

Torrid Literature Journal

VOLUME XX: BEND, DON'T BREAK

NOVEMBER 2017



SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

PERFECT YOUR CRAFT

EMBRACE YOUR VOICE

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Torrid Literature Journal - Volume XX Bend, Don't Break

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FROM THE EDITOR

Here we are again. Are you ready to wrap up another year? Ready or not, time will always stay true to its nature. However, we shouldn't view the end of the year as a doomsday finish line where we condemn ourselves for a past we can't do anything about. You can probably tell by now that I'm not a glass half empty type of person. I'm always looking for the positive in any situation, even if I have to look real hard at times and I will continue to encourage others to do the same.

As the calendar's clock ticks down, people generally feel the need to reflect on their life and the closing year. Here is where I want to encourage you. As we reflect on the challenges that threatened to break us, we should rejoice over the events that uplifted us in the right moments. We know that our past and the way we process it affects the decisions we make today. It doesn't matter how many times you need to get back up and start again. Your ability to remain consistent in your determination will be the deciding factor for how you approach every situation in life. There will be weak points. We all have them, me included. We are human after all. Just don't quit. Falling down is not the same as quitting. To use an old saying, it truly is better to try and mess up then to never try at all. Generally speaking, life is no fun on the sidelines. Challenges teach us patience (if we learn from them correctly), and patience gives us endurance. We can then say that endurance is the pathway to hope and we can all agree that hope is a necessary component of motivation.

Hope makes us flexible. We are more flexible now than we were at the beginning of the year because of what we overcame. The situations that tried to break us only made us stronger. Bend, but whatever you do please don't break and quit. Learn to adapt to your situations. Embrace change with a positive mindset. Remember, you can't change what comes at you in life but you have full control over how you choose to respond and act. Henceforth, the latest title for Volume XX of the *Torrid Literature Journal*: Bend, Don't Break.

In this issue, our long-awaited interview feature is Nikita Hernandez. Hernandez is a Pushcart Prize nominee who has lived in several states throughout her life. Her work has appeared previously in the *Torrid Literature Journal* and other literary publications. It was a pleasure to work with her on this interview and it's an even greater pleasure to share her thoughts and advice on literature and writing with our readers.

After the interview, new and familiar writers step onto the scene to share their unique poems and stories with our readers. We strive for diversity so each journal represents a wide range of voices as writers are multifaceted. They have multiple sides and layers that we want to unveil and highlight. Additionally, writers are crafty at manipulating words. I think this has to do with the fact that they can be much more flexible with life than the average person. They have the ability to see situations from the rarest points of view. Then they use words to create colorful story structures in our minds.

Speaking of story structures, it would be careless of me to not mention NaNoWriMo. November is one of my favorite months because National Novel Writing Month takes place during this time. As always the challenge remains the same. The goal is to write a 50,000 word novel in 30 days. This goal is very doable. You just have to approach it with the right mindset. Considering that 50,000 words can be broken down into 1,667 words per day, the real key is fighting for

diligence and consistency in a hectic world. The rush is addictive. If you have a story idea, now is the time to turn it into a novel. There are quite a few resources available to participants. Grab a writing buddy and get started. Find a support system. Join a writing club or attend a literary event.

Since I'm on the topic of literary events, I want to thank everyone who came out to our open mic show back in July. Our show was awesome. New and familiar faces came together to support the arts as artists took to the stage to share their talent. Our next show is scheduled for December 16th at The Bunker in Tampa, Florida. This will be our last show of the year. If you live near the Tampa Bay Area, please make plans to attend. We guarantee you'll have a great time! Even if you live outside of the area please try to get out and attend a literary event in your community. Doing so will help you perfect your craft and speak your truth.

2017 was a great year but it definitely came with its fair share of bumps and jagged roads. This year alone, personally, I've been blessed with gains and I've suffered great losses. However, every beginning has its appointed end because life is full circle. That being said, we've made quite a bit of changes at TL Publishing Group LLC. We're working with a new website for starters. As a treat for our followers, the digital copies of our journals are available for free on our site, dating back to Volume I – *Rediscovering the Passion*. We have more changes on the way as we continue working on our 2018 project plans. Thank you for joining us this journey. We're excited about the New Year and the opportunities that await us all.

