

Volume XIII January 2015

# TORRID LITERATURE JOURNAL

## *Dejà Vu*

**Featured Poets:**

Dylan Wilson | Tyler Pufpaff | And Many More!

**Must Read Fiction:**

"The Memory Den" | By Justin Rose



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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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**W**e've been here before, at the start line. Whether we're ready or not, the start of a new year is like a gunshot signaling the start of race. Only we're not racing against each other. We have our own individual race that has been set out before us, one where timing is just as important as patience and endurance. We're not here to sprint. We know we're not going to reach our destination if we're in hurry. We'll miss too much. We have short-term and long-term goals that we desire to accomplish and this requires that we know where we're going and why.

Furthermore, a new year launches a new journey and to kick it off we are excited to present you with our third anniversary issue of the *Torrid Literature Journal*. It's been three years since we released Volume I *Rediscovering the Passion* and it feels like it was yesterday. With each release, our love for literature grows as we work to introduce our readers to writers who share a mutual affection for the written word. However, in order to appreciate the power of the written word, you have to respect the entire process. This includes the initial stages where poets live through the experiences behind the writing and the intense moments where they're challenged with decoding that said experience into a dialect that readers can understand.

However, this is the beauty of art. A poet can write about personal topic and another person can read that poem and feel an instant connection without actually meeting that poet in person. I'm speaking from personal experience. When I read a poem or listen to a poet recite one, there are times when it feels as if someone took a snapshot of my life and hung it in the museum for everyone to see. That's how I feel when someone who knows nothing about my personal life seems to perfectly, and beautifully, sum it up in a poem. This sense of *Déjà vu* is one of the many reasons that art is so attractive. It draws people in because of this feeling of familiarity and reflection. Good literature communicates on a level that goes beyond normal conversation. Literature sparks conversations and creates general dialogue. Literature (and all forms of art for that matter) explores the different sides of life.

With that said, everything that is active has some sort of role in the development process. As a result, we always end up here, because the end of one point always leads to the beginning of another. Volume XIII *Déjà Vu* is filled with new and familiar voices. One of those familiar voices is Jacob Erin-Cilberto who makes an encore performance as he shares another insightful book review. This time around, he discusses poetry by Gwendolyn Jensen that appears in her new book *As If Toward Beauty*. Erin-Cilberto does a wonderful job of dissecting the individual poems and the entire book. He pulls it all apart and carefully examines the unique elements that make this entire poetry book the captivating collection that it is.

Following Erin-Cilberto's book review, readers are presented with a fresh collection of poems and stories that touch on a variety of topics. The poems will, without a doubt, inspire, motivate, and entertain readers as they present an interesting outlook on life's many situations. These poems are alive with a sense of purpose. They will seize your senses and take you on a trip that is far from traditional. Subsequently, in keeping with this extraordinary theme,

the short stories have a uniqueness that is refreshing. The work speaks for itself, so no further explanation is needed. If you've read one of our volumes of literature before than you're already acquainted with the knowledge that the *Torrid Literature Journal* is an open themed publication. The literature varies in style, length, and topic because we seek to highlight the various colors that span the canvas of literature.

Outside of the journal, we work with the same mindset. We highlight and expose our followers to various writers and writing styles through our journals, open mic events, contests, and more because let's face it...we're all different. Our tastes, preferences, dreams, and desires are unique. Consequently, we have quite a few exciting projects planned for the year as we work continuously to support and strengthen the culture of literature. Next month we will tally up the votes received for our Hall of Fame inductees. If you're unfamiliar with our Hall of Fame for literary excellence then I encourage you check out our current members. Several hundred writers have blessed our readers with their literary work and as such, our writers have nominated a few of these writers to receive longstanding membership in our Hall of Fame.

That following month in March, we'll kick off our annual literary contest where three writers will get the chance to receive cash prizes and award recognitions. In addition to this, several writers will receive honorable mentions for their literary work. This is just a small preview of what is to come at TL Publishing Group. We're just getting started when it comes to executing our mission for the culture of literature and moreover, we're looking forward to road ahead. The journey won't be easy but the best things in life aren't easily attainable. Success doesn't come because we want it to. Success comes when we back up our faith, dreams, and visions with active works. Success has one formula where the main ingredient is one's active desire to be committed. There are other variables that matter, such as skill, discipline, determination, motivation, humility, confidence, etc. Nevertheless, there is also one constant – the refusal to quit. You won't fail if you refuse to quit. Whatever your goals and desires are for 2015 and beyond, believe in yourself. Believe in your ability to finish the race that has been set out before you. It doesn't matter how many times you trip, stumble, or fall. Your life is yours to master. Keep moving forward.

Be you. Be blessed. Be torrid.

Sincerely,  
*Alice Saunders*

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

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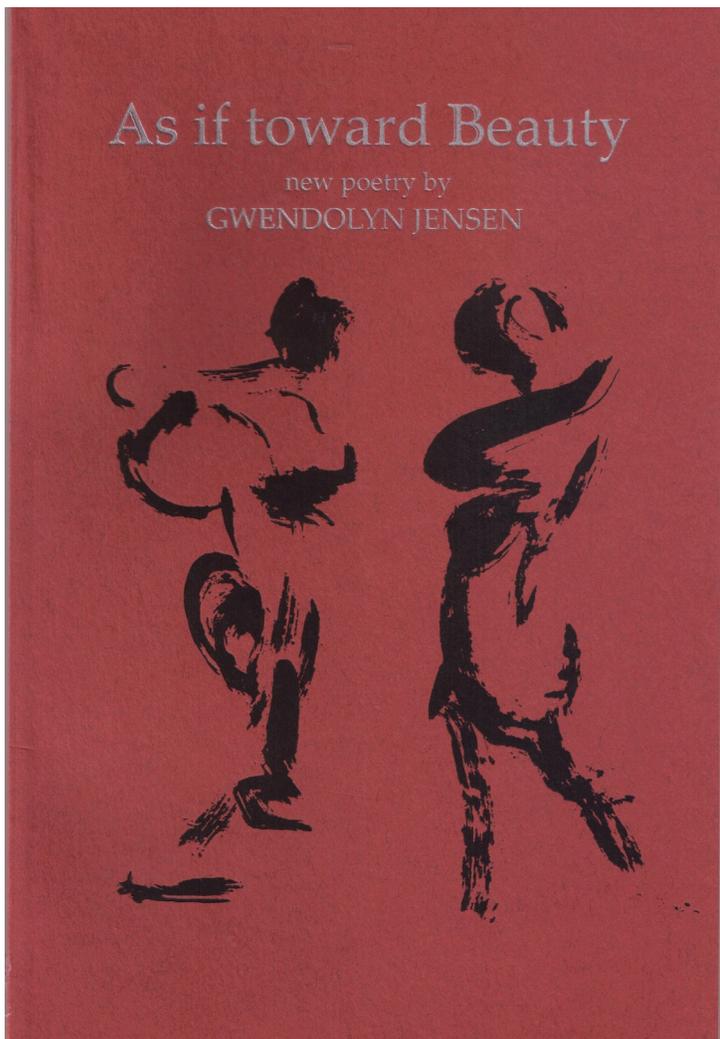
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## BOOK REVIEW: AS IF TOWARD BEAUTY

By Jacob Erin-Cilberto

Gwendolyn Jensen's poetry reminds me of another Gwendolyn (Brooks). As in her first offering, *Birthright*, Ms. Jensen's poetry takes us on a journey of life---from birth, as in "The Wedding Picture" when the poet asks the mother, "Why did you leave so soon?/ I must have hurt you being born/ I'm sorry if I made you cry." Already we see a maturity about life and pain and this is only the conception.

It is something like conceiving poems...a certain amount of pain goes into each poem, whether it is birthing the poems within the mind, or the pain suffered before the poet became pregnant with the inspiration to write.

And then there is "Money," the poem that reminds us all of when we were young and we would listen to the adults tell us of how it was long ago...in the olden days how scarce money was, songs of the Great Depression (as my dad used to talk about as I listened attentively). Life was hard then, and it is a different kind of hard now, "a way of walking where there is no path, a growing place, the tip of a fingernail, the froth at the edge of the universe." And as we grow that universe grows along with us like in "A Car has Summer in it" where the possibilities lend themselves to "a boy" who can "flit full-footed, nimble through the streets...passing car to car, open, wide, and shared."

At times we all share "The Gift" and find that "scent is his (or ours) to spin into/ a ludic wild, a ludicrous/ and random joy," we feel until, as the poem "Life Lesson" teaches us, there is "the line between a skin of wind---/a wrongful thing so lightly winged...the harder place, where things stick fast/ you can no longer shore against them." It's all part of that journey, isn't it?

In her poem "Office" there are references about "how it used to be," and now we see the child growing up to the point where he is starting to recall when that started happening to me---growing up? Growing old?

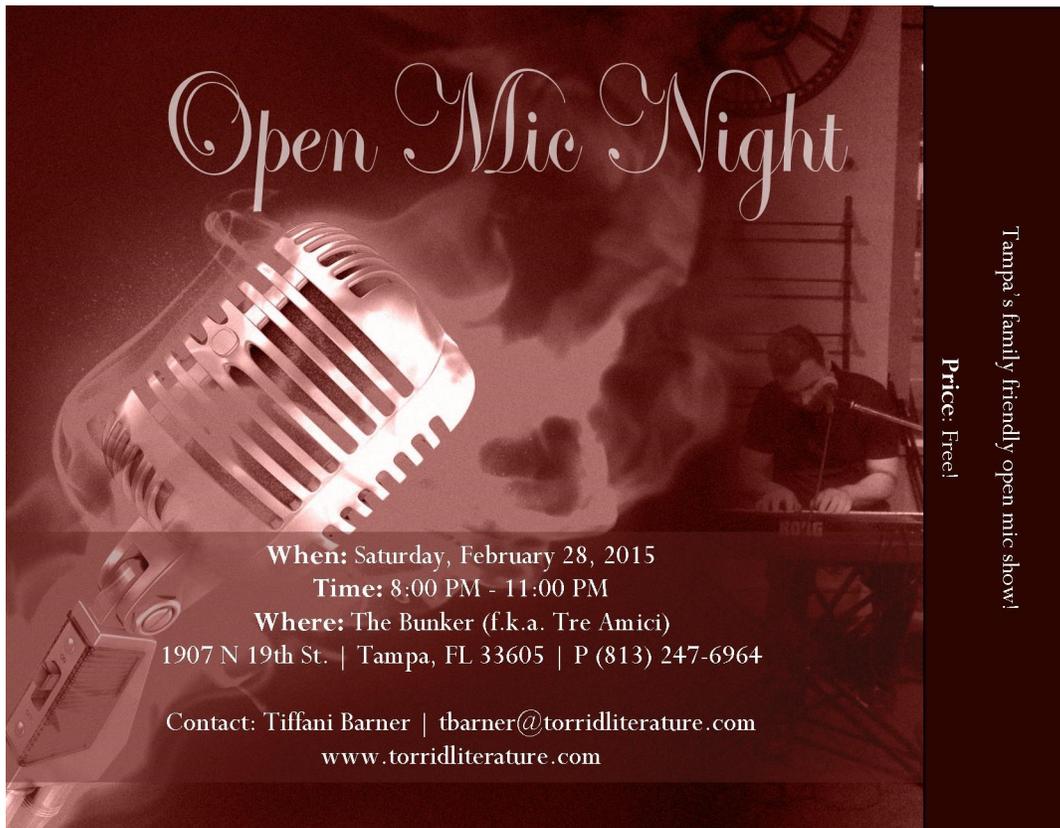
In "Retirement," we see the boy as an old man who had "worked and lived largely on this earth." And now those new children are listening to us, and we have come to the autumn of our journey and have stories to tell.

