied 'bout why it was I was itchin' ta hit him  
Waited for some reaction in your lyin' eyes when I came home from jail in the morning  
But you just tisked and shoved a plate of hot grits and sausages beneath my nose  
Creamy with cheese and spotted with caramelized onions just the way I like them  
Playin' the part of the good wife you ain't been in I don't know how long  
Our days churning along like wagon wheels over grass, crushing everything  
Our past, our memories, our trust like broken spokes  
And I wonder if this will be the day when I throw my hands in the air  
When I scream the truth across the dusty, sunburned yard  
And tell ya that I'm givin' up, that I'm leavin' and taking the dog and my old pickup  
And ta hell with the rest, ya can keep it or you can leave it  
Or you can move it on down ta Bobby's 'til he screws around with some blond at the bar  
'N you're the one left packin' your bags and wipin' 'way the tears you don't want the world to see  
Then maybe you'll know how it feels to be cast aside, your pride in tatters  
Told you were never meant ta be anythin' more than a passing phase  
Left shattered on the bathroom floor, as insignificant as those old spokes  
Left bent and battered as they fell from our wheels

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**Tyler Pufpaff** is an aspiring artist, student, and athlete. He has never been published. Pufpaff grew up in Texas and now continues his adventures in South Carolina.

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**PAINTING IN THE GARAGE**

By Tyler Pufpaff

Swallowed in paint, you are  
By a drop of a blue whale,  
That brushes with tail, west  
As you had set sail

With almost still lines,  
You might not have been caught,  
By eyes that weren't looking  
From one who had fought

Against endless depths of primers wet thick  
An artist appalled, that made one swim quick  
Against new strokes that only fate could have picked,  
To drag you out struggling,  
But it was then that you weren't depict.

II

Swallowed in paint, I am  
Submerged under grimacing tides of black,  
The tragedy continues beneath His hazy shack,  
While I decide to sink and slowly look back

At directions unknown and lights too few,  
Exasperated with efforts that turned askew,  
I was always stuck at this point-of-view,  
So when you find me, removed,  
It'll be too late  
I'm overdue.

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**Sterling Jacobs** received his Associates degree in art at Murray State College in 1999 then his Bachelors degree at East Central University in 2007. Most of his work centers on painting and ceramics ranging from pottery to ceramic figures to fine art animation mixed with poetry in a graphic novel format. Sterling Jacobs believes that poetry should be accessible to people who are down and out and can feel that they aren't alone in their struggles. Essentially, poetry, he believes, should not just be fodder for the hoi polloi but for the tamed and tortured as well. It is his hope that his poetry might find a place amongst' those who feel as he has just described. a YouTube channel: *Bottlehead Beatnick* that displays art and spoken work poetry.

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**POEM**

By Jacobs Sterling

I am a see-saw poem  
written out in rhyming verse  
edited, crafted, well thought out  
spoken loud then rehearsed!

My conscience speaks of ideas  
brought forth from words of tongue  
unleashed with awesome energy  
in a sonnet being sung!

I am an upstart emotion  
in ink confined to form  
I etch the artistry of a flower  
and give lighting to a storm.

I celebrate the marvels  
of the mysterious and unknown  
I tell about the struggles  
of the child-to-man now grown.

I am the rustic righteousness  
of belief held pure and true  
I am the soul within itself  
I am life...I am breath...I am you!

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**James Croal Jackson** hails from Clinton, Ohio. He is a 2011 graduate of Baldwin Wallace University. He currently resides in Los Angeles, California. You can find more of his work at [jimjakk.com](http://jimjakk.com).

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**MINESHAFT CLOUDS & FOGGY MORNINGS**

By James Croal Jackson

Like before, when mirrors were our only reflections,  
Our pasts - behind  
Doors rusted, opened only to  
Reveal slow decisions -  
Lovers like mud  
In shallow potholes.  
My last memory of you is  
On a bridge - slick from ice,  
These worn tires spun out from  
Beneath a weakened, disparate grasp.  
You did not want to leave,  
I could not stand to listen. . .

**BEDBUG**

By James Croal Jackson

crave only what i have,  
  
the motion that skulks between  
the seams of the  
carpet and the wall.  
we will encase our belongings in bags:  
sealed-up, plastic, forgotten.  
  
i am vacant &  
paranoid, you become my literature  
  
weave rashes along my skin --  
  
swollen artifacts of dreams  
i cannot remember  
  
still you wait in my bed  
  
like i can see you for who you really are

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**David Rutter** is the alter ego of Max Mundan. Or is it the other way around? David Rutter is far from certain. He has been published in a slew of magazines and literary journals, including *The Metric*, *Vagabonds*, *Dressing Room Poetry Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Haggard and Halloo*, *Subliminal Interiors* and the *Los Angeles Times*, to name but a few. He operates popular websites at *maxmundan.com* and *maxmundan.tumblr.com*. Thought Catalog just published his first poetry collection, *Junkies Die Alone*.

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### YOU LOOK LIKE POETRY TO ME

By David Rutter

Your flaming mane Is the Phoenix ascending; Rising from the ashes To bathe me in The burning mystery of life. You may be my paragon and You look like poetry to me.

Your knowing eyes Are the silent sinew Of the endless ocean, Ebbing and flowing in time To the melody of our love. You can be my quiet courage and You look like poetry to me.

Your volcanic lips are A dragon breathing fire; Sinking it's claws, Gently but definitively Into my yearning heart. You might be my wild wyvern and You look like poetry to me.

Your velvet love Is the crisp and bracing wind Lifting me up and Laying me tenderly down again, Like a leaf floating to the forest floor. You'll always be my humble hurricane and You look like poetry to me.

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**Gloria Keeley** is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a BA and MA in Creative Writing. Keeley currently volunteers at the grammar school she attended, teaching poetry writing to two third grade classes. Her poems have appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Midnight Circus*, *Straylight*, *Stillwater*, *Owen Wister Review*, *New Plains Review* and others.

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**FOR MY GRANDMOTHER (1890 - 1974)**

By Gloria Keeley

I have arrived too late  
the curtains are drawn; the walls have been painted  
I still feel you walking the lengths of the rooms  
a step here to anchor there  
your bedroom, solemn as a confessional  
stands lonely, emptied of its dreams

your front room, a museum  
all of us walking soft on your memory  
your hardwood floors creaking  
like old bones beneath my feet

the windows in your apartment are  
accepting the rain as if  
you are still contained inside

the breakfast table is set for one  
you are sitting there  
as always  
eating your morning meal  
in a bowl of sky

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**Jim Landwehr's** poetry collection, *Written Life*, was released by eLectio Publishing on March 31st, 2015. His first book, *Dirty Shirt: A Boundary Waters Memoir* was published by eLectio in June of 2014. He has nonfiction stories published in *Main Street Rag's Creatures of Habitat Anthology*, *Neutrons/Protons*, *Boundary Waters Journal*, *Forge Journal*, and others. His poetry has been featured in, *Off the Coast Poetry Journal*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Echoes Poetry Journal*, *Wisconsin People and Ideas Magazine*, *Verse Wisconsin*, and many others. Jim lives and works in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

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**WRITTEN LIFE**

By Jim Landwehr

If I am a brother to a brother  
a father of a father  
a son of a son  
a friend to a friend  
Then my burden is heavy

If my days are numbered  
my sunrises counted  
my laughter measured  
my pain impending  
Then my focus is vital

If my children are my legacy  
my time invaluable  
my effort critical  
my love essential  
Then my purpose becomes clear

The dreams of my dream  
become the realities of my reality  
The tomorrows of today  
become the yesterdays of now  
And the resonant phrase becomes

*Live a story worth hearing*

**EX-G.I. COLLEGE STUDENT, MEXICO CITY**

By Robert Joe Stout

In class a one of many: lawyers' sons  
and would be teachers, bankers' daughters,  
merchants' wives, some of them good students,  
others there for adolescent fun.  
But once off campus, navigating  
Tacubaya's cluttered streets, he felt  
a sudden surge of self and soul  
as he absorbed the noises, smells,  
the ways that people looked at him,  
shadows that leaped and swirled  
from place to place. He wasn't who  
he'd been, small-town precocious  
adolescent, insubordinate G.I.,  
but something else, a being merged  
into a throbbing universe of things  
both visible and not, a spirit/person/atmosphere  
in which he was a wisp of smoke  
blown by determining winds.

**WRITER'S VISITOR**

By Robert Joe Stout

As he crouched panting to take off running shoes  
a dog appeared, some kind of setter mix  
with luminescent eyes that seemed to say  
*I want some food*. He laughed and watched  
the dog sprawl full-length on the porch  
as he sat down, began to type,  
its eyes reflected on the monitor  
becoming glistening pools of shifting colors,  
forms, like dreams one wants to grasp  
but vanish leaving only traces, tastes  
of something rich, intangible. Thoughts  
a-swirl as he got up, zombie-like,  
he filled a plate with meat and bread  
and sitting on the porch again  
shared what he'd fixed with the strange dog,  
not knowing how or why the two of them  
were doing what they did.