I have a few final thoughts before we say goodbye to this year. First, your past can either make or break you. Make a firm choice to be better not bitter when it comes to your past. See everything behind you as an experience you can learn and grow from.

Second, be good to yourself and stay true to your craft. You deserve to flourish, but be prepared to put in the hard work that follows any goal. Give yourself room in your schedule to study your craft. I can't stress enough how important it is to read and write often for those of you who want to become a better writer. Also, don't second guess your craft just because opposition exists. Yes, you will receive rejections but this doesn't mean you need to abandon your calling. It simply means you haven't found the right door.

Last, take a look at where you are right now. That's right. You're still standing. Use this as motivation for 2018. Make plans to step outside of your comfort zone in every way possible. You've come this far, why stop now? I'll see you all in the New Year.

Be you. Be blessed. Be torrid.

Sincerely,

Alice Saunders

Follow me on Twitter:

@lyricaltempest

TL PUBLISHING GROUP PRESENTS...

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OPEN MIC NIGHT

Hosts: R.J. Kerker & Lyrical Tempest

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 ON 1:

NIKITA HERNANDEZ

By Alice Saunders

Born and raised as a military brat, or “professional gypsy” as her mom likes to say, Nikita Hernandez grew up in the Deep South drinking sweet tea and plucking pecans from her next door neighbor’s tree. She spends her time battling wanderlust, daydreaming, and drinking tea. Her poems are forthcoming to be published in *The Perch*, and have appeared in *Torrid Literature Journal XIV “Chaos,” The Fredericksburg Literary Review* and *The Gambler Mag*, among others. Additionally, Nikita was a 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.

My mom was an active duty officer in the Air Force for 20+ years, and we moved around every 2-3 years. We were stationed frequently in the Deep South, mid-West, and abroad only once, in Japan. I despised this rootlessness during my childhood, but now appreciate it for lending me the impeccable ability to adapt to my surroundings and not fear change as strongly. I studied creative writing as an undergrad and graduated a year early. I’m currently struggling with intense wanderlust, which is hard to satiate when I work a full-time job with limited time off.

My writing concentrates on the intricacies of relationships. I explore topics such as family dynamics, romantic blunders, memories, nostalgia, emotional turmoil, and others. My goal has always been to connect with my audience. I want readers to find a piece of themselves in my writing, to know that someone else out there understands and has been through what they’ve been through. We all need someone to relate to. It makes us feel less alone. After all, it’s human nature to seek connection.

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

Nothing motivates me to write more than the pure desire to untangle my thoughts on paper. I originally started writing when I was nine as a coping mechanism during my parents’ divorce. Writing has, and always will be, an outlet for my thoughts and emotions—a way to arrange and better understand myself and the world around me. My inspiration comes from everyday things in life—personal experiences, song lyrics, my own random thoughts, conversations I overhear, passages in books I’ve read, dreams I tossed through during the night, etc. There’s no one thing, and everything is game.

Is there a specific message or a reoccurring theme you communicate through your art?

Family and romantic relationships are definitely foremost recurring themes in my writing. I draw the most inspiration from these topics, as they are very accessible. I don’t focus on specific messages in my poems, because that’s never my goal. I always

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

just try to focus on the moment at hand and capture it with all the honesty and emotional complexity necessary to strike a note with the reader.

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

It’s tough to choose. I think I’d have to say “Fleeting” which appeared in *Cobalt Review* earlier this year. I love that this poem talks back to another poem, challenging the idea that the grass is greener on the other side, but that in the end, it doesn’t matter. This poem also showcases a briefer form, contrasting my usual writing style. It cuts down to the quick and doesn’t pussyfoot around.

What is the hardest part of writing for you?