The themes in so many of Gwendolyn's poems simply but eloquently deal with life, from our beginnings to our ends. And she does it so beautifully with her smooth phrasing, exhilarating metaphors and comforting lines that etch deep into our sub-conscious, reminding us that the poet tells it best. As Plath often said, "readers want to know from someone who has been there" someone with the experience to really show how it was and is.

In this book, Jensen also gives us a delightful selection of poetry by some German authors that she so deftly translates into English for our enjoyment. A voice among voices, Gwendolyn takes us on that "number 1 bus, from Dudley to Harvard Square...(where) we are all homeless there"---to places we can understand and relate to until that bus "kneels to let some of us go."

I highly recommend we buy that token and get on this bus---looking out the window we will see many reflections of ourselves---it is a journey into our lives, our minds, our spirits, "As if toward Beauty" "to the times that are ample" and amply described by this wonderful poet.

- Jacob Erin-cilberto (author of *Intersection Blues*)



When: Saturday, February 28, 2015  
Time: 8:00 PM - 11:00 PM  
Where: The Bunker (f.k.a. Tre Amici)  
1907 N 19th St. | Tampa, FL 33605 | P (813) 247-6964  
Contact: Tiffani Barner | [tbarner@torridliterature.com](mailto:tbarner@torridliterature.com)  
[www.torridliterature.com](http://www.torridliterature.com)

Tampa's family friendly open mic show!  
Price: Free!

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

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

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

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

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

<http://www.facebook.com/tlopenmic>  
[http://www.torridliterature.com/Open\\_Mic.html](http://www.torridliterature.com/Open_Mic.html)

If you are interested in being a featured poet at one of our events, please contact Tiffani Barner at [tbarner@torridliterature.com](mailto:tbarner@torridliterature.com).

# ODE TO LITERATURE

## TIME WARP

By Dean K Miller

Mortal men—  
Say you haven't the time.  
But I am not to be had.

And oh, how I envy you:  
Bodies, minds, souls.  
But I—a recorded voice,  
a glance at the wrist,  
numbers on a wall.

You say, "Times are changing."  
But I remain unchanged.

You can't see me,  
touch or smell me;  
Yet I rule your lives.

Nothing is as perfect.

I know not of days or nights,  
or a thousand years gone by.  
Just now—an instant, unmoving.

And oh, how I envy you:  
with eyes to see, hands to touch,  
lives to live.

I am here to stay—  
with no beginning,  
with no end,  
and everything in between.

**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 book, *And Then I Smiled: Reflections on a Life Not Yet Complete* was released in February 2014. 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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**William Miller** is a widely-published poet. Most recently, his poems have been accepted or published by *The South Carolina Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *The Tar River Review*. He lives and writes in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

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**BERRYMAN ON THE BRIDGE**

By William Miller

Collar turned up against  
he icy, river wind,  
he had only to take  
the next, final step.

Did he think of his father  
who killed himself  
with a shotgun blast  
that sounded like  
the slamming of a door?

Did he think of women,  
gin, great books taught  
and written?

Everything bored him  
and that boredom was  
worse than nightshade  
because it never killed.

Before he stepped off  
into the emptiness,  
wide and deep as the river,  
he saw an old soldier  
approaching.

Achilles told him to step  
back, pick up  
his shield and fight;  
no demon was stronger  
than a willing heart.

But he sent him away—  
no longer believed  
in great causes or valiant  
art, which bored him.

Three people walked by,  
Arms locked, heads down  
against the wind, laughing.

He turned back to the river,  
did the only thing  
a poet could do when  
words failed to describe  
the nearness of the ditch.

He waved goodbye,  
stepped off the bridge.

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**Emily Strauss** has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry. Over 230 of her poems appear in dozens of online venues and in anthologies. The natural world is generally her framework; she often focuses on the tension between nature and humanity, using concrete images to illuminate the loss of meaning between them. She is a semi-retired teacher living in California.

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**WOODS IN FOUR COLORS**

By Emily Strauss

Brown stems, sticks,  
trunks, a bare thicket  
empty of leaves in the snow  
poplars growing in, out,  
fallen over, impenetrable.

Golden, rusty maple leaves  
clinging to dry branches,  
a dash of paprika against  
the red-brown palate,  
a splash of cumin.

Deep somber green fronds  
of tall spruce, long flowing  
wings spread like old  
scarecrows' tired arms  
weighted down by cold.

White plumes, pure glowing  
sparkling, swirling, falling,  
blowing effortlessly, snow  
collects on logs, notches,  
showers like puffs of powder.

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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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ORION AND ME

By William Doreski

Brewing coffee before dawn  
only deepens the winter dark  
so it regains its confidence.

I'll dawdle until the sunrise,  
then drive headlong to a job  
that will hardly know I'm there.

Orion, setting in the northwest,  
wields his medals and ribbons  
as gracefully as old veterans

usually do. My dying friend  
counts each hour, although coma  
has draped him with its mercies.

Already his planned funeral hums  
with hymns, eulogies, post-burial  
snacks arranged on long tables

laid out in the vestry. Already  
the widow plans her life alone,  
daughter employed by the embassy.

in Rome. I wish Orion  
could wrestle him into the cosmos  
with a warrior's grim resolve.

I wish that inside that coma  
the screenplay of his life would round  
every subplot into fruition,

leaving not the slightest residue.  
Driving home yesterday I saw  
a bluebird winging across the road

into imponderable forest.  
How can this gloom support it?  
It's no more out of season

than I am, or my dying friend,  
but too tiny and brisk to waste  
its favors on my fading eyesight.

I fill my Thermos and plot  
a route as sure as Orion's  
and in roughly the same direction.

The night breaks and erases the stars.  
I lean against the cold window  
and wonder who's planning my funeral:

who among of eight billion strangers  
will think of Orion and me  
in the same fraction of thought?

REMEMBRANCE

By Yinka Reed-Nolan

Grandma  
when I imagine you  
you're standing in snow.  
Long coat with rough brown fur  
falling from your shoulders.  
You're standing next to a car  
with a lit cigarette  
but I'm far away.  
I watch as you smile  
your mouth sliding open  
to reveal the thin layer of gold  
encasing your front tooth.

I can hear your long fingernails –  
yellow from cigarette smoke  
high and narrow like my mother's  
instead of flat and wide like mine  
a trait I inherited from my father –  
tapping the steering wheel.  
A rhythmic sound  
slowing time  
extending the moment.  
In my imagination you know what is to come  
you know the future that I don't want to picture  
and why I imagine a past  
a version of you that I can never know.

I never imagine you the way you became –  
confused, frail, shuffling.  
I try to forget  
how you'd ask the same question  
*Where is Bay?*  
when I was always in the next room.  
How you'd get confused  
look at yourself in the mirror  
wonder who that scary person was  
staring back at you.  
How you'd forget  
leave your cigarette burning in the ashtray  
the pot of water boiling on the stove.  
I try to forget that I was always to blame  
when something went missing  
I ate all the food  
drank all the milk  
stole all your medicine.

I try to imagine you more glamorously  
not because it's what you deserve  
though it is what you deserve.  
I try to think of you in snow  
with your cigarette  
independent and free  
because I don't want to think  
about how much I hated you.  
The resentment that filled my chest  
bubbled up through my mouth  
spewed hateful words.

When the truth catches up to me  
when I wish I had treated you differently  
I imagine you're in standing in snow  
with a cigarette  
your mouth sliding open into a smile.

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

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**HIGH**

By Nikki Johnson

The needle slides home,  
lodging in its familiar vein  
that welcomes it like an old friend  
returning home from war  
as I pull the trigger  
and feed my blood its daily dose.  
Today it's the memory of our second date –  
us laid out under the stars,  
lying on my tattered old blanket  
in a place I had never dreamed of sharing  
with anyone but myself,  
and all I could see was light of the moon  
reflecting down on you.  
Your smile's illumination became my North Star,  
guiding my path to the promise land  
like the Wise Men to Jesus.  
Only this time my salvation  
was not found in the birth of a child  
but in the blooming warmth filling the space in my chest  
where only darkness had made its home before you.  
And even now the distant fading of my high  
reminds me that it was all just a illusion,  
the feeling of completion just an imitation  
of the real thing.

AS THE MOON

By Sarah Weiler

Be as the moon,  
Whose borrowed shine  
Is child's grace  
That knows no grief  
For losing face  
And bears with pride  
Her silver wreath;

And as the sun,  
Whose passion breath,  
Cares not to keep  
But gift ten-fold,  
To freely give  
'Til both grow old  
And leave us here,

Example far  
Though 'membrance near,  
To be the moon,  
Beloved star,  
Who without fear  
Shone midnight noon

And proved us then,  
Though worth be weighed,  
That love is light  
Not worthy made.

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**Dylan Wilson** is a (soon to be) graduate student from Canton, Massachusetts, although he dislikes that those are the first two labels that come to mind. Realistically, he is nothing like a graduate student should be, nor does he hold any kind of allegiance to where he resides. Wilson would rather be identified with what he hopes to be: a father, landlord and writer (in that order). This being Wilson's first publication, he's not sure if he should move to some French Quarter and give up paraphernalia, or just continue wearing his contacts. But then again, I never have enjoyed tea and he always loses that little green-white double-sided containers.

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**YOU DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE STOLEN**

By Dylan Wilson

i used to steal stationary from a ritzy office building  
down on Boylston street. the security guards  
were less than vigilant, some just didn't give a shit.  
outside there was a small patio-café thing  
that got quiet after the clinking of happy hour,  
like breezy peace on patio furniture  
with some whiskey and a p.s.

i never saw the sense in paying for fancy paper  
but you said it was like pheromone nostalgia.  
i ordered you a glass of blush wine  
from some out of state vineyard.  
it always just sat there in glass sweat.  
still, it felt better pretending you were  
stuck in traffic or working late. the waitress  
thought i got stood up quite a bit.

i tried to not write things that would upset  
your lover. (i hope he never found them.)  
the whole process was too romantic;  
i threw away the first drafts,  
they were naughty & smelled of whiskey.  
you would have liked them and sprayed  
perfume on the parchment, but they were  
handcuffs you couldn't get pleasure from.

i bet he only wrote you off, never letters or lyrics;  
no ode to the way you always curved  
your 'K' and bulged your 'B' when you wrote.  
i lived in your penmanship. those whitegreen,  
coiled, whimsical lines around the paper.  
they existed for us, a kind of  
poetic poignancy seen only in films  
and bottles of ink.

it was probably the second drafts,  
those dumbed down small talks  
that made you stay with him. maybe it was  
the stationary. in any case, the waitress  
got a fat tip for her attentiveness.  
i would have stolen you on stationary,  
but the patio was peaceful  
and the drinks were cold.

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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 book, *And Then I Smiled: Reflections on a Life Not Yet Complete* was released in February 2014. 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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### NUMB

By Dean K Miller

A flame dances-Winter exhales inside.  
Hanging daggers of ice protect the emptiness-  
A heart stolen of life.  
New fallen snow quilts the roof,  
Muffles footsteps on creaking slats of wood.  
Dropped to the floor, the wine bottle echoes despair.