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**Scott Honeycutt** is an assistant professor of English at East Tennessee State University. When he is not teaching, Scott enjoys walking the hills of Appalachia and spending time with his family.

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**FLINT RIVER, GEORGIA**

By Scott Honeycutt

One June morning near the close  
of the twentieth century, two friends  
found a three hundred-year-old  
hand-dug canoe in a muddy bank by  
the Flint River. No one knows  
how many times it had worked its  
leverage down the Flint's glossy  
mill before becoming marooned and  
forgotten between the water's edge  
and the sand heaps. The Flint keeps  
its secret passages and gives only  
those artifacts back to the living  
that the river has used up.  
It's as if the shoals had posed some  
improbable question years before  
and now were compelled to deliver an  
answer, spoken only in the mute canoe's  
silent dialogue between the unquenched  
river and the untidy Georgia hills.

**SNOW ON THE CEMETERY**

By Scott Honeycutt

Even three days after the storm,  
the snow covered cemetery grounds  
still looked like a silken dining cloth  
pulled tightly across a table set with  
flowered decorations for the  
guests.  
Such a lonesome dining hall lured  
only the ragged-tailed fox across its  
parlor. It, though, refused to stay  
and wonder at the utter blankness  
of the scene, snow amid the flowers  
the abolition of being.

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**Richard Spilman** has published two collections of poetry: *In the Night Speaking* and *Suspension*. His poetry has appeared in a variety of journals, from *Poetry* and *The Southern Review* to *Gargoyle* and *Main Street Rag*.

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**PRAYING FOR RAIN**

By Richard Spilman

My father comes to me in dreams.  
He talks about fighting in the Pacific,  
about the letters he wrote my mother  
with portraits drawn from memory.  
He tells me how hard it was to give up  
painting and settle for insurance  
and how he cried when my sister  
died stillborn; he apologizes for  
the weight of dreams I couldn't carry  
and tells me how proud he is of me.

In reality, of course, he does none  
of those things. It's all a lie.

The truth is his memory sits  
at the bottom of the well where  
love finally settles in the drought  
of old age, and at night I can hear  
water whispering to stones  
so far down they can't be seen  
even with a flashlight, too far  
for a bucket to go, which leaves me  
listening to the invisible, its scent  
sharp and clear, as I pray for rain.

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**M. E. Lerman** is an editor by day, writer by night, and amateur musician by turns. He has been published in *Poetica Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *Foliate Oak Literary Journal*, and his work has been featured in the *British Fantasy Society Journal*. He lives in Rockville, MD, with his partner, Donovan, and their cat, Sa\$ha.

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**SELENE**

By M. E. Lerman

You were a pale moon in your nightgown,  
Indigo clouds caressing your pale silver like Salome's veils,  
Every hair on my body stood in worship.

You haloed the darkness, blurred the edges of the night,  
Spoke with the moisture of the changing seasons, watercolor petals,  
And I saw all gods in you.

Since then the saplings girded themselves in gnarled armor,  
And the ruffled owls have completed their study, but I still come at night  
To howl at the moon.

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**Carolyn D. Elias** is a writer, currently living in Hancock, MN with her husband and two cats. She writes poetry and short stories. Carolyn's most recent publication, "Mother", was in *Sassafras Magazine*. Carolyn also works as a freelance editor, the most recent book she edited was *Snowblood's Journal* by Arbutus Press.

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### TONGUE TIED

By Carolyn D. Elias

In our disquiet silence  
my tongue roams my mouth  
tasting the memory of bitter consonants  
and the cool libations of vowels  
which sprang from your lips with ease.  
The overtone of anticipation clatters.  
I choke.  
My vocal cords, a taut knotted noose,  
hanging in the wind  
I am about to lose my head  
when I remember no final words  
need pass between us  
you know  
who I am.

### PHYSICS OF LOVE

By Carolyn D. Elias

My atoms loved you with reckless abandon  
As a flame burning through the atmosphere  
Descending at a million miles per second (per second)  
Until I swallowed our world in a fiery kiss  
Burning you alive.

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**Hannah Dellabella** works as an assistant editor in New York City. She is a recent Carnegie Mellon grad, where she studied creative writing and professional writing. She is a native of Bayonne, New Jersey, and is very aware of her Jersey accent. Her work has previously appeared in *Rougarou*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Albatross*, and other publications. She is a compulsive imaginer.

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### I COULD NEVER BE AN ASTRONOMER

By Hannah Dellabella

we, so presumptuously small	the universe stretching
minds too inward	like dappled cosmic putty
to imagine anything else	pulling the stars apart
outside the orbital lure	whatever we're doing
past solar system ellipses	means less than nothing
our tiny sun	I can't justify
our devourer	waking up
stardust	that we can believe
is not	there is no life
as poetic	outside of Earth
as we	is so fucking
pretend	human
we live among dark	we will die like stars
matter and energy	atoms dispersing into infinity
we still don't understand	bodies turning blue and small
as if we could ever quantify	bits of us building something new

### IMPORTANT FEDERAL STUDENT LOAN INFORMATION

By Hannah Dellabella

there are prices on our heads, not like criminals  
but cattle, paying for that quality  
grade. four years we grazed greener pastures,  
facing away from the slaughterhouse.  
now the metal prods are at our backs —  
we walk the stage, get shoved  
down the stairs. we're bent-backed borrowers,  
too much stress in our hands to shield our eyes.  
full-promised and empty-banked, we're trapped  
in the government's pockets. we're throwing  
dollars when all we have are unhatched eggs.  
some will bear chickens; some will break.

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**Sandra Rokoff-Lizut**, retired educator and children's book author (published by Macmillan, Holt Reinhart & Winston, and Hallmark Inc.), is currently both a print-maker and poet. She is a member of Oregon Poetry Association, Mary's Peak Poets, Poetic License, Gertrude's, and a weekly writing salon. Rokoff-Lizut volunteers, by teaching poetry to middle-schoolers, at the Boys and Girls Club in Corvallis, Oregon. She also studies poetry Oregon State University. Previous publications include *Illya's Honey*, *The Bicycle Review*, *Wilderness House Review*, *The Tower Journal*, *The Penwood Review*, and *Wild Goose Poetry Review*.

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**DYING TEN-LINED JUNE BEETLE**

By Sandra Rokoff-Lizut

Wrapped in striped  
    white wings  
        inner images paling  
When I look close enough  
    at the bug at its leg  
        that begs to move freely  
as if nothing  
    has happened yet  
        is happening nonetheless

Soon most everything will darken

With wings like that  
    I could fly to the highest site  
        enter heaven  
as beginnings  
    and endings  
        whirl me to oblivion.

Wings like that could  
    wrap round the simplest word  
        the most straightforward promise

And keep it let it keep me

Oh where is the wheel  
    on which  
        such things were spun  
How can a dying beetle  
    so basic a being  
        be stuffed with such force  
Cask full of undefined spirit  
    crust remembering  
        the cooing of a dove

Empty nest of ending

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**Nikita Hernandez** grew up a “professional gypsy” as her mom likes to say. She lived in 12 different houses, 6 states, and 2 countries throughout her military brat childhood. To date, she still experiences the itch to move after a couple years. Nikita spends her time daydreaming, drinking tea, and mourning the onset of spring/summer. Her poems have most recently appeared in: *here/there: poetry*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, and *The Gambler Mag*, among others. She has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

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### HERMANA

By Nikita Hernandez

I sat across a stoic girl with fading blue hair.  
Blue was my color,  
hers purple.  
The stark white hospital walls  
whispered insanity.  
The silence made our throats itch.  
The knives in her green eyes  
spoke for her—  
*I'm not coming home,*  
*I don't feel safe.*

Baggy gray sweats hung from her figure  
like skin pulling away from bone.  
The letters that landed  
her here cried wolf—  
her arms were unblemished.  
Mine were marred from moods.  
*You don't want to do this,*  
I murmured as I rolled up my sleeves.

Our father mapped the way  
to her hospital room.  
She cracked under the crossfire  
of custody battles.  
I pushed down my sleeves  
and left her  
to her white and gray world.  
She abandoned the blue sky outside,  
captured and caged it in her hair.  
She coveted my color.