The hardest part of writing for me sometimes is the development of a poem. I don’t always have a clear direction in my head of where I want the poem to go. Sometimes my drafts are just word vomit with no discernible beginning or ending, and it can be difficult to shape this blob of words into a cohesive, understandable poem. Other times I have either a clear beginning or end in mind, but am uncertain how to complete the poem with that intended beginning or end. The same dilemma can be applied to situations where I pull one of the fragmented lines or phrases from my running list of ideas to use, but then have trouble building a poem around that or incorporating it into another half draft. Another difficulty of writing for me is self-editing. I no longer have the luxury of handing off my poems to my professor every week for review and feedback. It can be a challenge to give my poems the proper editing they need, especially if it’s a fresh draft that I’m still infatuated with and haven’t given it the proper amount of cooling down time to approach it with a clear mind. Self-editing also doesn’t lend me the insight that someone else would have when they look at my poem with fresh eyes.

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

I don’t have a creative regimen, per se. I don’t force myself to

write every day or even on another level of scheduled regularity. I prefer to write whenever inspiration smacks me upside the head, but I know this isn’t always the case. I write almost daily, whether it be in my private journal, or in running lists on my iPod with fragments of lines or phrases I know I’ll want to use in a poem eventually, but aren’t fully fleshed out yet. I don’t want writing to ever become a chore for me. I don’t enjoy writing when I’m forced to do so, and always just want to enjoy the experience when the urge strikes.

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

This question is especially challenging to me right now, as I’ve been battling writer’s block for over a year. Some days it feels like my only talent has abandoned me and will never return. I rely heavily on advice from my undergraduate poetry professor, Erica Dawson, regarding remedies for writer’s block. She recently gave me a great idea to skim through my private journals and look for moments I could turn into poems. Other pieces of advice I’ve been given include:

Reading (anything and everything) a lot for inspiration;

Writing a bunch of haiku to focus on brevity and get right down to what you want to say;

Attending open mics and listening to what others have written, which will hopefully spark something in you; and

Finding a line from a poem/song you like and talking back to it with attitude.

With writer’s block, I’ve learned you have to be proactive. Ideas won’t always come running up to you and knock you over. Sure, it’s easier and much nicer when that happens, but you can’t always rely on that method. You need to get hands on to keep inspiration flowing. If it won’t hunt you down, you hunt it down and make it your bitch!

What do you do when you are not writing?

When I'm not writing you can find me watching Netflix. I couldn't even begin to narrow down a list of favorite movies or TV shows. I typically enjoy genres such as comedy, drama, psychological thriller, horror, documentary, and I have a penchant for 80's brat pack movies. I also spend my non-writing time hunting for new music to keep up with my voracious musical appetite, researching my family tree, or sewing.

Do you have a day job as well?

During the day I pose as a paralegal for a private, three-person immigration law firm, entrenched in that typical 9-5. My days involve communicating with clients, drafting forms, and compiling supporting documentation for family-based petitions.

What has been the toughest criticism given to you as a writer? What has been the best compliment?

Any criticism is tough, no matter how well intended. I'm a very sensitive person and my poetry is very personal and intimate. It's easy for me to feel attacked, even when that's not the case, and I'm working on learning to handle criticism without feeling bad about it. The best compliments are usually when people or my professor enthusiastically agree this is a "Nikita poem" or "Nikita line/phrase"—where I'm totally rocking it and the poem completely captures my essence. A recent comment my professor left on a poem I submitted for her edits that I love is, "YAAAAAAAAAAAAASSSSSSSSSSSSSS, as the kids say." Definitely lets me know I'm heading in the right direction.

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

I've always envied people who could paint/draw, dance, and take amazing photographs. Before I made up my mind to pursue a creative writing degree, I dabbled with the idea of becoming a photographer with a dream of working for *National Geographic*. I deeply enjoyed the traditional photography class I took in high school, and to this day the smell of dark room chemicals gives me nostalgia. Nowadays photography is more of an occasional hobby. I've also become engrossed in sewing and crafts, and am currently immersed in a t-shirt blanket project.

Are there any noncreative avenues you would like to explore?