A longing haunts the cabin  
The nights-hollow and drawn.  
She waits for the break of day  
Knowing life is abandoned.  
A flame dances-Winter exhales inside.

Her restless soul reaches for warmer climes.  
Memories try to bring him back  
To revive the death that steals the night  
And darkens the day.  
Hanging daggers of ice protect the emptiness.

Amber coals strain to warm the air,  
Dying crackles of energy spent.  
She shuffles across the room,  
Peers inside the wood stove and sees  
A heart stolen of life.

Silence now seldom creased-  
A spoon set in a bowl,  
A splash of water upon her face.  
Life is muted-  
New fallen snow quilts the roof.

She knows the time has come  
Yet can't remember how long  
It has been.  
Desperate cries of sorrow  
Muffle footsteps on creaking slats of wood.

No one will come for her.  
She understands and doesn't care.  
Unmeasured time passes.  
Evening descends. A veil cloaks her senses.  
Dropped to the floor, the wine bottle echoes despair.

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**Philip Jackey**, a Midwest poet, was born and raised in South Bend, Indiana. His work has appeared in journals such as *Torrid Literature*, *The Write Place* at the *Write Time*, *Sundog Lit* and *Sixfold Magazine*. When he's not writing, you can likely find him crawling with his daughter on their living room floor, mastering the art of baby talk.

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### SOPHIA'S DREAM

By Philip Jackey

My baby Sophia still smiles before sunrise,  
on a day mundane as any other,  
before the minutes in the hour have exhausted  
every single attempt to cope.

Dreaming softly under twirling butterflies,  
the cradle lullaby carries her away  
to a far off land of baby rattles and pacifiers;  
bumbo seats and rocking chairs  
and toy blocks ideal for crawling to a red horizon,

where missing & exploited children don't cry anymore;  
their once freezing fingers are now kept warm,  
nestled deep inside the fur of Teddy Ruxpin himself.

And beyond that a field of daffodils—  
row after row of golden thimbles  
in the middle of pinwheels painted ivory,  
feet above a hundred bunnies  
made of plush except for their hearts,  
beating forever beside a gracious sun  
serenading along mommy's voice.

And past the shimmering saffron meadow,  
my Sophia awakes with ocean blue eyes  
given to her by her mother's mother, who's now an angel  
because a very bad man decided to shoot her with a gun  
and she died in real life. Now she's side by side  
with the Patron Saints of children and wisdom,  
guarding the pinkest of barriers and patiently waiting  
for my daughter's next nap so they can once again  
let loose the childproof gates and gladly rejoin  
my beautiful baby to her beautiful village  
of make believe and play pretend.

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**Susan Martin** is a retired English and creative writing teacher. She has had poetry and short fiction published in several literary magazines and anthologies. Most recently she has had poetry published in *Improv 2013*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Still Crazy Literary Magazine*, and the *Society of Classical Poets*. She was a prize winner in Oneal Walters 2009 Women's Inspirational Contest and the New Jersey Society's 2012 Annual Contest. She is a member of the Jersey Shore Poets and is active in Monmouth County poetry events.

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### PRAYER WALL

By Susan Martin

Crying their need to God,  
they pin their prayers written on tear-shaped cutouts  
to a bulletin board in the basement  
of a church social hall.

Pray for Theresa who is in a coma,  
for Melody who needs a job,  
for our family. There is  
anger and turmoil every day.

Pray for an abused mom  
with two young children,  
for Danny struggling with alcoholism,  
for Emily, a teenager,  
who must deal with mental illness.

Pray for Mary  
who shows signs of dementia,  
for Ann who suffers from depression,  
for Justin taking the SAT's  
and is scared to death.

Pray for Bob who suffered a stroke,  
for Paul who contracted MRSA  
after cancer surgery,  
for my parents whose home  
was flooded in Hurricane Sandy.

Pray for Terry, still in Afghanistan,  
for my sister, Janice,  
despondent since our mother's death,  
for Ann, caregiver to her husband,  
ill herself.

Pray for everyone who does not love  
or does not feel loved  
that they may find both.

Oh the love that begs hope,  
and the faith that is love, a miracle in itself.  
Pray for those who can pin their faith  
to a bulletin board,  
That God may answer their prayers.

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**Chris Farrell** is a poet from Southbury, Connecticut. His work has appeared in such publications as *The Aureorean* and *The Barefoot Review*, as well as others. He earned his MFA in Poetry from Western Connecticut State University and currently teaches English at Westchester Community College.

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### BETWEEN SHORES

By Chris Farrell

This isn't really about you.

Sorry.

If this were about you, why am I here?

If it's about me, why are you here?

Here we are,

You and I.

I go East, to the shore,

and you're not there

for the ride

away from suburbia,

catching only a glimpse of lit cities

from the highway until I dig my toes into the sand,

the way they do in books and poems and movies and songs

because I know no other way

and doubt another way exists.

Then there are days or weeks or months

and I go West, to the shore,

and you're not there

for the travel and plane and sky,

for chewing gum and popping ears

until the country is behind me again

and all that's changed is the direction

my toes point and the entire life

I've lived between one shore and the other.

Meals and dreams and conversations exist between the shores

and every cell in me has died and been reborn

between East and West

and for you it's fifteen lines and the blink of an eye.

And you say, "I know this feeling.

I know what it means to feel

the sand between my toes

and the breeze that cools my skin

in the hot sun and brings the waves crashing.

We are alike, you and I."

But you have a different beach,

a different shore. And so we

have both been to some beach.

What does this make us? Friends?

I could use more friends.

And so you have made this yours -

somehow about you -

after all.

It's my own narcissism -

or solipsism -

that I want my shore to be mine

and not yours because I

understand the rest of it -

that the shore is not the shore,

but everything that led me there,

and of what use is the path that led me if you will take mine

and make it yours?

This is not to say I would not - do not - do the same to you.

I will only understand what you say

as it relates to me.

Sorry.

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**Jean Ann Owens** has written since her early adolescent years, and has a vast repertoire of poems. *Wealth*, is in *The Best Poems of 1997*, and received a golden award in John Campbell's World of Poetry Contest, in 1989. "Black Princess", is in *The Best Poems of 1998* and received an Editor's Choice award in 1996.

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### DO YOU KNOW ME

By Jean Ann Owens

I was walking in the bar  
You were playing the piano  
I left to go upstairs to refresh  
Came back down  
I had a silk gown on  
The color like purple  
You looked at me  
I looked at you  
Your eyes sparkled at me  
My eyes sparkled at you  
We both stood up  
At the same time  
Then left  
Two weeks went by  
I went back to the bar  
I was playing the piano  
I saw you coming down the stairs  
You were dressed in a purple tuxedo  
Everything stopped  
The ladies turned their heads  
And looked at you  
Then smiled  
I knew right away  
It was my lucky day  
I still had  
The sparkle that was  
In your eyes  
I stood up  
Then walked by  
You said hi  
I said hi  
The next day I saw  
You coming out of a restaurant  
I'm just getting out of the car  
To walk to work  
You stop me  
Do You Know Me  
No, I don't know you  
Well my name is  
Erick  
Well my name is  
Jean Ann  
Well I do know you  
No, you don't know me  
You just know my name  
Is Jean Ann  
Nothing else  
Well you are right  
Why don't we see each

Other more often  
Ok, that won't hurt  
A year later  
We married  
I guess you can say  
You Do Know Me  
Now

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**Monica Lynn Moraca** received honorable mention for the “Your Assignment” contest sponsored by Writer’s Digest in September 2004. 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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### TRANQUILITY GARDENS

By Monica Lynn Moraca

The angels have stopped weeping  
a sunken feeling of my timid steps as  
the loam’s fine hair crackles with a deep gruff.  
Clasping the moist soil in my palms,  
I stroke the mound and mumble a quick prayer,  
showering the dirt into my matted hair, wanting to feel,  
wanting peace . . .  
It was serene, it was surreal.  
The mighty oak hovered above and watched me.  
Her limbs swaying gently,  
cradling her leaves to a lullaby.  
She was their guardian.  
Her roots were like fingers,  
digging into the brown flesh where rocks mounted  
her berth.  
She shelters the lonely souls.  
She shelters me.  
I ran around and around in circles,  
like a wild child frolicking in the open fields.  
Oh the tranquility . . .  
I pretend to play hide-go-seek,  
running, skipping and tagging each  
monolith as though they were my friends.  
Hugging, caressing and then I suddenly stopped.  
Sweat glistened on my fevered skin as  
I began to weep  
tears of sadness, tears of joy . . .  
I raised my arms towards the heavens  
and chanted the names; Otto, James, George, Blanche . . .  
and it went on and on.  
I covered my face and fell to my knees  
pondering why oh why?  
Then the angels began to weep.  
I held out my hands and gathered  
the tiny droplets and scurried over to *Mary*.  
My fingers grazing the stillness of her being,  
as she cuddled in her arms ‘our infant’.  
Let it rain so I can wash away the green moss of all  
the unkempt and forgotten souls.  
But it did not matter.  
They were human once.  
Memories erased, no more flowers -  
their mistress in her black garbs comes no more.  
They are finally free.  
How I envy all of you.  
No more pain, no more suffering . . . such tranquility.  
Hush, I hear the leaves chanting,  
the angels have stopped weeping.  
I must leave this paradise; I must leave you all for now,  
for hell on earth is past those iron gates.

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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 has 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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### MY MOTHER'S TEARS

By Marchell Dyon Jefferson

I wipe them dry with hands themselves no longer young.  
The salt of her tears, the anguish of an age  
Soon to be disappearing

There isn't any gift I can give her  
No funny face I can make to erase time.  
Hollow are my words on this final day of her independence.

No soothsaying tongue or a classic crooner  
Can gather enough melody to carry away this sadness  
She is a bright bird conscious of losing all of her feathers.

To her, her tears are an embarrassment  
Another chance to admit a lack of strength  
She gives to me now the gift of herself  
Something when I was a child  
I never saw, a reality she never revealed.

I do not want to remember her this way.  
I do not want to question divinity's choice,  
But why do we grow old?

Today, we children moved mom out.  
From the home of her youth,  
And gently wheeled her into a nursing facility

Mom's memories to be stored, filed, and dust mite,  
Left till after her final breath and then rummage through  
Its worth judge by heirs that will be too busy with grief  
To recapture her warmth  
To save what we most loved, the essence of the woman.

Still, she thinks of me and my sadness  
Even now as her days decline.  
Between silent tears of pain

Mom holds my left hand to her cheek.  
Mom's final wisdom pearls my fingertips  
Mom said to me as she cries, "love is everything."  
In that moment I believe she is right.

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**Paul Weidknecht's** stories can be found in *Once Around the Sun: Sweet, Funny, and Strange Tales for All Seasons*, the newest anthology by the Bethlehem Writers Group, LLC. Publications include work in *Appalachia*, *Best New Writing 2015*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Rosebud*, *Shenandoah*, and *Structo* (UK), among others. He lives in Phillipsburg, New Jersey where he has completed a collection of short fiction. For more, please visit: [www.paulweidknecht.com](http://www.paulweidknecht.com).