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**Amy S. Pacini** is a freelance writer and poet who resides in Land O Lakes, Florida. She is a Western New York native who decided to trade in the northern snow for the southern sunshine. Amy has always had a passion for writing and a love of language ever since she can remember and enjoys creatively expressing her thoughts, ideas, and emotions on the written page. Her work has been widely published in online ezines, literary journals, and anthologies including *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Lost Tower Publications*, *Kind Of A Hurricane Press*, *Page & Spine*, *Cyclamens And Swords*, *Making Waves Poetry Anthology*, *All Things Girl*, *Magnapoets*, *Hope Whispers*, and *Hanging Moss Journal*. She is a two-time 1st place winner of the Annual Romancing The Craft of Poetry & Fiction Contest for 2013-2014 sponsored by the TL Publishing Group, and a 2015 Pushcart Prize nominee. Amy writes poetry, short stories, personal essays, and motivational quotes. She is the owner and operator of A.S.P. INK. For more information, please visit her [website www.amyspacini.com](http://www.amyspacini.com).

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### ENIGMA'S EYE

By Amy S. Pacini

Scrambled writing on upside down newspaper words  
Wrestling with crumpled confusion and festering frustration  
Composing the same hackneyed worn out clichéd content.

Don't know what this imaginative ink will conjure up next  
Need to throw off the cozy warm blankets of covered comfort  
Living in a complacently controlled cocoon of lethargic limbo,  
Emotional upheaval and delusional doom.

What's so reprehensibly repugnant with me?  
People would rather repellently run past than really look me in enigma's eye  
Gauchely living in melancholy mildness and shy silence.

I am artistically armed with the profound power of willful words  
Against the superficial snobs, popular pretties, and conceited counterfeits  
Narrow-minded ninnies, ignorant ill willers, and evil egotists  
Aggressive agitators, critical connivers, and humiliating hurtfuls.

I may not extrovertedly express every esoteric emotion in my waking head  
But that doesn't mean I feel virtually nothing inside  
Or don't have anything significant to say.

Wandering words are profusely percolating in my mosaic mind  
Ready and waiting for the right time, place, and opportunity  
To valiantly find their valuable voice  
And profoundly speak from a compassionately sensitive open heart.

I desire to follow my Christian calling and obediently deliver  
The Messiah's message of divine faith, truth and love  
To the sick, poor, hungry, lost, hopeless, hurting, and unloved.

Could that someone be you?  
Let me offer my warm words of hope and encouragement  
I will eagerly extend the altruistic arm of friendship and kindness  
And a humble heart full of unconditional love and acceptance.

Why not wait awhile to attentively acknowledge  
Instead of blindly brushing me off so quickly  
For there's more than meets the enigma's eye.

If only you will examine me just a little bit closer  
By taking a curious chance and gracefully glimpse beneath  
The silent sheath of shyness where you will amazingly discover  
The stirring soul of a veiled visionary reflectively revealed within me.

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**Jacob Erin-Cilberto**, originally from Bronx, New York, 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. *Intersection Blues* his lucky 13th book of poetry is available through Water Forest Press, Stormville, New York. His previous two books an *Abstract Waltz* and *Used Lanterns* are also available through Water Forest Press. His books are also available on *Barnes and Noble.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.

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**JUST AN AWKWARD POET'S DREAM**

By Jacob Erin-Cilberto

some have a green thumb for gardening  
others a tin ear for music  
or a Romeo void  
when it comes to love  
and some have a magic brush  
to paint interventions of vibrant moods

but when i get near you  
and try to write the words of expression  
i etch a deep impression  
of shadowed intent  
but the poetry stutters

like a backward Shakespeare wannabe  
posing plays within plays  
to catch the conscience of the girl---  
and still i end up  
with nothing more than another  
lonely soliloquy.

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**Smita Sriwastav** is an M.B.B.S. doctor with a passion for poetry and literature. She has always expressed her innermost thoughts and sentiments through the medium of poetry. A feeling of inner tranquility and bliss captures her soul whenever she pens her verse. Nature has been the most inspiring force in molding the shape of her writings. She has published two books *Efforts* and *Pearls of Poetry* and has published poems in journals like the *Rusty Nail* ("Rule of Survival", "Conversations") and *Contemporary Literary Review India* ("spring lingers"), *four and twenty*, *Paradise Review*, *Literary Juice*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Torrid Literature*, and many more and one of her poems "Unsaid Goodbyes" was published in an anthology called *Inspired by Tagore* published by Sampad and British Council. One of her poems was published in the anthology *A Golden Time for Poetry*, and she has had her poetry published in the anthologies, *Something Brewing*, *Tic Toc* and *Storm Cycle 2013* by the Kind of a Hurricane Press. Some of her poems are also slated to be published in another anthology *Just a Touch of Saccharine* by the same publisher. She has written poetry all her life and aims to do so forever. Her poetry can be read online on her blog, *Rain-Chimes~My Poetry Blog*, <http://drsmitasriwas280.wordpress.com>.

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### BAKING A CAPPUCCINO...

By Smita Sriwastav

Self raising flour  
of myriad contemplations,  
are sifted through  
sieve of self critique  
to blend with bittersweet mixture  
of coffee granules and sugar  
garnered from moods  
of a bipolar life,  
Softened butter of emotions  
hardened into indifference  
is spooned into measured oil of  
generosity and decency  
baking powder and soda are sprinkled  
into batter of versatile desires  
to make dense realities  
fluffy as Morpheus' fantasies,  
While a fuming oven  
of fixated ideologies sighs  
in overheated syllables  
as it impatiently awaits arrival  
of fickle fluidities to  
convert into a sweet decadence  
to savor on palate of introspections,  
mouthing expletives  
and appreciations in tandem.  
As aroma of a baking cappuccino  
fills nostrils of bland thoughts,  
icing of coffee cream tasting  
like mixed sentiments,  
is prepared by an industrious spoon  
to layer over bronzed realms  
of freshly chiseled interpretations.  
Dark chocolate of mystique  
is grated over dithering indecisions  
to cover with an innovative mix  
of assorted dry fruits,  
on the stoic face of baked wishes  
and stands within an atmosphere  
of pregnant anticipations  
awaiting the spoon of  
adventurous, connoisseur gluttony.

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**Suzane Bricker** is an Associate Adjunct Online Professor at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), and took a leave of absence for the length of a semester, to teach onground courses in Advanced Business Communication at the University of Southern California (USC). In addition, she presented at the "2012 Global Education Conference," and the corresponding text was submitted to former Education Under-Secretary, Martha Kanter. Bricker also peer edits for the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, (JBTC), and is a paid editor for Stanford University's Hume Writing Center. She taught at California State University, Fullerton, and reported for *The Los Angeles Business Journal*, and for *Government Technology* e-zine. Bricker earned her bachelor's degree at Antioch University, and master's degree from California State University, Northridge. Several poems are in publication, with the latest due for release in on April 1<sup>st</sup>.

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**MY FATHER**

By Suzane Bricker

Beneath the mantle of hard-edged reality  
Lies the cloak of innocence  
Once unmasked  
Once unleashed  
Once allowed to be free.  
To you I owe this time in my life  
When eyes so young were sheltered  
From the cold  
And could not recognize  
More than  
The happiness  
I felt  
Inside.  
The comfort of living a privileged existence  
Where books would beckon me into a world full of dreams  
Where time was not measured  
Nor much was demanded of me.  
Other than to know that a child had a right  
To listen for the sound of her father's car  
So that life would begin again.  
So that loneliness would disappear  
And so that love would reappear  
Each day.

# FICTION

## SIX DAYS IN THE LIFE OF GREY

By Casmir Hodge

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**Casmir Hodge** is a senior at Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology. Hodge is majoring in Literary Arts at high-school.

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Monday

I remember the night Ida jumped from our window. She was schizophrenic or that's what the quacks told her. She said she was hearing the voices of her "other selves," the more conscious parts. The real parts. I didn't understand, and I sure as hell didn't bother to ask. In mental institutions like here at Crossroads, it's better not to. Besides it's not like I was talking to anybody those first three weeks. I just laid in bed and slept until sleep was a thing my body dreaded doing and refused to shut down like it was supposed to.

The night Ida jumped, she tongued her sleeping pills. I watched from my bed when she crushed them on the linoleum floor and blew the dust under the nightstand.

"We know you're awake. You're Grey right? Saw it on that chart they bring when they come change your bandages," she said, creeping up to the side of my bed and crouching so she was right in my face. I didn't answer, just stared at the freckles spattered across her nose. She looked washed out. Like someone sucked the color out of her and left a pasty, bottle blonde shell of a girl with one too many consciences in her head. "You wanna know something? We're gonna fly outta here tonight. Right outta that window. Don't matter the lock's painted over. We got ways of gettin' out." She whispered, then giggled like she'd told the biggest secret she'd ever heard. She got up and twirled around, her peach coloured nightgown fanning out before she flopped down on her bed where the moonlight came in through the window. It made her gown see through and I saw more of her than I cared to. She wasn't my type of girl. Didn't have that heat I craved.