I'd love to explore genealogical research more. While cleaning my apartment one weekend, I stumbled across my eighth grade family tree project, which reignited my interest in learning about my ancestors and discovering their stories.

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

You know, I've often kept this question in my arsenal for conver-

sation starters with friends and family, yet I've never quite formulated a title for my own autobiography. Devising titles for my work has always been an imposing task. If I was a teenager now answering this question, I'd lean towards something incorporating my age such as "Seventeen Down," etc. I think at this point in time, I favor the title of a nonfiction piece I've written, "Scars and Separations," because that encompasses two major facets I've faced throughout life.

Can you share with us some of your goals for this year?

Write more and defeat this writer's block. Also to read more. I used to be such a bookworm when I was younger and would read all the time, but once I got to college I stopped reading for pleasure since I was always reading for class assignments. The thought of reading more on top of that exhausted me. And after graduating, I've been hard put to pick up the habit again. Non-writing goals include staying off social media more and focusing on fostering more meaningful communication with friends and loved ones through face-to-face conversation (when available), letters, etc.

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

67 Press has recently invited me to collaborate with them as a volunteer guest poetry editor. They published my first fiction story "Sexting Is Such A Bad Habit," in their collection "Affinity: An Anthology" last August, available on Amazon. The editor also took a shine to my poetry and likes the "dark side" I bring to things. I'm very stoked to continue working with 67 Press on this opportunity.

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

Writing has proven to be an important facet of my life from an early age. It's an escape, it's a joy, a way to untangle thoughts and put things in perspective. Along the way, I've learned it's best to be yourself and write like yourself. Don't write to impress people. Just write. Your voice is always truest.

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

Tumblr blog: <http://nikitahernandezpoet.tumblr.com/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/nikita_sparrows

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/nikita_sparrows/

FALL MORNING

By Robert Stout

She lies in the gentle balance
between night and dawn,
her eyelids sorting the cadences
of dreams. Outside the window
a sparrow sings. Her lips
transpose its music into sleep.

Then I feel her lift
herself from dreaming flesh
and stumble into the bathroom,
Flick lights, run water, flush.
The room, without her,
is curtained, shadowed, dark:

Her image beside me has muscle
and sinew. I feel it suck
me into embrace
that happened years ago.
In the doorway, lighted now,

her voice pronounces my name.
As I try to rise
I feel the shadows rip
their share of my darkness from me
and press it into the bed.
Beside her, I turn,

try to see
past the prism
that flattens us here,
fossils in a moving stream.

CHRONIC FATIGUE

By Robert Stout

The room congealed around the way
you propped yourself on cushions
with the computer in your lap, your face
absorbing patterns of light
as you typed. The dog, curled against your knees,
understood. So did the kitten at your elbow,
asleep. "I talked to Janet," you said,
never mentioning that floods and hurricanes and wars
lay between your words and hers. Or that
the sun outside was shining on the sea.

To love you is to take circles
of light in my arms and dance gently
into worlds that rise like dream shapes
through the moving mists of morning.
Those times I've try to tear the clouds
away I've stumbled into storms that ice my
hands and lips. The dog and cat would
run away, the room gray into hurt. "And what
did Janet say?" my giving in would ask.

THE END

By Marissa Vander Ploeg

He whispers, "I love you,"
And the wind spins faster,
The rain pounds,
The thunder rumbles,
And the lightning cracks
The sky in two.

Two of us here
At the end of the world.

He said it first
In school days when we
Whispered behind books,
Kicked under tables,
Danced on rain-soaked streets,
Carved our initials in bark:

Two sets, four letters,
To last until the end of the world.

I grip his hand,
Holding him back
As the wind shrieks.

I said it back
As he lifted my veil,
Kissed my lips,
And made me his
With a ring and a promise
When his name became mine.

Two joined together
Before the end of the world.

The lights flicker,
My heart pounds,
Holding on for dear life.

We said it, together,
To our daughter, son, and son.
Watched them giggle behind
Books, hold hands, carve names,
Grow into the words,
Grow into the world, and leave

The two of us here,
Awaiting the end of the world.