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### HOLDING THE ACE OF AGE

By Paul Weidknecht

On their eighth grade trip to close the year,  
five girls stole from Six Flags  
stuffed bags with new goods,  
each without receipts to cover tales told.  
Sweatshirts and tees and bucket hats  
and ball caps and stuffed animals  
and penny jars stamped with zodiac signs  
and plastic hobo stogies tipped with fake ashes  
and gag sunglasses that were never funny anyway.  
Five hundred thirty-nine dollars and twenty-eight cents  
—giant in '85—their haul on the long table  
divided into mounds to bear account.  
Asking who won, joking to keep some,  
knowing the penalties of law didn't apply  
to theme parks or those entering high school.

Soon, a suited woman stood in the doorway,  
dressed more for a board meeting or parent-teacher night,  
chin up and shoulders back; stoic, the figurehead on a ship.  
The girls spotted their principal—and giggled.  
Swelling to laughter and crashing down the row,  
animated, exaggerated, the look of a pie-eating contest,  
but slow, mouths frozen open over the five piles.  
The principal grateful for answers she wanted to hear:  
No, the park would not press charges.  
Yes, they would have to leave.  
Yes, they could sit on the bus in the lot.  
But they had no idea she was holding the ace of age,  
a player seasoned and skilled, skipping  
the chiding of children and ephemeral scolding:  
though decades past, she, too, had been an eighth grade girl;  
and this was June.

“And none of you will go to the dance.”

The first shrieked, another groaned, faces twisted,  
sickened by the simple sentence.  
They cried and wailed and pleaded and begged  
and banged on the table with their fists  
and threw back their heads from the pies.  
And fifteen minutes later filed  
behind the figurehead leading the walk to the bus,  
all talk of what dress to buy,  
what hairstyle to wear, or what boy to see,  
a sudden waste of time.

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**Amy S. Pacini** is a freelance creative writer and the Poetry Editor for Long Story Short ezine. Her work has been widely published in literary journals and publications including *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Lost Tower Publications*, *Kind Of A Hurricane Press*, *Page & Spine*, *Cyclamens And Swords*, *Making Waves Poetry Anthology*, *All Things Girl*, *Mag-napoets*, *Hope Whispers*, and *Hanging Moss Journal*. Pacini writes poetry, short stories, personal essays, and motivational quotes. She is the owner and operator of A.S.P. INK and its site [www.amyspacini.com](http://www.amyspacini.com).

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### **BARD'S BLOCK**

By Amy S. Pacini

*What do I say*

When I don't feel the melodic muse  
Passionately pulsing through my vacuous veins?

*What can I write*

When my mind won't let literally loose  
Of thoughts and ideas too humanly obtuse?

*How will I feel*

After I berate myself with negatively narrow minded notions  
Of analytically angry abuse and sabotaging self loathing speech?

*How will I sound*

When I don't have a vibrant voice left and my literary luster  
No longer shines through a single crack of creativity?

*Where can I breathe*

The artistic air of creativity and inspiration  
In the stifling smog of discouragement and despair?

*Where can I find*

Perfect paradisiacal peace and pleasure  
In a wounded warrior's world of carnage and casualties?

*When will I taste*

The glitzy glamour and sizzling success  
Of freelancer's freedom and writer's wealth?

*When will I escape*

From this hibernating hollow of stinging sorrow and pin prick pain  
And eventually end my distressing battle with bard's block?

*Who will I see*

If I look beneath the skin-deep surface  
Of my anatomical abnormalities, beastly blemishes and unflattering flaws  
In the mortifying mirror of hideous horrors and inferior illusions?

*Who will I become*

If I miserably move on with torturously tethered timidity and feeble fear of failure  
Without persistently pressing ahead along artistic avenues  
Of poetic pursuits and expressional endeavors?

*What will await me*

If I persistently plow through the bumbling brambles and thorny thicket of this forested fury  
And fearlessly follow the unexplored pathways of the literary life  
Without worrisome wavering or skeptical second-guessing?

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**Owen Vince**, by way of his own background, is a technical writer and games and music critic, a graduate of Russian literature living on coastal Wales. He has been writing poetry and prose for a little while, now, but have only just begun to seek places for it to be published.

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**/HUNGER**

By Owen Vince

how do you measure it  
your starvation? in measured tape  
wrapped along these fine frail glancing  
bones which keep us, so they say,  
together ; and yet  
i've heard how under  
great strain the blood slurs and soils in its veins,  
not rushing and everything a struggle your skin  
paling visibly and eyes sinking like ships  
beneath the waves until  
you are  
    lost.

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**Rick Hartwell** is a retired middle school (remember the hormonally-challenged?) English teacher living in Moreno Valley, California. He believes in the succinct, that the small becomes large; and, like the Transcendentalists and William Blake, that the instant contains eternity. Given his “druthers,” if he’s not writing, Rick would rather be still tailing plywood in a mill in Oregon. He can be reached at [rdhartwell@gmail.com](mailto:rdhartwell@gmail.com).

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OPTIONS

By Richard Hartwell

Dreams lie on opposite sides,  
yet which side should you take?  
Innermost fantasies one way,  
nightmare phantasms the other.  
With your fall fast approaching,  
choice is vital, but without directions  
from which end should you start?

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

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**THE PERFECT PERFORMANCE**

By Tyler Pufpaff

Once the victim, I now must play the perpetrator  
Sliding by with a lifetime of crime  
To keep from being all that she is,  
To keep it all together. Whatever's left.

All for the sake of breaking the pattern I do a tedious task that lacks heartfelt intent.  
But who could forsake, disown, and cast off another like that!?  
Not I, and so we are opposites, as Night is to Day.

And it makes me feel no better doing the right thing because I will always remember:  
How her words cut so sharp, every evening just after four  
The broken promises that left her word less than that of a Vietnamese Dong  
The burnt bridges, billowing in smoke, choking you everywhere you went

And now that those flames are long gone,  
That my days of dodging mortars and ever losing games of minesweeper are over,  
I walk back to her.

It is not the smoke that bothers me now, it is the ashen rubble of her errors that have stained my  
Feet, the lingering embers wandering for something else to ignite. But I spit them out in hatred, so that I  
May try to forgive her. But I just keep spitting.

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**Kobina Wright**, editor and contributor to *The Wrighter*, is a second generation Southern California native who wrote her third volume of poetry titled, *Say It! Say Genocide!!* – dedicated to the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. It was in 2009 that she co-authored a volume of nuler poetry with friend and fellow poet, Lisa Bartley Lacey, titled *A Crime And A Simplification Of Something Sublime*. In 2010 she wrote a volume of nuler poetry titled, *50* dedicated to the late Michael Jackson. In 2013 Wright’s literary and art works had been published in: *The Bicycle Review*; *Boxcar Poetry Review*; *Burning Word Literary Journal*; *Crack the Spine*; *The Fiction Week Literary Review*; *The Missing Slate*; *Orion headless*; *The Passionate Transitory*; *Subliminal Interiors* and *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

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**LIKE TRADITION**

By Kobina Wright

An electric blanket  
wide eyes comatose limbs didn’t help.  
I smelled the turkey  
basil and honey.

Pink Himalayan salt and black pepper  
baking through the night to  
pry the neck from a liquid cavity.

I vacuumed every room after frosting the cake  
leaving messages for expected guests  
I picked up drinks  
tea soda San Pellegrino.

I debated seeding the lawn deciding to wait  
until everyone was out shopping and the neighborhood quiet  
and the refrigerator was full of leftovers.

Only mother came  
laughing and eating with the two of us  
like the house was full.  
It’s starting to feel like tradition.

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**Athar C. Pavis** grew up in New York City, attended Mount Holyoke College and studied literature in France. She lives both in Maine and in France where she teaches at the University of Paris. She has published her poetry in magazines in the UK (New Poetry, Candelabrum) and in the United States in *Explorations*, *Measure*, *The Eclectic Muse*, *The Comstock Review*, *the Avatar Review*, *Oberon*, and *Trinacria*. She is currently working on a collection of poetry to be entitled *The Power to Revoke*.

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**LOVERS WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN**

*for D.P.*

By Athar C. Pavis

He must have seen, even against the light  
The trace of crow's feet, a droop in the mouth,  
A flaccid look about the neck, and jowls  
Waiting to appear. Her cheeks had fallen

But still in homage to her youth she wore  
Heeled boots laced high in the new retro style,  
A dress of jersey knit molding her form,  
A low neckline. I think he saw her

For the first time, the way a woman sees  
She has grown old, out of the blue, betrayed  
By what the mirror says, and his youth too,  
Twice lost because of what he thought he'd had,

A lithesome girl. And so he let her go  
With no good-bye and no regret. He would,  
He thought, forget, and so he did. But when  
Night comes, he sometimes wonders how her braid

Would look undone, and whether other men  
Are with her now, while she does what she can:  
And so they wait, lovers who might have been,  
He for perfection, she for another man.

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**B. Diehl** is a poet from Phillipsburg, New Jersey. He discovered his passion for reading and writing at a very young age (age five to be exact) and all the way from kindergarten to his last year in college, he wrote short fiction stories in his spare time. However, in January, 2013, Diehl found his inner-poet...and he has been writing poetry, nonstop, ever since.

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**BARGAIN BOOK RACKS**

By B. Diehl

Pathways to new beginnings,  
marked at fifty percent off:  
Romanticism and Realism,  
handmade chapbooks of wordplay,  
fiction and nonfiction,  
self-help and biography —  
all desperate for fingerprints,  
frayed pages, coffee stains.

Few will make it straight  
to the checkout counter from here.  
Most will only slide further  
and further down the slope —  
further away from a heart to call "home,"  
crashing to ground levels:  
the buy-one-get-one-free rack,  
the dollar rack, the quarter rack.

By the end of each month,  
the racks are stripped bare.  
New failures are drafted  
and pulled from the shelves.

The bestsellers laugh  
as the saddening cycle goes on —  
beginning with neglect,  
ending with a fading beauty,  
buried in storage, alive and in vain.

It truly is a shame:  
wormholes to alternate worlds,  
now hidden from science, eternally.

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**A.J. Huffman** has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her eighth solo chapbook, *Drippings from a Painted Mind*, won the 2013 Two Wolves Chapbook Contest. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, *Kritya*, and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. [www.kindofahurricanepress.com](http://www.kindofahurricanepress.com)

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**NINE**

By A.J. Huffman

degrees outside.  
99.4 degrees inside  
my mind, and gravity  
seems to have quadrupled  
its effects. I cannot lift my head.  
My body is working against me,  
I am no longer upright. Upended  
is the way my world looks, feels.  
I have begun to believe I am alien,  
birthing myself into the sky. Nothing  
is clear. I cut a fragmentary pill  
from its foil, force it down my throat,  
bury myself in the obliterating false  
warmth of another downy comforter, and wait  
for oblivion to claim me or spit me  
back out, rejected and clearly stamped:  
*still living.*

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**John Repp's** most recent poetry collections are *Music Over the Water*, a chapbook published in 2013 by Alice Greene & Co., and *Fat Jersey Blues*, 2013 winner of the Akron Poetry Prize, just out from the University of Akron Press.

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**ESTUARY**

Jenner, California

By John Repp

We laugh in sudden cold—  
    terns, gulls, faraway  
        child's shriek, blue-green

current, swirls  
    of salt & fresh,  
        seals slabbed

on the sandbar, cows  
    mooring from somewhere  
        high on the headland.

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**Holly Day** was born in Hereford, Texas, “The Town Without a Toothache.” She and her family currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she teaches writing classes at the Loft Literary Center. Her published books include the nonfiction books *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, and *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, and the poetry books *Late-Night Reading for Hardworking Construction Men* (The Moon Publishing) and *The Smell of Snow* (ELJ Publications).