"Just wait 'n see. We're gonna fly tonight." She whispered and had this smile I'll never forget. It was the first time I'd seen someone look so ... happy. She was quiet after that, sprawled across the bed. Didn't even look like that scrawny chest of hers was moving up and down like it was supposed to.

After awhile I closed my eyes and counted sheep even though it was pointless. I couldn't sleep and sleeping pills interfered with the pain meds I had to take, so I couldn't have them. Around 983 sheep, I heard Ida moving. Her bed creaking, her bare feet sticking to the floor when she got up. Three steps, silence. It was quiet for too long, and I opened my eyes again. Ida stood in front of the nightstand, staring at the window for the longest time. At first I thought she was sleepwalking or something, but her gaze was too focused and she kept clenching and unclenching her hands. Psyching herself up like a boxer before a match, a bird before first flight.

Suddenly, she grabbed the clock sitting in front of her and smashed the window. The sudden noise made me cringe, the burns under the bandages on my arms stung from the sudden movement. She broke the wooden bar between the panes of glass and climbed up on the nightstand to knock out the top. I could already hear the night nurse's shoes tapping along the hall on the way down to our room.

"We're gonna be free Grey! Watch us! Watch us fly!" Ida said, her voice pitching to an ecstatic high. She stepped out onto the window ledge littered with glittering glass. I struggled to sit up on my own, swung my legs over the edge as Ida threw her arms out. The night nurse's key scratched in the door's lock.

"What the hell is going on here?!" she asked, freezing in the doorway when she caught sight of Ida. She snatched her radio from her elastic waistband. "Code Blue! Room 313!" She rushed past me, crushing glass under her shoes and leaning over nightstand and jagged window edges in an attempt to grab Ida. I don't think she even touched Ida's nightgown.

Tuesday

Daily therapy became a requirement. Group therapy. I was put into a group of six other patients, people I'd only seen once three weeks ago when I'd been wheeled into this place. Eight chairs were set up at a round table, six already claimed. I chose the seat between a twitchy looking boy and a girl with patchy red hair. They seemed the least likely to try talking to me.

"Good morning everyone. I hope you all slept well."

I turned in my metal folding chair to get a look at the man who'd spoken. Tall, brown hair, brown eyes, straight nose, small mouth, a common face. Easily forgettable is what I thought.

"We have a new addition to our group. So we'll start today's session with introductions," he said, sat in the last empty chair across the table, and fixed those plain brown eyes on me. "I'll go first, I'm the group monitor, David Vanbrugh. Just call me Mr. David, OK? Penny, how about you go next. Name and why you're here, then popcorn to someone else."

The girl next to me shifted uncomfortably in her cold metal chair.

"I'm Penelope Dirges ... I'm here for... Because I've got split personality disorder," she said, refusing to raise her gaze higher than the table top. "Greg."

Penny, Gregory, Jade, Luke, Katrina, and Natalie were the names I learned along with the problems that got them stuck here at Crossroads. Things I didn't want to know and wouldn't remember after this anyway.

"How about you introduce yourself?" Mr. David said, smiling at me. I just glared. He was too happy. Much too happy after what had happened to Ida last night. That smile was plain and happy and oblivious, and I hated it. I felt a familiar tension in my stomach, a throbbing in the back of my head, a burn in my chest. I knew the feeling all too well, like a prelude to my madness.

"Hey Davy, it don't look like the new kid's gonna talk," Gregory said, drumming his fingers on the wooden table top in a rhythm that gave an edge to the throb in my head. Mr. David signed, that damn smile fading away before he placed his hand over Gregory's to stop the tapping.

"Well then, I'll introduce you. Everyone this is Grey Murrow. Grey is here because of something called pyromania," he explained, putting my business out there for everyone to hear. I put a hand over my arm and gave it a little squeeze, hoping that a little pain would clear my head of the throbbing that clouded my mind. Doing that caused a lot more than a little pain, and it didn't do much mind clearing either.

"Hey Grey. You're androgynous, that's what is called ain't it? That's why you look like a dude and a chick all at the same time, right?" Luke asked, leaning forward on the table all blonde, blue eyes and twitchy in the seat beside me. "So which one are ya?"

"Luke leave 'em alone. Gender doesn't matter," Jade said, grabbing Luke's belt and yanking him back into his seat.

"Yeah it does! I wanna know if it's a dude it not!" Luke said, thumping his fist on the table.

"Just shut up about it Luke," Katrina said and rolled her eyes.

"He's got a right to be curious Kat. Wouldn't it suck if Luke were to hit on Grey and it turned out to be a guy?" Natalie asked and laughed when Luke's face turned red.

"Alright, alright. That's enough. Grey will never open up to us if you guys keep that up," Mr. David said, attempting to reign in the group and failing. I lowered my head and crossed my arms over my stomach. I felt wound up like a spring, like I could break at any moment and everyone around me was too preoccupied with what I had in my pants to notice.

### Wednesday

Today was a memorial service for Ida out on the rear lawn. The whole third floor picked white roses from the gardens the residents had planted last spring. Everyone except me. I found a rose that reminded me of Ida. It looked washed out, like someone had sucked most of the red out and left it this sad peach colour. The service was just long enough for people to come in and put a new window into my room without causing a fuss with the others on the floor. I could see them putting in new glass from where I stood in a semicircle with everyone else, only pretending to listen to what the director and staff were saying. They were saying things anyone else would say.

"She was such a sweet girl."

"I truly believed she was getting better."

"She must have been more troubled than she ever let on."

Bunch of half-assed comments from people who hadn't even met her. A few people from my floor stepped up to say a few things, even the night nurse that tried saving her.

"If only I'd been there a second sooner, maybe I could have prevented her from jumping. I just feel so—" she said before she burst into tears and had to be led away. I debated staying where I was, watching the window repairmen fix my window when I really wish they'd just left it broken. It was a testament that Ida had actually been there since the orderlies had already cleared out her things and scrubbed away every trace of her ever existing in room 313. I felt my head throbbing again, cracking under some imaginary pressure I was probably putting on myself. I stepped forward with my rose in hand, twirling it between my fingers. The weight of everyone's stares made me want to throw up everything I'd eaten for breakfast, but I swallowed back the slimy film coating my mouth and pressed my thumb against a torn before I spoke.

"The night Ida jumped... She told me the same thing over and over again ..." I said and had to wonder if that was really my voice. It was hollow and thin from disuse. Not at all the way I remembered it. "She said, 'We're gonna fly and to just wait and see.' She kept saying that, and then she was quiet for a long time before she ... before she smashed the window and got out on that ledge."

I looked up at the ledge Ida stood on just two days ago and tightened my grip on the rose stem. "She looked so happy when she told me that, and then before she jumped she called my name and ..." My voice cracked, and I had to tear my gaze away from the ledge and look towards the ground. "I just ... didn't know what to do, I guess." I shifted on my feet, the throbbing in my head beginning a full on migraine. I moved back into the semicircle and shot a glance at the ledge again, letting my gaze fall just like Ida to the concrete walkway below. From where I was standing, past a lone strip of neon yellow police tape, I could see rust coloured stains on the concrete that hadn't been power-washed away.

### Thursday

I spent the day in the infirmary. My migraine from yesterday hadn't subsided, and a fever started around midnight. The tightness in my stomach prevented me from keeping anything down, even water I threw up into the bucket beside the bed. My hair was plastered to my forehead and the back of my neck, and the sheets were drenched in sweat. It wasn't long before I stopped sweating and had an IV stuck in my leg to keep me hydrated. My arms were still recovering from the burns, and the sweating wasn't helping the bandages stay in place, so for awhile the attending nurse left them unwrapped. My skin was pink as a baby's and softer too, but it was still sensitive and hurt like hell if I accidentally brushed it against something too rough. Throughout the day my temperature climbed north of 100°, and in a way, I began to feel as though that fever wasn't such a bad thing. I had wanted to set something on fire ever since that first group therapy session. I had been searching for things to light up and something to start the blaze with. A stray match, pieces of

metal I could steal and strike together hard enough to get sparks at least. I couldn't find a thing. The nurses and staff were very careful and didn't leave me a thing to satisfy my urge with, my craving to see and touch and smell that lush heat. The only thing that could burn now was me, and through that fever, I was the embodiment of the fire I craved so much. It made the migraine and the tightness in my stomach all worth it.

Friday

In addition to daily group therapy, I still had to go to my weekly therapist. My fever broke that morning, and I scarfed down my first meal in twenty-four hours. I felt like I'd nearly forgotten how good food was. However, after brunch I had to go straight to the office of Madam L. Strutter. She was short, pudgy, completely grey, wore horn-rimmed glasses and bright red lipstick that always smeared across her teeth. She wasn't married and had everyone call her Madam instead of Ms. She gave me the vibe of a grandmother who had been a school principal for most of her life, caring but in a strict way.