The window shatters
And we gasp together,
One last time.

"I love you"
I whisper, his hand
Slipping, falling onto the
Pressed white sheets.
Flat-line beeping competing with the wind,
Rain, thunder, lightning.

One of us here
At the end of the world.

THE DREAM

By Marissa Vander Ploeg

Actor

One breath, two, three
Step onto the chalked floor
Remove myself, step through the door
Speak the lines and break free.
My old mannerisms none can see
My own virtues and morals are no more
I am my character, and my character is me
My mind clears and my spirit soars.

Director

Out of the darkness, a glaring light beams
Hundreds of eyes turn to you
Enough to make you shiver to your seams
More people than your burning eyes can view
Yet your heart beats fast, for this is your dream
As they wait in breathless silence to see what we can do.

Marissa Vander Ploeg has been writing fiction for longer than she can remember. During high school, Ploeg finished her first novel and her second one is in the works. Ploeg has also begun to dip into the world of poetry as a different format to express her ideas. She graduated from Olivet Nazarene University of Bourbonnais, Illinois in 2016. Ploeg studied Corporate Communications with minors in Professional Writing and Theatre. She also took all of the Creative Writing classes offered.

WONDER

By Nicholas Froumis

How is it there in the place with no night,
our essence no longer burdened by sleep?
And how can we process all of the light,
are human eyes even something we keep?
Most likely folly for me to wonder,
about mysteries I can't understand.
But when this life has been torn asunder,
and I bid farewell to all that was planned-
I'd rather think of you in some great room,
preparing for a joyous reunion.
Count it more than nostalgia to assume,
that there's hope for eternal communion.

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

RUBY SLIPPERS

By Erren Kelly

Lightly, she presses the keys, she
Instinctively plays home in dreams, a nocturnal sound
She stokes from a kaleidoscope of thoughts, a vision
Appears out of her creations; it is a tapestry of moments

Held together by lingering golden chords winding around themselves
Into infinity until it gives birth to a crystal pool of sounds
Like a song, she is temporary, yet she lingers in
The air, like a memorable perfume, or a season
Once known to her; she can play home anytime
Naturally hitting the keys and finding that feeling, always ringing true

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

ENDEMIC SOUL

By Carl Scharwath

Among the painted faces
lost in a labyrinth
of emotional chaos.

Lies a linguistic fault line
meandering down the
expanse of imagination.

The day obliterated
in metaphysical time
searching for yourself.

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

BROKEN PIECES

By Jason Kirk Bartley

Broken and distraught,
I brought all the pieces back to
Him.
He put them back together,
while singing a hymn.
After this show of love what
more could I want or say?
He embraced His wanting child.
Tears flowed from my eyes.
I did not know what to say.
He knew exactly what would work,
like the potter to the clay.
This heart was so empty.
Could there be any other way?
He knew my broken heart
would need mending today.
In that moment when I needed Him most,
He was still there though many times
I was not.
He still put me back together,
giving me His blessing.

Jason Kirk Bartley is a Christian poet who loves writing for the Lord. Bartley is from Chillicothe, Oh. He has an Associate's of Arts degree in Social Science from Ohio University, a Bachelor's degree in Leadership and Ministry from Ohio Christian, and a Master of Arts degree in Ministry from Ohio Christian. . Bartley is a 41 year old single male, who loves reading the gospel, attending church, and watching sports when he can.

ONE DAY

By Milt Montague

one day many years ago
when I was young
ruminating on my good fortune
and happy life
these words sprang
fully formed into my head

in my library
my hand reached out
to spend an idle hour
dallying in poetic worlds

and out fell this vision
from the past

One day I saw a face
A most wondrous face
Framed in silken gold
And as I spoke
I trembled
Lest in my anxiety
I'd frighten this sprite away

And when she spoke.....
It was the music of
Faeries dancing on cowslips
I looked deep into her eyes
And saw an oasis
Of peace and delight
In a desert of loneliness

My heart quavered
And almost leapt
Thru my mouth
Towards that other
To beat as one