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**SHELTER**

By Holly Day

It's easy for you to go home without me. It's easy  
for you to take my hand and say no, like I'm  
some sort of wounded bird that wants to follow you to bed  
white wings spread as if I really could go if I wanted to  
but really, still struggling to deal with  
so much impending solitude.

for days now, for weeks, there is no other place  
that will have me. My heartache grows fainter  
as we talk of my freedom, the places I should go  
now that we're through. There are people out there  
just waiting for someone like me

you say, as I try to picture my white wings spread  
carrying me to rooftop nests in Holland  
fields of wild grain in Italy.

**CONFISCATED**

By Holly Day

She puts her fingers over the disaster, closes  
dead white eyes once filled with pain. She kisses  
his tiny feet one last time, closes the lid, the end, the end.

Stars shine bright and scream of miracles, illuminates  
the fresh hole that yawns in the graveyard soil.  
She denies this end, outside the door, she denies  
that there is an end.

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**Justin Rose** is a twenty year old Wisconsin native in his junior year of college pursuing a Professional Writing degree. Growing up, reading was always one of his passions. He immersed himself from an early age in classic literature, and his love for reading never faded. As he read, he developed the desire to write, to create for others the same wonders that reading created for him. Since the age of twelve, Rose taught himself to write. And, in high school writing classes and his time in college, he has striven to hone the raw skills he's gathered in his own pursuits.

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### MY WORDS

By Justin Rose

A lilted patter of phrases falls,  
Gilded in lithe, golden laughter.  
Tinkling notes of silver bells  
Ring within your laughter.  
Flashing glints of pleasure flit  
And play across your eyes.  
I feel a warmth, unknown, unfelt,  
Dawning deep inside.  
Dull, at first, dim beams in mist,  
They swell to fill the dark.  
Cold self-hate and bitterness  
Fade. Long-held guilt I discard.  
With all my failings, faults, and fears.  
My words still elicit your mirth.  
A single moment, faultless, clear,  
Reveals my words have worth.

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Recently nominated for two Pushcart awards, **April Salzano** teaches college writing in Pennsylvania where she lives with her husband and two sons. She is currently working on a memoir on raising a child with autism and several collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Convergence*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Deadsnakes*, *Visceral Uterus*, *Salome*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. The author also serves as co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press ([www.kindofahurricanepress.com](http://www.kindofahurricanepress.com)).

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### IT'S MORE A DREAM THAN ANYTHING

By April Salzano

I find a hole in a wall and I crawl  
inside. No one can see me  
because I am not myself. The sky is not  
blue, but irrelevantly hued, a snow globe  
dome I can crack with my teeth, should I  
choose to. I move behind plaster.  
I am a rat weaving between studs,  
balancing on rafters without a second  
thought. Everyone is home,  
sleeping their stupid slumber  
as I chew at the insulation  
that warms them,  
tiptoe across closed lips  
with my filthy feet,  
gnaw right through hearts  
that never miss a beat.

# FICTION

## THE CAKE

By Grant E. Fetters

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**Grant E. Fetters** passed away on June 6, 2014. He was a writer from Madisonville, Tennessee. His work has appeared in multiple publications, including *Backpacker Magazine*, *The Professional Photographer Magazine*, *District 63 Toastmasters Newsletter*, and others. Fetters held memberships in Chattanooga Writers Guild; Knoxville Writers Guild (KWG); Writing 4 Children...With/KWG; and Etowah Writers Alliance

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In my memory, one of the all-time greatest treats I've ever had was Grandma's cake with her yummy, smooth, and sweet caramel frosting. I have such fondness for this cake that it makes my mouth water just thinking about it.

When I was young, my family and I went to Grandma's house for Sunday dinner. She was a fabulous cook and always had her caramel frosted cake for dessert. Everyone spoke reverently of this cake. You could see in their eyes that it had very special meaning to them. One reason for her making this cake was that it was simple to make, and another was that Grandpa just loved it. It is hard for me to remember a time when this dessert was not available at Grandma's house.

The first time I tasted this delight, we had just finished our dinner, and Grandma asked me to fetch the cake from the pantry, a room about the size of a good-sized walk-in closet. In it, was a piece of furniture called, a food safe. It was much like a china hutch but not as tall, and in place of glass, there was window screen was stapled all the way around it to keep out flies. The cake rested on one of the shelves in the food safe, I grabbed it. The cake was in a very old, well-used cake pan. As I carried the cake to the kitchen, I could smell the frosting lofting up from the pan. Grandma started to cut pieces and place them on small blue china plates. I took each piece of cake out to everyone who was still sitting at the table. Everyone was still there; no one had left the table. They were all waiting for their little slice of heaven. One by one, everyone got a piece of cake. I could sense the excitement building in anticipation of such a treat. Fresh coffee was poured, and everyone began to dive into his or her very own piece of cake.

I sat down at the table, my fork at the ready.

That's when my Grandpa spoke up and said, "What was that? I think I saw someone on the front porch. He was looking directly at me and saying, "Did you see that?"

Well, of course, I had not, so I got up from the table to look out the front window. I could not see anyone, nor did I hear anything either. I headed back to the table; after all my cake was there waiting for me, and I was so looking forward to eating it. Let's not forget that yummy caramel frosting. I got back to my chair and found that my cake had been given a frosting-ectomy!

"What!" I said.

I looked at everyone at the table. I looked at each one individually. I looked on everyone's plate. I was missing my frosting.

"Wait, just a minute there!" I said.

I was in distress, but no one was paying any attention to me. I looked all over the table to see if my frosting had fallen off my cake by mistake. Nope, not on the table. I looked under the table to make sure it had not fallen on the floor. Nope, not there either. No one seemed to understand the problem at hand. Now, it was time to start the questioning, the accusations.

"Do you have my cake?"

"Do *you* have my cake?"

By this time, most everybody has finished his or her own piece of cake and moved away from the table. It seemed no one knew where my cake frosting went.

"Your cake is right there on your plate," someone said. "What are you griping about? You must have already eaten it and just don't remember."

"I did not eat the frosting! I would have remembered that little point."

I sat at the table with Grandpa; he was drinking his coffee, and me with just a piece of yellow cake, no frosting.

I must have had a pitiful look on my face because Grandpa said, "What's wrong, boy?"

I proceeded to explain that somehow I had lost my frosting. He offered to help me look for it. We looked for a couple of minutes with no success.

Then Grandpa said, "Just go get another piece."

"Ok. I could do that!"

I went out to the kitchen and Grandma cut another piece for me and said, "Keep your eye on this one."

I said, "I will!"

Realizing that something was not as it seemed, I took my new piece of cake back out to the table and sat down next to Grandpa, at his request. I noticed that he glanced up at the front window again.

"What was that?" he says, as he looks towards the window.

I look and then thought, “*That’s was how I lost the last piece of frosting.*” I looked back at Grandpa and saw that he had his butter-knife in hand and was ready for action. I grabbed my fork, and stabbed my cake right down through the top of the frosting and through the middle of the cake, all the way to the plate. Turning my head to look out the window, I could see that no one was there.

“Nope,” I said, “no one there.”

Grandpa started to laugh and cough. He almost fell off his chair. He said that was the first time anyone had ever thought through what happened and figured out how to keep him from swiping the frosting. Grandpa had pulled that same joke on countless people over the years. He’d become an expert at slicing off the top of any cake in one quick movement without disturbing the cake below.

That day I became the favorite grandchild; I could do no wrong. That day I also learned a very valuable lesson: when in doubt, stab the cake.

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Grandpa was a wily old goat, and he loved to play tricks on his grandchildren. After you’ve had the missing frosting trick done to you a few times, Grandpa found it harder and harder to pull that same trick on us, so he had to change it up a little. Grandpa was an equal opportunity prankster. It did not matter if you were young or old. Everybody got the same treatment, if there were someone new at the table, he or she were fair game.

One day we had relatives visiting from quite a distance, and at the dinner table I could see that my grandpa was getting ready to do the ‘missing frosting trick’ on my great aunt Sadie. My aunt was no child, she was the same age as Grandpa. I thought Grandpa was going to get into trouble, so I sat back in my chair and waited for the fireworks to begin.

Aunt Sadie was in the kitchen helping Grandma dish up our desert. As plates were coming out from the kitchen, Grandpa passed them out to each of us kids. With each return to the kitchen, Grandpa placed the last plate, from Sadie, under the table on top of one of his legs. He must have had five or six pieces of cake stacked up under there. On the last trip back to the kitchen, Grandpa leaned over and quickly sliced off the frosting of Sadie’s cake and slid it into his mouth. Grandma and Sadie returned to the table and picked up their conversation just where they had left off.

Aunt Sadie looked down at her cake and stopped abruptly in her tracks. She seemed to be frozen in place. She looked up from her plate with such a puzzled look on her face. Sadie actually lifted her plate, and looked under it trying to find her missing frosting. Her eyes slowly looked across the table to see if, or who took her frosting. She stared at Grandpa for a long time. He was the most likely culprit, but he sat several seats away.

Sadie bent over and looked under the table to see if her frosting had fallen on the floor. I thought for sure she would see the plates stacked up on Grandpa’s leg, but she must not have looked his way.

Silent as a mouse, she did not touch her cake as she rose from the table and walked back out to the kitchen to cut herself another piece of cake. When she got back to the table, she found several empty plates covered with crumbs and a couple of smashed chunks of cake waiting for her. Grandpa brought those extra pieces out from under the table and placed them at Sadie’s seat at the table. Aunt Sadie simply pushed the other plates aside and took her fork and began to eat her cake. She did not say a word.

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When slicing off the frosting did not work on us kids anymore, Grandpa had to come up with a new strategy. Grandpa was typically the first to receive his dessert at the table, and so by the time the last one received their piece, he was done.

Selecting his target, Grandpa would ask, “Would you share your cake with me? I did not get as big a slice as you.”

The unsuspecting mark would want to please Grandpa, so they would always say “Yes.” But the chosen grandchild would also remember that he was the frosting bandit.

I personally was very leery of his intentions and watched him like a hawk.

“Grant, would you mind sharing your piece of cake with me?” Grandpa asked.

“Umm. Yeah?”

“That’s good,” Grandpa would say. “Do you mind if I split your piece?”

“No, I don’t mind. That would be fine with me, I guess?”

“I’ll only take half,” he would say. “Is that alright with you?”

“Umm, yes. I guess so?” I said.

“OK, then,” said Grandpa, and with one quick movement, he sliced off the top half of my cake, *again*. He slid my frosting into his mouth and down it went.

“Aargg!” He got me again. “Why did you do that?” I cried.

“What do you mean, I only took the half I wanted.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Well, I just wanted the top half,” Grandpa said with a grin.

## THE MEMORY DEN

By Justin Rose

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**Justin Rose** is a twenty year old Wisconsin native in his junior year of college pursuing a Professional Writing degree. Growing up, reading was always one of his passions. He immersed himself from an early age in classic literature, and his love for reading never faded. As he read, he developed the desire to write, to create for others the same wonders that reading created for him. Since the age of twelve, Rose taught himself to write. And, in high school writing classes and his time in college, he has striven to hone the raw skills he's gathered in his own pursuits.

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*Back to Bliss.* That's what the sign said in garish neon letters that lit up their rusted settings. I cringed, and my stomach did a tight loop as I approached the unpainted door beneath the sign.