"I heard you've finally begun speaking, Grey," Madam Strutter said as soon as I walked in. She motioned me into the stiff back chair in front of her desk, and I sat without speaking.

"How are you feeling? Your temperature was rather high a few hours ago," she said, pulling my file out of her desk.

"I'm fine," I said, attempting to get comfortable in my seat in any way possible. I figured that the best position was on the edge.

"That's good. Now that you're talking maybe we can actually make some progress," she said and shuffled through papers until she found what she wanted. "I heard what you said during the memorial service on Wednesday. Were you close with Ida?"

"I'd rather not talk about that."

Madam Strutter pursed her lips and leveled her gaze over her glasses at me while she steepled her fingers.

"Then why don't we talk about why you're here. From what I've read in your file, you have a history of burning things and over the years things have escalated. Am I correct?"

I gave a shallow nod and looked down at my hands.

"Can you tell me why?"

"I ... like fire."

"What is it about fire that you like Grey? Don't you ever feel guilty about destroying someone else's property or like you've done something shameful?"

"What isn't there to like?" I asked. I felt surprised at first. How could she not know? Then I remembered that not everyone saw things like I did. "Fire is ... this beautiful thing. It is destruction and life. It's repulsive and sensual all at the same time. The smell of something burning, the heat waves, the way flames twist and curl, the sound of the fire eating away at something, the way it feels when I wave my hand across a flame! It gives me goose-bumps just thinking about it! No I'm not ashamed! There's just ... the pleasure is indescribable."

Saturday

I don't think I'd ever been to a funeral before I went to Ida's. I never had much family, and the family I did have were so far away that I couldn't ever attend a funeral if someone died. I got all dressed up and made sure my hair was clean and brushed like everyone else who'd decided to go. It was completely silent on the bus ride out of the country and across Burhmington. It was creepy really, like we were the ones on our way to be buried.

The funeral home was stuffy. The air felt heavy with the death and sadness people brought there. I walked slowly behind everyone else, watching them move towards the casket next the podium. The lid was open, the silk on the inside pale peach, and even from where I stood at the end of the line, I could see the tip of Ida's nose, her hands folded neatly over her stomach. The line moved much faster than I would have liked. I heard people murmuring things to her before they moved on, and I felt like I needed time to think of something meaningful. The couple ahead of me approached the casket and said their goodbyes and I'll miss yous. The woman dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and touched Ida's hands. The man with her ushered her along before she began wailing. I took a deep breath before I stepped up and looked down into the casket. It was sad to me how Ida looked so beautiful in death, more so than when I'd seen her alive. Her bottle blonde hair was curled like a doll's with little pearls threaded through it, her skin had a healthy sheen, her thin lips were glossed and turned up to give the impression of a smile. She was dressed in a peach dress with a cream-coloured sash.

"Ida," I called quietly. I expected her to open those baby doll blue eyes and look at me, tell me that she was going to fly. "I ... I really wish you had grown wings that night and flew off." I bent over the casket and kissed Ida's cheek before I went to take my seat. I couldn't stop thinking about how cold her skin felt against my lips, and how much I wished it had been hot.

## ROAD TRIP

By Chris Negron

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**Chris Negron** graduated from Yale University in 1993, where he wrote for the nation's oldest daily college newspaper, the Yale Daily News. He has been awarded the Literary Award of Merit by the Dawson Country Arts Council and has also placed in the Atlanta Writers Club's Fall Writing contest for a short story excerpted from his novel in progress. Another short story, "Card Games," will soon appear in The Grand Central Review. His literary work is represented by Amy Cloughley of Kimberley Cameron & Associates.

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It was my idea to drive home for Christmas. We could have flown; it would have been easier. But we had driven once before, when we first moved down. Seventeen hours, nearly a thousand miles. Ten states, if you counted those tiny patches of Maryland and West Virginia. All of it trapped in a small car, feet from each other. Nearly touching.

Doing it again all these years later was part of my master plan. A trap, really. She couldn't run away inside a moving car. Still, an hour into the ride and already she had leaned against the window, watching the shoulder breeze by and glancing up at each giant green exit sign as if it surprised her. Feet away but miles away, the gray console with the cup holders balancing our side-by-side charging phones marking the distance between us like an impassable chasm.

"What are you thinking about?" I tried.

Silence. I shifted in my seat. Sometimes I wondered if she heard my questions. Then just as I was about to ask again, she answered. "Nothing." She brushed the hair from her face. She leaned her chin into her hand and rested her forehead on the cold glass. Outside, Georgia streamed by at eighty miles per hour. Tall pines and towering billboards enticing truckers with the dropping price of diesel. I cut around a low-riding pickup, the bed weighed down with stacked dining chairs, a blue couch, a bungeed mattress. Someone was moving. I cruised past the two young kids, twenty-somethings, and merged back into the right lane, adjusting my rearview mirror to catch the remnants of their laughter before they disappeared behind us.

"You must be thinking of something," I said, not expecting a reply. I studied the splitting cracks in my old steering wheel. I reached down, slid the first disc of the audiobook we had brought out of its sleeve and into the CD player, turned up the volume. We allowed an easy curtain of silence to drop between us and settled into someone else's story for a while.

###

The miles turned into hours and the hours back into miles again, the smooth, open highways of the south passing by the outside of the car as effortlessly as the silence had enveloped the inside. I drove with cruise control, just over the speed limit, changing lanes to pass trucks climbing hills and hybrids coaxed along by the elderly. We reached the top of North Carolina and started the steep climb into Virginia, three states already gone as if they'd never been there in the first place.

###

We started a conversation in Virginia that ended in Pennsylvania. Not because we were so engaged that we talked non-stop for hours, but because it suffered through such long gaps of injured silence. We searched for a way back into a discussion that kept descending into arguments fueled by our own memories, the choices we each obsessed over.

Her brother had decided to move his family away from her hometown, as we had done many years ago. A migration, like restless hummingbirds flitting southward, hoping to nest, depending on it. Except we had never had any intention of returning, and neither, we knew, did Peter. We were debating the merits of his choice, but the weight of our own decisions kept blocking our words. Why had we moved away again? Why hadn't we returned back home after we lost Ben? He was only two. We were still young. We could have gone back, started over. What had happened to the past six years? Why had it been so important to make it on our own?

Our fierce independence had been the birth of us, all those years ago in her dorm room when we discovered we thought and felt the same things about politics and religion and the number of children to have and how to raise them and the unfair price of a Wawa hot dog. And as the first fat flakes of snow floated down from the clouds and melted on our windshield, I felt a hot stab of fear that the very same unwavering independence might soon be the death of us.

###

Anyway, she had never liked bridges. Even now, as we crossed dozens of them, hour by hour, I could hear her occasional sharp inhales, could see her grip the edge of her seat or the handle of her door with her manicured fingernails.

She caught me watching and huffed. Maybe I was smirking. "Remember Seattle? Do you know how many bridges are on the verge of crumbling in this country?" She asked this with a tremor in her voice, a shake of her head. "People have no idea." I did know, because she had told me before, again and again. I waited for it. "I saw this report on—"

"— *CBS Sunday Morning*. I know." She used to like it when I finished her sentences, that I knew her so well I could predict what she was going to say before she said it. But this time she turned away from me again, inhaling and holding her breath as we passed another diamond-shaped sign showing a car with wavy lines trailing behind it. *Caution: Bridge ices before road.*

###

For a few miles I thought about our wedding. I wondered if she wished, as she had stepped up to the aisle, that a sign had been posted, one that warned her of what lay ahead. *In the winter of your marriage, you will cross bridges that will be more slippery than the regular road. Caution.* The wavy lines trailing behind the swerving car.

But there was no such sign, just a lot of smiling relatives, happy to see us making the same decision they had made. Snapping pictures, nodding, sending her a reassuring wink. And, back then, she had walked straight up that aisle toward me without any hesitation at all.

###

In the middle of Pennsylvania, as we passed a *Cabela's*, after miles upon miles of farms sporting proud silver silos, we laughed. At a rest stop a mile back, a middle-aged man had been wearing a bright red, ugly Christmas sweater that we both noticed. It was far too tight.

"That sweater, right?" I said, smiling, and we laughed so hard I veered slightly in the road, and she didn't notice the next bridge we crossed.

"Do you remember yours? The one I shrunk?" she asked. She stabbed at the corner of her eye, inspected the moisture that came away on the tip of her finger.

I did. Of course. It had been one of my favorites, a red sweater that had suffered a laundry mishap. Two years later, still hanging there in the closet, I decided to give it one more chance. It felt a little tight, but I thought ... maybe.

"What do you think?" I asked, standing straight in front of her. I was on my way to a client meeting. I had chosen black dress pants and shoes.

She tilted her head, then tapped a finger on her top lip. "You sort of look like you have one of those Star Trek uniforms on. Like you're about to die tragically during an away mission." She broke into laughter then, too. We used to laugh like that.

"Okay. All right. Something else, then."

"Wait. Say 'Beam me up, Scotty.' Just once. I want to see what happens."

"Get out of here."

"Come on."

And then I said it, for her, and after a momentary pause we laughed together again. But I remembered wondering if that had been a faint flicker of hope I had seen dying in her eyes as I uttered the words. I remembered wondering if she had really thought there was a chance I might disappear, be beamed somewhere else, far away, out of her life.

I was quiet for a few hours. We crossed into New Jersey.

###

In these last few states—New Jersey to New York and finally into Connecticut—the driving patterns changed. Gone were the comfortable, open spaces of the south. Speeding cars cut across traffic behind us, barely missing the back bumper, passing us and then swerving back into our lane, narrowly missing the front bumper. We felt under attack.

It was as if we were the only travelers who didn't realize this wasn't some sort of video game we were all playing. All I wanted to do was get into a lane and drive straight, but there were so many cars, so many people. So many other people in so many other cars. Cars and people and none of them seemed to care that we weren't used to this, that we hadn't planned for it. We were just expected to learn to handle it or get off the damn road.

A black SUV streamed past us. Must've been going ninety. "Slow down," she warned.

I frowned and sped up. We crested a hill to red, nothing but red. Brake lights. I checked my rearview – no one too close – then stomped on the brake, trying to maintain control through the rapid reduction in speed. The wheels locked. We swerved. For just a moment, I thought, "This is it. It's over." But it wasn't over, not yet. Somehow, we stayed in our lane. Somehow, we survived.

The SUV wasn't so lucky. Smoke poured from the back tires as the driver slammed on his brakes. It twisted and spun once around, twice, before smashing headlong into the cement median. She screamed. I had heard it only once before, that scream.

I eased around the smoking vehicle, wondering if I should stop and help. The driver, slumped over his steering wheel, started to move. People were already running down the divider to his aid. She was crying, and I decided the only thing to do was keep going. For her sake. For both our sakes. I gripped the steering wheel hard, with both hands, and vowed to pay better attention to her warnings from now on.

###

It was dark when we pulled into her father's driveway. There had been construction in White Plains, right after we'd crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge (her fingers digging into the dashboard for a solid five and a half minutes in all that mad congestion), and I had thought I'd heard something hit the front tire but didn't dare stop. I told her I wanted to check it out now, though, and she nodded. She looked as tired as I felt. Loose strands of her hair kept swinging in front of her face; her shirt was half-tucked. Sitting sideways on the seat, legs out, she pulled her shoes back on, leaving them untied.

We were both tired. We had been on the road a long time. Years, it felt like.

She muttered something about starting the unpacking and wandered toward the back of the car, yanking open the hatch. I knelt by the driver's side tire, using a flashlight to inspect it before deciding to peer back instead. I squinted into the deep shadows.

I knew she was there, somewhere, hidden by the jumble of suitcases, the wrapped boxes and overflowing totes, all that baggage we had brought with us. I knew she had always been there. And I thought, maybe – probably – she always would be there. I just couldn't see her anymore.

## DEAR GOD

By A. Leigh Corbett

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**A. Leigh Corbett** is a self-taught reader whom overcame profound illiteracy that persisted until just shortly after her tenth birthday. After her older brother died of a drug overdose at the age of twenty-one and just a couple weeks following her high school graduation, she began writing poetry cathartically. Corbett's prolificacy has already manifested as her career continues to unfold. A. Leigh has over six hundred and fifty poems published between seven poetry books. She also wrote a feature article titled "Sanctuary of Words," which focused on her early struggles with literacy. It appeared in the special summer 2014 edition of "Chapman Magazine," which is published by Chapman University. Additionally, Corbett's short story "In Another Life" has recently been accepted for an upcoming publication in the spring 2015 edition of Writers Tribe Review.

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Every morning starts the same. Alarm clock, eggs, toast, orange juice—a side of hike to the beach. No, that is a lie. I am already at the beach; I live in my tent just beyond the high tide crest of the ocean break, behind some rocks. The only choices I ever make are the ones that happen to me. I did not lose or give up on my dreams; I burn them in a pipe just before the dawn of each day. Rough, sandpaper-snaps as a flame erupts. The sound itself is enough to ignite an urge to inhale. I replay the sound over and over again out loud, and then repeat its memory just in my head; each time I get that same unyielding urge. I want to stop but have never really found a reason that makes me feel like I can. So I don't.

Surfing through sunrise—then the day begins and nothing happens. I lay out, baking in the sun. My tan is excellent. Today, everything is in order except for the weather. A coastal swell is bringing overhead waves to a normally quiet part of the beach; I'll check it out later for shells.

Arms holding my surfboard overhead, I jogged down to the beach. When I met the water, I flipped my board onto the water and slid on as I paddled out. The first few waves were not worth trying to catch. I paddled out farther, repeatedly diving under the crashing mounds of water in the hopes of better waves ahead. And then I saw it—the perfect wave. I barely stand up for more than a few seconds before losing my balance and falling into the barrel. A wipeout is nothing new to me, but not comprehending which direction the surface could be found in, was.

Waves—clashing, smashing, crushing; spins, churning—stillness, quiet; placid surface. A silhouetted female figure fades into sight. Her features softened at the edges, almost like she is emerging from nothingness. I am standing on top of the water, and so is she. Everything around us is darkness except for her; she is light.

"Who are you?"

*"Some call me Death."*

"Am I dead—?"

*"Not quite."*

"Well that's comforting ..."

*"Are you ready?"*

"No, but I don't think I ever will be."

*"I find that usually you never are, not even when you've had time to prepare."*

"I've done this before?"

*"Yes."*

"You know me?"

*"Yes, quite well actually. It'll all come back to you once you cross over again."*

"Again—I've had other lives?"

*"Many, and this one will soon be one of them."*

"But I'm not ready. I didn't do anything yet. What if I don't want to leave—*can* I stay?"

*"Do you want to?"*

"Yes, I think so."

*"Then fight."*

"How?"

*"Start swimming."*

"In what—this? Call me Jesus, because I'm still standing on top of the water, *not* in it; swimming isn't going to work."

*"Really—So would you rather drown in an ocean of doubt or a sea of water?"*

"Are you really giving me spiritual advice ... *now*? Is this really what my life has come to?"

*"It would seem so."*

"Sounds almost ironic when you say it."

*"Perks of the job, but if you want to live my dear, you best start swimming."*

"How?"

*"Even fish out of water still try to splash. Otherwise, it's time to go. God doesn't like to be kept waiting."*

"God is waiting?"

*"He's always waiting, but now more than usual. You have a decision to make."*

On my knees, I'm patting my hands fast against the water and *nothing—nothing is happening*; my hands aren't even wet, then—splash; motion everywhere, ocean. Can't breathe—drowning. Panicked cries for help—shore-sighted glimpses, dip. I try to grab onto something, anything—there's nothing then—kelp. Wrapped in kelp, I'm going to die. It's really going to happen—*no, I just did that*; I made a choice. I came *back*. I have to relax—can't risk inhaling water. Options? None. No more resistance—the light fades to darkness as I sink further beneath the surface. Currents tugging at me left, then

right—dragged by a leg towards the ocean floor, then out towards deeper waters. I've heard stories of people drowning in rip currents, never thought I'd be one. Or that it could or happen to me; the ocean is my second home. Clarity coming the instance I gather myself—I won't have enough oxygen to reach the surface. I'm going to drown. I read once that drowning was peaceful in a surf magazine, but now that I'm actually drowning, I think whoever wrote that article is full of shit.

Swim up—get pulled down, gasp—water full of mouth; choking, cough—water inhale. Murky feet and a surface bound push. Waves roll, currents catch—crest break, hands emerge for a chance inhale—riptide-bait catches a current. Exhausted—stillness. Just a body, buoy-bobbing sandbar-deep and barely visible to the tower, a lifeguard runs in after.

#

Blackened abyss—it's back to this.

*"Been awhile."*

"What the hell—I thought you said I could choose?"

*"You could—and you did, but you failed."*

"Why didn't you help me?"

*"Didn't I though? I am not the giver of life; I just decided not to take you when I could've."*

"So you can just take life whenever you want?"

*"No, only life ends life. I take what all bodies leave behind—the soul."*

"What do you do with it?"

*"Guide it to where it belongs."*

"So what happens now—I cross over?"

*"Yes, unless you want to keep drowning infinite times over, hoping that one time, it might finally be different."*

"Could it ever be different?"

*"Sure, anything can happen—in life, but now you're dead."*

"So that's it? It's just—game over, no second chances?"

*"You got a second chance, but once your life ends—it's no longer within my control what happens to it."*

"What does that even mean? How do you not control death—you are death."