Never having visited a memory den, I felt dirty just entering the building, as if I were identifying with the peeling walls and gritty floors. Entering the dim, smoky interior, I saw a few other customers reclining in torn leather seats, clutching little plastic tokens with numbers and staring dead-eyed at the walls.

Nobody looked very blissful. Kinda fried, maybe a bit frenetic, but definitely not blissful. I thought about turning around, leaving the filthy cave to the addicts and junkies, the basket cases desperate enough to frequent it. But I stayed. I couldn't stand the thought of returning to my empty home, of sleeping in my empty bed.

I took a plastic number—39—from a haggard, skinny little girl behind the counter. I think she was supposed to be sexy. At least, she was dolled up pretty heavily. But no makeup could hide the hard lines on her face and the sag of her skin or the sick, dead-to-the-world-and-I-don't-care look in her eyes. She was clearly a user.

I took a seat between a long-haired guy who sat chewing his plastic number and a scrawny boy of about fourteen. I shuddered to see the child in a place so naturally old.

The long-haired man turned to me and whispered, "Hey, want a real trip?"

I shook my head.

He glanced around cunningly and leaned in closer. He smelled like paint thinner and rotting flesh. There were tiny, speckled blood stains on his shirt as if it were pressing on open wounds.

"I used to do some, do some work for, uh, for pharmaceuticals," he whispered raspily. "Yeah. They, uh, I was like, for tests and stuff. New stuff. I got some real dope, man. Forget the memory den stuff. I give ya some real, some real lift. Interested?"

I edged away and once again thought about leaving. "No," I whispered, my voice trembling slightly. I glanced at his speckled shirt and edged a little farther back.

The man turned around, hunched over, and returned to chewing his plastic number.

I closed my eyes and remembered. Rachel stood in the kitchen, her apron spattered with flour, her hair thrown up in a bun, looking just like a poster, you know, the really old posters from back when people still did kitchen work. Rachel loved the kitchen, loved to work. No matter how many times I told her to let the robot do the work, she'd still be in there, kneading bread dough with her painted nails. I adored her quirks, so old-fashioned.

I walked in and joined her, rubbing cheese on a hole-ridden metal tube. Must have been the last cheese grater in New York. She grinned at me, and we worked together in silence, just content to spend our time together, never mind what we were doing.

"Thirty-one!" The voice fell on my memories like Rachel's bread dough on a bed of flour, scattering them in a thin cloud.

I sighed. Memories were so frail. One moment I held them; the next, they were gone. The simplest thing could kill them: a voice, a light, another memory. The present's tiniest distraction could kill the past's most vital experience.

Humans are designed for the present, for the tiny prison of time in which they feel. The past, the future, they both cover before the present.

I guess that's why I went to the memory den, to give the past a fighting chance.

The long-haired man beside me stood and walked to the desk. The girl at the counter made a face as she took his saliva-ridden token.

Several minutes passed. The girl called another number. I wiped perspiration from my forehead.

The stench of unwashed flesh and rotting food broke my nervous tension. I felt ready to gag as a young woman, grimy and dressed in tattered rags, took the seat beside me.

"You new?" she asked, eyes flickering over my clean suit and tie.

"Yeah, first time," I replied.

"Lose someone?" she asked, slightly softer.

I nodded.

"It helps, really does," she said with a gentle nod.

"You do this often?" I asked, glancing at the needle marks that peppered her arm.

She shrugged. "A few times, not so many as some. But, since my husband—well, it's just made it easier."

I nodded. "I'm sorry. When did he die?"

"Oh, about a month ago. In May."

I paused, wondering if I had heard correctly. "It's August," I said.

She paused. Her eyes clouded. “Wait,” she said, “is it—I mean, already? Wow. I guess it has been a few months.”

I nodded. “What year is it?” I asked, prompted by a morbid curiosity.

She laughed. “Well, I know that much. 2042.”

I smiled. “Sorry, just wondering. I mean, it is a memory den. Some people ...”

“You thought I was lost?” she asked, smirking.

I shook my head. “Oh no, certainly not. Just making sure.”

She nodded. “It’s okay, I get it. I feel sorry for people like that. I often wonder—do they have any idea?”

“I really don’t think so,” I responded, wincing as I looked over her tattered clothing.

On the other side of me, the boy spoke. “Lady, it’s 2044. Where have you been?”

I winced, afraid of how she might respond. I had hoped to be tactful.

The lady smiled at the boy. “Oh sweetie, I’m afraid you’re confused.”

The boy snorted. “Yeah, I’m confused. Right.”

The woman went white and shifted uncomfortably. “I’m just going to—over there,” she whispered, pointing to a chair across the room. She stood shakily and walked away.

The boy turned to me. “Hey, mister, how come you didn’t tell her the year?”

I sighed. “I didn’t want to scare her. Wouldn’t do any good anyway.”

The boy looked down at the floor. “Feels sick not to tell them though.”

Another number was called, and the boy left, throwing a glance of pity at the lost woman. *Poor child, I thought. He shouldn’t know these things.*

I scratched my chin, brushing my fingertips through sandpapery fuzz. *I really need to shave.*

I tried to remember again, tried to prep myself for the coming immersion. Rachel sat on the porch swing, a relic of the past as dear to her as life. I leaned against the doorjamb and stared at her, watched her calf as it flexed to move the swing. Her muscles swelled, and her skin tightened with every rock. Her bare feet shone beneath the porch light, the brightest objects in the evening dim. I smiled. “You know the house creates a better temperature?”

She nodded. “I know.”

“It could synthesize the surroundings. At least—their feelings,” I said.

“I know,” she replied.

“But you’re out here?”

“Yep.” She turned her head and smiled.

“Why?” I grinned as I asked it, staring at her bright teeth, at the subtle curve of her half-smile.

“Life’s lived, not felt,” she replied.

I sat down beside her. She nestled closer. Her chest rested against mine. We sat still until I could feel her heartbeat. Then I whispered, “I love you.”

“Can the house synthesize that?”

“I could check,” I replied.

She laughed. The only other sound was the crickets, a gentle background chirping.

I sat in the lobby of *Back to Bliss* and listened to the chirping until it changed. *Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.* The EKG across the bed counted out Rachel’s life as I clutched her hand. Each beep, each pulse, each waver in the line, represented another moment—forever gone.

“Thirty-nine!” The voice cut short my memory before its familiar end, and I leapt to my feet.

I walked to the counter. “Roger Adkins,” I said, sliding my credit card across the stained desk.

She smiled, or at least her makeup made an upwards heave. “Welcome back, Mr. Adkins. You know where to go?”

I shook my head. “No, first time.”

Her face went blank. “Oh, of course. Right down that hallway. You’re in room six.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

I entered the room slowly, trembling slightly. It was mostly empty, dimly lit. In the center, a young lady in a lab coat sat beside a large, reclining chair, like the chair I used to sit in as a child at the dentist’s office. I smiled as I saw the chair, thinking of cluttered offices filled with knickknacks and puzzles and that sour tasting cream the dentist puts on your teeth.

The nurse motioned me to sit.

The leather was cold, stiff, the kind of cheap covering that never fits to your form, the kind that you can hear hiss when you sit on it. I shivered as I pressed my neck down. I felt a wet swab brushing my arm and glanced down as the nurse smeared iodine onto my vein.

I grimaced. “Sedative?”

She nodded. “We could do the procedure while you’re awake, but it’s safer if you’re out. The mind is more pliable in the subconscious, more susceptible to influence.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“And what kind of experience are you looking for? We can access highs, suppressed memories, physical pleasures, instances of abuse, trauma ...”

“Abuse?” I asked.

She smiled. “Oh, yes, it’s one of our top sellers. People love the masochism line.”

I shook my head. “Nothing like that. I was—married.”

“You want her back?”

I nodded. “Can you do that?”

She smiled. “Of course. Just lie back while I inject the sedative. I’ll hook up the machine while you sleep.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

I felt a slight chill in my arm as the sedative entered my vein. It warmed as it flowed further into my body. Then nothing.

The memories came, but not as memories, not as the past. They came as the present, resurrected from the subconscious and converted a second time into my narrow realm of experience.

My arm was asleep. I tugged gently, and Rachel murmured, shifting her weight. I bit my lip. My arm really hurt, but I couldn’t bear to wake her. I glanced at her face. She was beautiful in her sleep. Her muscles relaxed, the color came into her cheeks, and her nervous energy faded. So peaceful. So clear. So pure.

I sighed. It was going to be a long evening. I kissed her forehead and leaned back against the couch, careful not to move my arm from behind her.

Jolt. I felt an almost physical blast in my chest as emotions, long forgotten, resurrected, as dead passions burst to life. My heart raced, and I wanted to leap. But I couldn’t I stayed sitting, stayed staring, and felt the warmth of new love building in my chest.

A flash of white. Blankness replaced the intervening time, the dark past that was devoid of Rachel. And then, another memory, another joy, a deeper joy.

We lay in the bed of my truck, music drifting quietly from the cab, and searched for constellations. We dreamed of the day when men would touch the stars, when human life would burst from the prison of Sol’s gravity.

We kissed for the first time. Moments later, I told her I loved her.

Lying in the truck, I felt a tight pain in my chest, a blast of despair so strong that I could hardly breathe. It was as if two worlds had clashed, two men’s emotions run into each other and rebounded, each in horror. My current feelings conflicting with the past’s joys.

I nearly screamed. But the memory moved on. Rachel barely noticed. She just kept pointing to the stars.

Moments flashed by. Firsts came and went. Lasts lingered. The whiteness ate the space without Rachel, and the moments with her melded into a constant present. Gradually, our life together slipped by and finally ended. Awakening, I nearly fell from the medical chair, gasping and clutching at my chest. “Too much!” I said, choking on my own words.

The nurse laughed. “How do you feel?”

I glanced down at my trembling hands. “Alive,”

She nodded. “Good, hope to see you here again.”

I nodded. “Doubt it, but thank you.”

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\_ack to Bl\_ss, the sign said, its neon letters flickering weakly over an unpainted steel door. I shuffled forward nervously. I had never done this before. The broken sign, the steel door, the peeling paint—it all made me a little uncomfortable.

I entered and approached the counter. A sickly girl handed me a worn plastic token—46. “Hey Roger,” she said, smiling beneath her makeup.

I glanced at her curiously. “How do you know my name?”

She shrugged. “Forget it, take a seat.”

I nodded and approached the torn leather sofas that lay scattered about the lobby. I sat beside a young lad, about sixteen. I sighed. He was too young for a place like this.

As I began my wait, a ragged woman shuffled up. “Hey, what’s the date?” she asked slowly, her voice hollow and pleading.

“February sixth,” I said.

She paused, looking slightly puzzled.

The boy beside me rolled his eyes. “And it’s still 2046 if you want to know,” he said. “Just like it was last time you asked.”

I laughed. “I think you’re a bit confused. It’s 2044.”

## WHEN I TELL THE STORY OF WHAT JUST HAPPENED

By Alex Hallwyler

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**Alex Hallwyler** is a writer residing in Las Cruces, NM, where he is pursuing an MFA at New Mexico State University. Originally from Portland, OR, he alternates between obsessing over the sun and the rain, and both excites and calms his mind with other non-writing activities such as composing and playing music, eating burritos, observing and attempting to decipher human behavior for all its beauty and its flaws, and talking in hopelessly romantic ways about being hopelessly romantic. His work has previously appeared in *DIN Magazine*.