*"The purpose of Death is to ferry souls from one plane of existence to the next."*

"Okay, so where do I go from here—after life and death I mean?"

*"You're welcome to find out, but I cannot tell you—that's between you and your God."*

"Me and my God?"

*"Yeah, your creator—you might have heard of him."*

"So there is a God?"

*"More or less."*

"How does it work?"

*"Just like you've always heard—step into the light."*

"I don't want it to be over."

*"It never is."*

Light expanding out of nothingness near my feet; golden and intoxicating, breaking the trance, I look back. Death stands stoic. I wave at her; she smiles, not waving back. I step forward as the ball of light engulfs me. Snow white winter warmth.

I close my eyes—if only I knew today would be my last: the quotes, clichés—axioms that begged life to be lived. I always considered the words but never found a good enough reason to actually change anything—black-spotted dapple brightness. This must be it. Oh God, I'm so scared. Don't leave me, God please! More black, so much black—it's taking over. God, no please! I am begging you, dear God, please. Don't let me die, please God. I'll change. I promise.

Panic, a chaos-charging chill—zap, thwack; head tingling nerves to feet—zap, thwack—pounding; drums. Eyes stuck shut—grand finale, pace drops—thwack.

Eyes beep.

#

"Hey there—welcome back."

## XENOLOGY

By James Bezerra

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**James Bezerra** is a graduate student in creative writing at CSU Northridge. His work has been published in *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Bicycle Review*, *Blood Lotus*, *The Blueprint Review*, *Cease Cows*, *Blackheart Magazine*, *The Northridge Review*, *Citizen Brooklyn*, and *The American Drivel Review*. He is a recipient of The Northridge Review Fiction Award, The Oliver W. Evans Writing Prize, and San Diego Playwrights' Project Award. Bezerra co-wrote the film "Strange Angel" and he blogs at [standardkink.com](http://standardkink.com).

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Even the cockroaches had grown skeptical. Discussions began taking place in quiet cabals behind the refrigerator. Conditions had been improving out there, they knew, but The Resident still was not working. Fewer resumes had been sent in recent weeks. No interviews had been scheduled in months. Plates and bowls were being washed right away now because this provided The Resident with some diversion since the cable and internet had been cut. Older roaches told stories in the weak green light thrown by the microwave clock—stories of stacked dishes, of full trash cans, of cereal boxes left open on the counter in morning haste. Quiet and and lazy and easy had the days been when the apartment was theirs and theirs alone for eight or ten or even twelve uninterrupted hours. Lives were lived fully then, and contentedly, calmly. Abdomens swelled and glistened proudly in the quick scurry spaces between shadows then.

Xenology sometimes breeds odd loyalty. Geriatrics were able to feast on their memories and were willing to wait patiently for the abundant times to return. Bent old legs. Mandibles which ached with age. These things encouraged them to hope because hope can sometimes sate hunger. Hope is easier than exodus.

Reconnaissance missions were launched though and found more promising lands beyond the walls. Intrepid homesteaders set out, stitting carefully up cliffs of sharp pink insulation. Some of them still couldn't stand to leave though. Younger generations—who had only ever known hunger—felt no pang at all about the journey out.

With a growing sense of desperation, those that remained behind began to venture further from the empty pantry shelves. Just an old grain of rice under the microwave or flake of broken ramen noodle under the stovetop would have sustained them. Zigzagging out across the carpet exposed them to great danger, but there were hysterical stories of crumbs in the sofa. Keeping calm became difficult, keeping their hope was even harder. Very few of them lived through those lean times. Unemployed, The Resident had the time to hunt them.

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# POWHATAN HIGH SCHOOL

## YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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Dear Readers,

When I was six years old, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life; I wanted to be a writer. I spent much of my time making up stories in my backyard with my dog, DJ. As I got older, I began writing stories and poetry in my spare time, and even won a few contests. My grandmother, Charlotte Berlin, was one of the most amazing people you would ever meet. Her warmth and kindness is what always inspired me and motivated me to keep doing what I love. I will never forget the day that she gave me one of the best gifts I could have asked for; a small plate with the words; "Young Author 1995" written in golden pen at the bottom. I still keep the plate to this day and always remember how much she believed in me.

Today, I see those dreams in the students here at PHS, and I have a reason to believe in something great that we are doing here; we are sharing words, literature, and art. As my third year here at PHS, I feel overjoyed that we have come so far. I did not grow up in Powhatan, but have come to love this county and the small town environment that I see every single day here. You walk down the hallways at PHS, and you are greeted with a smile and a "hello" by staff and students. This warm, welcoming atmosphere is what makes us strong as a community. This is what binds us and brings us together to create wonderful projects like what we have accomplished this year.

Last year, I began working on a project that would later turn into something amazing this year with the help of some dedicated students who encouraged me to keep going with it. I felt like I wanted to inspire the young writers at PHS and help them on their journeys as much as I could. I started helping out with Writers Club, an organization of writers at the school. I also created a website to post students' short stories, art, and poetry, the first part of our literary magazine. While I was excited about the prospects of helping our young writers, we did not have a lot of interest in the beginning, and it was really hard for me to find students to help me out, although I had a few committed students who took time to stay after school and help me with whatever I needed.

It wasn't until this year that a massive shift was in the air, something that I see occurring here every day at PHS; writing is flourishing. Every corner I turn, every student I interact with, has something unique to say, and so many of them are wonderful, ambitious writers and artists. By the beginning of the school year, I had some students willing to help me with the project. Things started off with just ideas, and then those ideas became actions. We got other interested students. The word got out quickly. Before I knew it, we had 35 students signed up for Writers Club this year, and 11 dedicated souls (and growing) signed up for the literary magazine club. I couldn't believe my eyes. My heart was joyous in knowing that so many PHS students were beginning to come out of their shells as writers.

Thus far, we have had two contests, two poetry readings, and we have around 80 different submissions on the site including stories, poetry, art, and photography. Last year, we held a poetry/short stories reading in the lunch room for Halloween. I remember the turnout was very small. This year, we almost doubled those numbers in size for both Halloween and Valentine's Day. (I'm not sure if that was because we had great food or if they were actually enjoying listening to the literature!) Either way, we have accomplished so much this year.

Now, I feel like the possibilities are endless. We are planning things out; contests, events, and now we have made our own print magazine. None of this would have been possible without these students that have shown me their passion for literature and I am so excited for the rest of the year and the future ahead for our own students. I see future writers, future journalists, editors, inventors, and entrepreneurs in all of them.

I can't stress enough how lucky I am to work with such caring, passionate, and inspiring young students. Their writing moves me to tears sometimes, but also makes me laugh, smile, and wonder about things I have not before. I really believe that in the walls of this school, we have grabbed hold of something great. To see so many young people interested in this is truly amazing to me, especially in an age when I feel like literacy is being lost to computers and smart phones.

We hope that these pieces, written by our very own students, will inspire you, and you will see the greatness in these that I see myself every single day. I always tell my students that to be a writer, you have to be brave and fearless, kind of like Odysseus in the Odyssey because, I think, if you really try hard enough, your writing can take you home. Writing is home for myself and for many students, and one day, these "young authors" will be flourishing in their field, and, who knows, maybe even changing the world.

-Anne Marie Bise  
English Teacher  
Powhatan High School  
Powhatan, Virginia

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# YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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## SOLDIER

By: Sophie Kidd

You're halfway between life and death, Soldier  
But you still fight on  
The storm continues to rage  
And many lives have gone

You're a soldier  
Fighting in this war  
Your gun wounds and kills  
Around you are pools of blood and gore

How long will you last, soldier?  
I'm afraid for you  
I'm afraid you won't return  
I pray to God you do

Remember who the enemy is, Soldier  
And don't look behind  
Stay strong  
Don't let the screams fill your mind

Win this battle, Soldier  
Listen to the cannons roar  
I beg of you, survive  
Above the enemy you shall soar

C'mon, Soldier  
Defeat the rival  
You're stronger than them  
This is a war of survival

Keep battling, Soldier  
I wish not to lose you  
Resist the overpowering of the enemy  
Think not of the men you slew

## THE WINGLESS MORNING DOVE

By Sophie Kidd

The mourning dove without wings  
Hops across the ground as he sings  
He sings a mournful cry  
Oh, how he wishes he could fly  
Day and night he stares up above  
Where there are flying winged doves  
They fly with freedom and sing their songs  
To be free, too, the wingless mourning bird longs.

# YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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## CHANGE

By Laura Baird

The weeks had passed in gray  
His colorless routine  
forever on replay  
He noticed she always  
seemed to be close by  
And yet had no idea why

His life continued its  
downward spiral  
Each day became a  
wearisome trial  
But even as he felt alone  
and confined  
He was on her mind

The day prior to February 14  
She wondered how to  
confess without making a scene  
She considered cards,  
music, and even food  
But finally decided only  
one thing to do

He hadn't expected a single thing  
But that morning his doorbell rang  
There she stood with a rose bouquet  
And said "Happy Valentine's Day"

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# YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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## CHRISTMAS WITHOUT HIM

By Sidney Mann

One warm summer afternoon, I was at a camp  
called Teen Escape Camp. It was Friday,  
10:30, when we arrived at Iron Bridge Park.  
I had a a great time,  
but after the fun was over,  
I got in the car and my parents told me...  
Paw Paw died at 10:32 A.M.  
It's still really hard  
Since we haven't had  
a single holiday without  
him and since Christmas  
is coming up,  
it's going to be sad.  
I miss my grandpa  
taking pictures of me  
on Santa's lap,  
I miss his laugh;  
when he'd open christmas presents  
and I'd see his big smile from cheek to cheek.  
When he'd see what it was,  
he'd be thankful,  
he'd be patient.  
When I opened my presents,  
I ran up and jumped in his arms  
and said  
thank you  
thank you  
thank you  
He would say i love you  
and i would say it back  
and i miss him saying that  
and i still think of him every Christmas;  
How when i was little  
he would sit on the floor and help me  
because it was hard to open my presents.  
I wrote a poem for him on July 31st,  
2 days before he died.  
I had to read it as his funeral.  
My grandma is very strong,  
she knows he's in a better place;  
where there is no more pain and suffering.

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# YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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## MISS INVISIBLE

By Cheyenne Proffitt

(Dedicated to all the Miss Invisibles)

Hello, my name is invisible  
and to me everyone is blind  
I'm that girl in the back of the class  
that always slips the mind

I never get called on  
though my hand is always raised  
Even though my grades are perfect  
I never get praised

Life is not always perfect  
when everyone is unaware  
I can't be more unseen  
no matter my clothes or hair

Especially that boy in class  
the one who is meant for me  
Me he has never looked nor glimpsed  
Me he can not see

People talk around me  
but none listen to my voice  
I never make a team  
never am I the best choice

But seeing Mr. Perfect  
Completely unaware of Miss. Invisible  
His lips are pink and smooth  
Imagine they're so kissable

I have him in every period  
but I doubt he knows I exist  
I might as well be a unicorn  
What an unexpected twist

I've always accepted this life of mine  
just the way I was created  
but now I'm done and want out  
Invisible is overrated

I want him to notice  
I want his attention

I want his mind to scream with delight  
When my names comes to mention

I love the way the couples  
hold hands in the hall  
Most everyone does it  
No matter how small or tall

I'm too nervous to wave  
I'm too anxious to speak  
I need to calm my heart  
or I'll look like such a geek

His face is on every page  
His name on all the lines  
My journal is completely filled  
Especially around Valentines

The year is almost over  
My time is running out  
He still is completely blind  
No matter how much I shout

And now in english  
I realize I'm too late  
Not even Shakespeare  
Could write this heart break  
A tall, beautiful blonde  
Complete with all her charm  
Has stolen my man  
she is now on his arm

Just as the bell rings  
she kisses his cheek  
the bell's throbs match my own  
My sorrow at its peak

Now I watch them hand and hand  
So completely miserable  
I wanted that more than anything before  
But I'll always be Miss Invisible.

# YOUNG AUTHORS FLOURISHING

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## SMALL VOICE

By Megan Hughes

I am a small voice. No one sees me or hears me because I am small and shy. No one really hears me in the class. No one acknowledges me when I am standing near them. I only have a few friends who acknowledge me when I am near them. I hide myself when the teacher asks people to read out loud, or when we are presenting a project. I am a small voice.

I can accomplish great things but I question myself on whether I can do it or not. People don't realize I am there. When they do they look at me with judgement. They sometimes look at me like I am stupid or weird. But the thing is.... I am not stupid..... I am not weird. I am special in my own way.

The popular kids think that they are all that. When really they are just normal people. They look down on me. They don't even know my name. Well.... I don't think they know my name. Except for one of them..... He asked me a question. He asked ME, a small voice a question. He even said my name. So one of them knows my name.

I am a small voice. I am different yes. But I am special. Sure it takes me longer to learn some material in school than other kids. And maybe I have a hard time processing things but that doesn't make me stupid it makes me special. I love helping others. When I help others it makes me feel good. When I see the person smile that I just helped it makes me feel good. I love dancing. Dancing is my hobby. I dance for fun, to get rid of worries, to get rid of stress. I am a small voice but would a small person be able to earn their gold award? Yes, they would because I did. I raised \$785.00 for Backpacks of Love and bought the food for them. Would a small person be able to do that? Yes, they would because I am a small person.

When you are small you can do anything. I am a small voice. Can you guess who I am?

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# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

TL Publishing Group is always looking for submissions. We publish 4 issues a year and our journals are available online and in print. When it comes to reviewing a submission, we don't look for a particular theme. We look at the work itself, specifically its message, delivery, and structure. We accept a variety of submissions including: poetry, fiction, and articles. We also accept requests for interviews and book reviews.

All submissions may be uploaded by visiting:

<http://torridliterature.submittable.com/submit>

We encourage everyone to become familiar with the Torrid Literature Journal first by reading previous editions. This will give writers a general idea of the type of content we look for. Our submission period for the Torrid Literature Journal is year round and our response time varies depending on the volume of submissions received.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Alice Saunders at [asaunders@torridliterature.com](mailto:asaunders@torridliterature.com). We look forward to the reading experience.



Dear Reader,

When you mix boldness with desire, creativity, and faith, what you end up with are writers who are willing to share the most intimate parts of themselves with others. When writers create, they are giving you a firsthand look inside of their heart and mind. They're basically pulling off parts of themselves and building it into their work. It's habitual for writers to embed pieces of themselves in their work without even trying. If you want to understand a writer, or any artist for that matter, then consider their work. They don't waste time creating random things that they don't care about. When writers create they're sparking discussions on themes that matter most to them.

Art warrants attention. It's a call and response. Furthermore, we hope you paid close attention to the work in this journal because original art deserves to be studied and admired. It's one of the reasons why we do what we do. Publications and literary journals are similar to museums. We don't house any type of art. We fill our journals with the best art of the highest quality. Due to this, we're always updating our pages with new material. We're always looking for new, original work that stands firm on its own.

Moreover, we're constantly looking for innovative ways to bridge the gap between writers and readers. This publication is just a piece of the bigger picture that's being created. Visit our website to learn about a few of the other avenues we use to support writers.

We look forward to seeing you again in Volume XV. Be sure to subscribe to our eNewsletter to receive important updates and breaking news about our publications and fellow writers.

- Editorial Staff



“...my tongue roams my mouth tasting the memory of bitter consonants...” - Carolyn D. Elias

“...I wish that I could write sonnets about the color of your eyes...” - Nikki Johnson

“...I end up with nothing more than another lonely soliloquy...” - Jacob Erin-Cilberto

TL Publishing Group makes a dynamic return with a new release the *Torrid Literature Journal*. This release presents readers with the noteworthy literature they know and love. Volume XIV *Chaos* picks up where Volume XIII *Déjà Vu* left off by continuing to showcase literary pieces that discuss everyday topics from family, faith, and love to literature, self-reflection and nature. The contributors in this issue do more than simply touch on these topics. They dive deep beneath the chaos that occurs in life. They go beneath the surface to uncover the treasures and the hidden beauties in life.

Writers are specialists at this because they understand words. They understand that words have power and when used correctly they give life. They give life to dreams, hope to the tired, and freedom to the confined. The list goes on because the benefits are limitless. It's no wonder writers create art like they do. They have an infinite supply of tools at hand and boundaries are of no concern.

In general, this publication contains poems and short stories that are contemporary in nature and reassuring to senses. Supporters of literature will not regret adding this publication to their reading collection. TL Publishing Group is well on its way to actively completing their mission, which is to support and strengthen the culture of literature. Join them on this journey and discover true appreciation for the written word and the way it caters to the heart and imagination.

Contributors: Richard Spilman; Dean K Miller; Monica Lynn Moraca; Marchell Dyon Jefferson; William Doreski; Cara Vitadamo; Nikki Johnson; James Sutton; Chrystal Berche; Tyler Pufpaff; Jacobs Sterling; James Croal Jackson; David Rutter; Gloria Keeley; Jim Landwehr; Robert Joe Stout; Scott Honeycutt; Richard Spilman; M.E. Lerman; Carolyn D. Elias; Hannah Dellabella; Sandra Rokoff-Lizut; Nikita Hernandez; Amy S. Pacini; Jacob Erin-Cilberto; Smita Sriwastav; Suzane Bricker; Casmir Hodge; Chris Negron; A. Leigh Corbett; James Bezerra; Sophie Kidd; Laura Baird; Sidney Mann; Cheyenne Proffitt; Megan Hughes



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