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I'll probably start with:

"The other day this scruffy homeless guy invites me out to lunch and I say, "No, I can't. I'm heading out of town."

I told him this even though I'm really going to be in town all summer, in this long searing summer where the sun burns you with a tingle at first before moving so many dermal layers down after so many days and turns your skin into scorched leather. I'm not going anywhere this summer, but that's not what I told the man. So, yes, I lied, just like I've learned to lie in these situations.

I lied to him, this hobo or bum or homeless or whatever you're really supposed to call him. And he just looked down at the uneven ground full of potholes, his face with sparse yellow teeth and discolored skin from so many months in so much heat. I enjoy lunch, and I enjoy lunch with people, lots of people, but when a dirty, sketchy-eyed fifty-something-year-old man with a duffel bag and black lines around his lips extends his smelly-looking dry-as-hell hand and asks you if you want to meet him at Furr's Family Dining tomorrow around—well, you know. My dad taught me how to deal with these guys a long time ago: give and go, don't engage and don't encourage. Say a blessing if you will, but definitely don't go out to lunch. What with disease and your reputation and all. But definitely do give something, also because of your reputation. You must be at least *seen* as compassionate. My dad always liked to say, "See that guy? That'll be you if you don't go to college."

*You don't innately owe other bodies sympathy and concern.*

But when I tell this story, I'll tell it with details that tone down how truly sick I felt when I declined, how a new kind of vomit churned up and settled in my throat, a thin boiling kind almost like a mouthful of coffee swallowed too soon and too hot.

It still coats my throat now, threatening to erupt as I sit in my car. I was supposed to meet my friends a half-hour ago, but I haven't moved, haven't started the ignition to pull away from this melting lot where hobos with stories wait for someone to listen, for hands willing to touch.

I had just rented some movies and held a copy of *Men's Health*—which I never actually put to use—under my arm in the parking lot glare, sun barely dipping down and spreading over the field of asphalt in streaks of spilled rainbow-patterned oil. He walked up toward the store from the highway with his bag over his shoulder, cars flying by behind him, his steps constantly forward yet uncertain in their hesitation. Even from a distance, his color was the color of earth.

When I tell this story to friends, I'll say, "He came at me, man. It's not like I had time to get away."

I might make it sound more dangerous, put more at stake, center myself more fully: "I mean, who knows what he was holding. You never know with these guys."

Or maybe I'll amplify my sympathetic, God-fearing heart: "Even if I had kept moving in a straight line, not too quick so he wouldn't think I was an asshole, we would've reached my car at the same time. Like he knew I'd help him. Like fate, you know?"

Perhaps when I tell the story of what just happened I'll make my dad proud, say I never even made eye contact, just gave him a dollar and disengaged completely, rightfully focused on my own life, goals, relationships, struggles. Which are great and many, of course.

His odor was definitely bad. It pushed me back a little like a light shove from a big guy, entering my body's space before the man did. It still lingers in my nostrils now. But it was his teeth that got me, those teeth that seemed to scream in their crookedness, a shriek that smelled fouler than his own bodily smell when he flashed that grin, that smile trying so hard to rest somewhere between inviting and unassuming, yet falling short at creepy. What teeth he had left were made so loud by the empty gaps between, as if they allowed more to emit from his mouth and throat, more words to be spat, more black space to fill with sound.

I already had my hand around a bill in my pocket, ready to give and go.

But he spoke, and I tightened up.

"Hi there partner. How's your day?"

"It's good."

"That's good."

I looked to the highway as if some passerby might sense my stress and find a way to relieve it. I'll tell my friends that I gave him good strong eye contact, and asked what I could do, ready to be of service while maintaining my personal boundaries.

I didn't say anything, and just kept looking as far away as I could.

The man cleared his throat. "Well, look, I'm a vet, but my VA money don't come in for another week before I can go pick it up."

"You get by on VA money?" I said in reflex.

*Don't engage or encourage.*

"Yep, but I got to make it 'til the end of the week and, I can't work and, I, I got to get to Montana to see my daughter next month."

I nodded and kicked at the ground and *man oh man* and *jeez that's tough, yeah you know we all have to get by* and nothing very helpful or

bright, just the usual preprogrammed responses to anything dejected and dark, to the things we hope never happen to us. And to anything we deem sub-human or beneath our precious standards.

I'll leave that out when I tell the story later, just say I listened intently and watched his eyes.

"You ever been to Montana?" he said. "I tell you, plains green like my daughter's eyes, but maybe only almost as green as her eyes, and everyone laid back and real friendly and ..."

"I don't really travel," I said.

"Come on, everyone travels, son."

"Not to places like that."

I said this with *Men's Health* under my arm and movies in a bag, and there was some truth to what I said. This homeless man had seen more of the world I had.

He shifted in his stance and I looked at the ground. "So hey," he said, "I don't, I don't need much and my check ain't far off, and I really don't eat much food so ..."

"I hope this helps," I said, handing him a five dollar bill. I hadn't checked the amount that my hand gripped. He had just fished out his VA card from his torn wallet, and I saw his picture on the laminated plastic. "I wish I had more," I said, which I really didn't wish, even though I really did have more.

"That's more than enough," he said. I'll say he said that when I tell this story, which he did truly say, but I won't tell that he also said I shouldn't be afraid to talk to an outcast, and that if I had a story, he'd be happy to hear it and tell me one in return. I said I wasn't afraid, just in a hurry, and that my story wasn't interesting anyway.

"Every story's a good one," he said.

"There aren't many good ones out here," I said, looking up at the white-hot sky.

He said, "Okay," and his voice rang past me like the sound waves of an ignored television program. Depending on who's listening when I tell this story, I might stretch a bit and add here that his face gave away his greed, that he probably hoped to squeeze me for a few more bucks and that you still just have to look past those things when you're helping another human being. But I had yet to even look him in the face. I just stared at patterns in the sticky black under my feet, afraid of what I might see if I looked up, something scary or real or too damn true.

By the time I did raise my head to meet his, he was looking down instead with his hands in his pockets. And his face did give something away—though not greed, squinting his dusty eyes against the sun—and it was a subtle constriction in the muscles around his mouth, an attempt to hide some hidden hurt, like he drowned in a scorn of what he is and what he does and what he may always be that only he can understand. Or he had long ago drowned, and now had nothing left but the grass-green of his daughter's eyes embossed on his memory.

"Hey," he said, offering his hand, "I stay in that park just up behind the Rec Center. Tomorrow I can, you could come over there and, well hey, I'll buy you lunch at Furr's."

"No, I can't. I'm heading out of town."

I gripped my keys in my pocket as I lied, and they scraped against each other in my wet hand, tension all through one side of me like an awkward swimmer unsure of when to dive in.

*Give and go.*

When I took his hand mine quickly slid out of his grip during the shake, his grip firm, mine weak.

He picked up his bag. "I'm always there," he said.

He really did open his eyes wide at that moment, and I saw how green they were, green like I thought the grass must've looked in the country of the war he once fought. Maybe green like his daughter's or greener still, an unnamed green that can only belong to someone with his story. I might add that in tomorrow when I get drinks with my friends, if the mood is sappy enough. Or I'll just say they were brightly bloodshot, as to be expected. If I tell my dad this story though, I'll make sure he knows that I knew this guy was just a no-good bum, and that I completed a simple act of generosity while maintaining my critical judgment of the man. I'll assume and condemn, just like my dad taught me to.

As he turned to leave he said, "God bless you, I hope I get through the week."

I said, "I hope so too."

I might tell a particularly sensitive friend that I waved and watched as he walked off, and that I'm considering volunteering at the shelter next week, which isn't true at all.

Now new beads of sweat rise from the pores of my hands where they were wiped away by his dry, cracked palms. It's hot in my car in the lot, no relief from the diminishing sun.

This is where I'll stop when I tell the story of what just happened, no matter who I tell it to: with my contemplation of his condition, the condition of the homeless, the downtrodden.

I'll stop with my exit, driving away on the desert asphalt with five fewer dollars to my name and a nice gooey conscience.

I'll say I slept well that night.

But I won't say that I'm still sitting in my suffocating car, holding the steering wheel and letting it burn my hands. I do watch him walk away—I have to—slowly across the lot and around a building, dragging his bag, shaking his head at voices or figures or maybe just the terrible state of things. The rubber starts to hurt, and I wipe my hands on my sweat-soaked shirt. I might stay like this for a while, I don't know. He rounds the corner and waiting there must be one of his many homes, some carefully constructed bedding of trash or a makeshift

shelter. I don't know. There must be others like him sharing food, passing drink, telling stories. They're laughing and hugging, and they laugh with the joy that only a sincere mindfulness of the present moment can bring until someone's subconscious thought shouts out and stifles them with the truth of their lives. Then I see him getting enough money, or if he doesn't, hopping a train to Montana with a picture of his daughter in his hand. He's in Montana at last, sitting with a beautiful green-eyed young woman who's so glad to see him even though it's been so long, the two of them sitting on a wooden porch overlooking those endless plains, and he tells her again of the war, of how it changed him, how that violence is the root of his distance from her and that he's so very sorry and will she forgive him, and after a long silence broken finally by crying, from this point on the woman has a father again.

Or he won't ever get enough money, and never know if her eyes are the eyes he sees in his mind. But I don't know. I won't know.

I won't sleep at all tonight.

The sun's rays pierce through the top of my windshield as they fall toward the mountains, and I don't mind that they blind me. All the asphalt turns hazy, made unfamiliar by the changing of day and the feet that stepped there, feet I don't understand, feet that fall so much heavier than mine.

God bless, I hope I make it through the week.

My throat heaves and I try to choke the vomit back down. If I give that detail when I tell this story—which I won't—I don't think I could fully describe the way the fluid jams inside my neck.

I'm really going to be in town all this punishing summer.

Maybe it's dark now, or maybe my eyes just can't take in any more light, but I can't see much other than my own hands, ugly in their lack of use, the absence of damage. They haven't bled, chafed against rough ground like they could. By the corner of the building all is still, and the stillness is jarring as I try to refocus my vision so I can leave this place. I listen. I listen hard for any sound worthy of hearing, sounds deserving of a hard listening, all sounds able to form into tales intent on entering willing ears, and as the silence rises in volume pulse by empty pulse I fumble with my keys and my stomach clenches, releases, and purges itself all out and over the dashboard in a violent wave and this, this is where my story starts.

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## WHITE SILENCE

By Danuta Blaszk

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**Danuta Blaszk** was born in Warsaw, Poland. She is currently living with her family in Winter Park, FL. She loves being with people, or watching towering cumulus clouds, skydiving, or canoeing alone through Floridian swamps.

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*It is early morning and still dark outside. We hear frantic banging at the door. As mom opens the heavy wooden door, a strong gust of wind blows giant flakes of snow into the cottage. I see my cousin Johnnie. What is he doing here? He is supposed to be with his parents at a luxury hotel in Snowy Town.*

*"Have you seen my dad?" he asks.*

\*\*\*

The white snow is so slippery and yet at the same time, magical.

We decorate a snowman with Dad's hat. My younger sister brings a carrot and two lumps of coal from the kitchen—our snowman will have a long nose and coal black eyes. Mom says the snowman looks like Dad. Iga argues; Dad has blue eyes and is beautifully tanned, not white like the snowman.

I feel the sun's rays fall on my face and make me beautiful. We all are tanned and when we come back to the city, everyone will envy our healthy skin and the fantastic holiday we had. The city is gray and cloudy, but here, the sun belongs to us.

The snow melts slightly in the noon sun and freezes again at night. It sparkles in the moonlight like a million diamonds scattered on the ground.

The snowy mountains—high and sharp on the horizon—look powerful, and we feel God close to us.

For whatever reason, my mom never wants to go closer to the Colossal Mountains. We spend each winter in Midhighland County. We rent a room in a cottage in Dreammee Village, or another like it, but still further away from the mountains. She is afraid, perhaps, that one of us may slip and fall off the steep sides down into deep abyss or just into one of many ravines and crevices that may be deadly, especially in the winter when temperature drops fast and snow can quickly cover you.

My mom spends a few hours every day on a wooden bench in front of the cottage and exposes her face to the sun. She will make her co-workers very jealous when she gets back in work.

We do not go skiing or sledding. We just play in the snow. We do not have those big coats, which we wear at home. We have instead, sporty nylon jackets and shoes with rubber protectors. We dance and make pirouettes on the icy paths, and then smiling, fall down in

the snow.

We watch for our footprints in the snow. Iga says the protectors on our shoes are like a tractor's tires. We can also see old footprints of deer and wolves. They disappear when we step on them.

We escaped from civilization to here, the serene wooden cottage, without any running water and coal fuelled old fashioned stoves instead of central heating. However, there is electricity here, and my parents can read late into the evening.

It gets dark very early. Sometimes we play bridge with my parents. We are staying here two weeks longer than the school break, so we have promised the school director we will catch up with our schoolwork when we return. Iga has only recently learned multiplication tables. I am older so the director asked me to learn new material, dividing big numbers. Dad told me on the first day something about big numbers, and then we started playing cards. All the strategies of the bridge come to us all easily though.

During the day we often go with our parents for a walk to a nearby forest and admire the spruce growing by a frozen stream. We collect large cones, but we do not take them home, because my mom says that squirrels eat seeds from cones. We do not want them to be hungry.

Mom does not like skiing and does not like to go high up the mountains. She does not like walking too far, especially now, when the snow is melting and is as slippery as ice.

"Be careful. It's slippery," Mom says.

"Watch your step," Dad says.

We rarely go far from the cottage. I dream of meeting God, and going to the high sharp mountains. I can climb to the peak.

\*\*\*

One day my younger sister stays with Mom while I go with Dad to a chapel, hidden deep within rocks. The path climbs really high into the mountains. The snow is really slippery, and I have to watch my step.

A statue of the Virgin Mary is watching us as we step inside the chapel. She is carved and painted beautifully with a golden shining halo that surrounds her face. She has a long blue cloak.

There are two bowls of holy water, with which I bless myself in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Behind the statute there is a plaque that states she is Virgin Mary, Queen of the Colossal Mountains.

On another wall there are paintings of the mountains, with their bubbling streams, deer, and other wildlife, crafted by local artists.

A guest book lies on the table, and we can write one wish in it. I write that I want my favorite football team to win next season. They lost one important game a few months ago. I am very positive about my wish.

Dad is so angry that I am not serious. He says people have their serious problems. People suffer fatal diseases, wars, illegal drugs, and domestic violence. I am not supposed to write about anything as silly as my favorite football team.

I feel guilty. In our Catholic religion we are supposed to feel guilty a lot of the time.

Once again we walk on the slippery trail and pass some tourists on the way. There is a wild custom of greeting everybody here. There are only a few people in this untamed area and they all say "good afternoon" and help each other if it's necessary.

I'm excited and busy dreaming of my favorite team. I imagine them winning the season. I am silent, deep in thought. I do not say anything, not even "good afternoon," so once again I break the rules of the Colossal Mountains.

For awhile I feel guilty. I think about Virgin Mary, the Queen of Colossals, her anger, punishment, or need for revenge. I feel something really bad may happen.

Then I keep walking through the sleepy snowy dream.

\*\*\*

I wake up early. It is still dark. I hear our host. She lights the fire in our tall old fashioned stove. She rakes out the cinders noisily and puts fresh coal on the fire.

I push away a thick down-filled comforter and try to check what I can see out of the window. It keeps its special design with flowers carved by frost. I puff out warm air from my lungs onto the window until I make a piece of glass clear enough to see through. In the dim outdoor light I see large flakes of snow dancing in the strong wind.

This morning it is snowing. The snow is mixed with freezing rain which created a beautiful winter wonderland by coating everything with silvery glistening ice.

It is getting warm inside. My mom sits on her bed...

Someone knocks on the door. What's going on? Our hosts usually come in without knocking – so as not to wake us.

My mom puts on a bathrobe and slippers. She turns the light on. Dad sits up on the bed like a soldier ready to protect the home.

Iga rubs her eyes and dives under comforter.

Johnnie is standing at the door. Johnnie? He is alone, eleven years old like me, and I wonder how he got here from Snowy Town.

"Have you seen my dad?" he asks.

This image has been printed forever in my memory. The snow is stuck all over him in clumps and he looks like a snowman. He took a bus to get here. I imagine him walking from a bus stop in the freezing rain.

We look at him and nobody says anything.

Then suddenly both parents ask him to have a seat, and take off his coat. They offer hot cacao, a sandwich with white cheese.

Iga wakes up and starts looking for slippers.

Johnnie's father is my uncle, my dad's brother. Auntie was shopping with Johnnie, and when they came back to hotel, my uncle was

not there. He did not leave any message. They waited for him all night.

\*\*\*

Dad says, "He must have gone to the mountains."

Mom nods to us, "He loves the mountains. It is his passion."

Mom is always scared of walking too high in the mountains.

They talked about him, so I know.

My uncle is not an alpinist, just a tourist, the one who respects and follows principles set in their old family. He walks only on trails, never taking shortcuts over mountains or through forests.

That year he had an unusual enthusiasm for his short trips to the mountains, he smiled to everybody in the hotel, and he is not scared of nature. It is his happy time with mountains and his loving family.

I have a feeling something is going wrong. I know the Colossal Mountains are dangerous and snow is slippery. I think he was not careful and he did not watch his steps, so he hurt himself and was lost in the snow.

I see my Dad putting on his jacket. I know he is going to the post office to call 911 and Mountain Rescue Service. We do not have a phone here.

"What shoes was he wearing?" I ask Johnnie.

"Black," he answers.

"Without protectors?"

"Black, leather ... I don't know ..."

"We will check all the footprints on the snow. We will find your dad," I promise.

\*\*\*

My dad comes back from the post office. Mom makes us a hot dinner of mashed potatoes and lamb and a drink of milk from mountain cows.

I am sleepy and I can see in my dreams myself writing my non-serious wish, I see myself not saying good afternoon to tourists. I feel guilty. Later on I see my uncle lying on the snow. He is not alive. No longer with us.

\*\*\*

The next day some strangers come to our cottage. My dad goes to Snowy Town.

Everybody asks my auntie where my uncle wanted to go, what he had planned to do. The police do not believe he would go to the mountains. We try to be patient. The police ask many questions: no, he never drinks alcohol; no, he never tries drugs; no, he is not with his friends; he has no friends in Snowy Town; just family.

My auntie cries. I wonder whether she will ever stop crying.

The rescue team arrives to search for my uncle. They are strong and muscular. They are heroes in their dangerous job.

One of the members of the rescue team reminds me a bit of the captain on my favorite football team. He has a tanned face and his eyes are blue like the sky over mountains. When he takes off his hat I see the same hair cut and a similar face shape as the captain.

They are brave and committed to help.

\*\*\*

Two weeks after that winter break I come back to school with tanned face and lighter hair. All the children know I had a good vacation.

My math teacher asks me to multiply some numbers, and she is upset because I write something times zero is zero. She says zero is nothing and I am not supposed to write nothing. She says whoever was teaching me during my vacation was not really good with numbers. I do not discuss this with her.

I teach some friends from my class how to play bridge and we enjoy it.

I think my auntie will never stop crying. Somebody from my class thinks I am wrong about it. People always stop crying in time. Time heals all wounds.

\*\*\*

Two months after my uncle's burial, my favorite team wins—even if they seemed to not have a chance. I watch my team on TV coming back home victorious with all their medals and trophies. They look happy, and I am proud of them.

The Virgin is not angry with me. Oh no.

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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,

What can be said about great literature that already hasn't been covered? The literature in this issue is reason enough for why we do what we do. Writers need a platform because they know they'll implode if they don't share what has been building up inside of them. They nurture the belief that there is more to life than what is seen at face value.

Writers understand this. They know that life is a large puzzle. They use their third eye to help bring everything into focus as they shift around the pieces into a recognizable picture. The overall outlook is something to behold because a picture says something. It speaks to anyone willing to lend an open heart and mind.

Writers are serious about their craft. The treasures, keepsakes, tokens, and scars that they receive from their life experiences are the tools that they turn around and put to good use. These tools allow them to create pieces of literature that spread messages of hope, inspiration, encouragement, entertainment, and relief.

Moreover, we're humbly excited about our role as an intermediary, whereby we're able to assist with this process of bridging the gap between readers and writers. Everyone has a role and a purpose, and as we strive fulfill ours, we hope that you're well on your way to discovering your path and the hidden treasures that await you.

With that said, it's no surprise that this journal has become our favorite meeting place. We look forward to seeing you again in Volume XIV. Be sure to subscribe to our eNewsletter to receive important updates and breaking news about our publications and fellow writers.

- Editorial Staff



TL Publishing Group kicks off the New Year with the release their third anniversary issue of the *Torrid Literature Journal*. A new year brings new beginnings and through Volume XIII *Déjà Vu*, quite a few new voices make their appearance on the scene of literature. A few familiar voices also make a return. Altogether, Volume XIII *Déjà Vu* is packed with engaging and thought-provoking literary material that will lock readers in for an interesting journey.

One of the highlights of this issue is Jacob Erin-Cilberto's review of Gwendolyn Jensen's poetry book *As If Toward Beauty*. Readers will enjoy how Erin-Cilberto takes Jensen's poetry apart and discusses the intimate and familiar structure of her poems as they relate to general life.

What's more, life itself is a journey and it's never complete without a map to help guide the travelers. This is where the role of a writer comes in. They have the innate ability to navigate the senses. Only a writer can map the vast landscapes of life in a way that communicates a true understanding of the power of the written word.

Fine literature gets stronger with time because the affects never wear off. These poems and stories will be just as relevant today as they will be several years from now. Their ability to inspire, encourage, and entertain readers will never grow old. There is no better way to start the year off than by discovering what the writers in this issue have to say. With over 25 different pieces of literature, Volume XIII *Déjà Vu* has a diverse collection of material that will cater to a variety of tastes.

TL Publishing Group is just getting started and the route ahead looks promising. Writers, readers, and general supporters of literature don't want to miss out on this literary journey.

Contributors: Jacob Erin-Cilberto; Dean K Miller; William Miller; Emily Strauss; William Doreski; Yinka Reed-Nolan; Nikki Johnson; Sarah Weiler; Dylan Wilson; Philip Jackey; Susan Martin; Chris Farrell; Jean Ann Owens; Monica Lynn Moraca; Marchell Dyon Jefferson; Paul Weidknecht; Amy S. Pacini; Owen Vince; Richard Hartwell; Tyler Pufpaff; Kobina Wright; Athar C. Pavis; B. Diehl; A.J. Huffman; John Repp; Holly Day; Justin Rose; April Salzano; Grant Fetters; Justin Rose; Alex Hallwyler; Danuta Blaszak



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