Six years, four months, and three days ago,
I fell in Love

fearing these words might vanish
back to where-so-ever they came
I scribbled them down
hastily in pencil
placed them within a book
for safe keeping

the moment spent
life's pressures returned
these words lay sealed
within their vault

for five decades they rested
silently

one day as I relaxed

Milt Montague was born and raised in New York City. He survived The Great Depression, the school system, and World War II. Back to finish college, marry and help raise 3 lovely daughters. After many years as an independent business person, retirement and back to college, spent 20 years of reveling in knowledge, then discovered writing at 85. Now at 90 plus he has 86 poems and 15 brief memoirs published in 35 different magazines, so far.

I AM GOING AWAY
By Jolene Munch Cardoza

I am going away away away
Lost in my words
In my thoughts
In my dreams.

In my hour of need.

I am going away where
I cannot be found
And all that exists
Are palm trees and peaceful slumbers.

It's late, past Midnight now
And all of the neighbors are tucked in
Dreaming about tomorrow
While I mourn the loss of today.

I don't want to wake up another day
In a world of violence
In the hate
In the silence.

I don't want to click on a link
Be sent to the ads
Pause while it loads
And grieve any more.

I want to lose myself
Find someone new
Recreate what has been taken
Build a sand castle out of flesh.

Tell me it's there
Just beyond the horizon
Pink and purple sunset,
That I'll find it in the stars.

I'll believe anything you say
That's just what I want to do
A fairy tale, a winner's heart
Some cute and cuddly cat video.

I'm shouting out of my soul,
Someone please hear me
Someone please come
And sit with me a while.

But all I can see is the length of this bed,
The cold air conditioner hums
Laughing at me

Jolene Munch Cardoza is a native Floridian and member of the American Theatre Critics Association. As an ardent ally of the Washington, D.C. theatre community for 13 years, she has reviewed theatre for a variety of publications and media outlets, including *The Washington Examiner*, *Metro Weekly*, *Washington Theater Review*, and *Theatre Spotlight*, among others. Her poetry has appeared in several volumes of *Torrid Literature Journal* to date. She attended the University of South Florida in Tampa and is a graduate of the Eugene O'Neill National Critics Institute. She resides in southern New England.

TIME CAPSULE

By Joe Bisicchia

And maybe it's just me,
or the clay shell of who I was,
now boxed and maybe even forgotten,
down deep as I sleep
holding tightly to rosary beads,
all of me planted like a loaded cannon.

Or maybe, it's just a seed,
maybe only a small thing now embalmed,
buried down deep,
with all the majesty of creation,
all of it here tucked in these insides
like a wiring beyond comprehension.

And maybe soon it shall all pop open
not like a bomb but like a bloom
and remind all those with eyes to see
that even from down deep
there is forever in what life shall leap
unearthing eternity as if another spring.

Or,

other than just a clay shell,
down deep,
maybe nothing relevant is packaged here.

Maybe time and place has no time
or place to contain the uncontainable,

specifically spirit.

Maybe even the breeze will speak of this
if only one could hear it.

I do sense the unraveling of all that is.
And I don't fear it.

Rather, let me follow the rhyme
and be near it,
in the time capsule of my soul down deep.

Joe Bisicchia writes of our shared spiritual dynamic. An Honorable Mention recipient for the Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry, his works have appeared in *The Poet's Haven*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Balloons Lit. Journal*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Poets Collectives Anthologies*, *Poetic Matrix Press* and others. The current public affairs professional in New Jersey is a former award winning television host who also taught high school English. His website is www.widewide.world and he is on Twitter @TheB_Line: https://twitter.com/theb_line

LOOSE ENDS TWO

By Jim Boswell

The Grass is Greener
Without Glasses.

Your Next Thought
Must Be Created.
It Is Not Just Sitting Somewhere
Waiting to Be Picked Up.

The Foundation for Any Thought
Should Be Love.
The Foundation for Any Thought
Is Love.

You Can Measure Net Worth
In a Number of Ways—
Money Is Only one.

Love Is a Pareto Optimum

Newton and Einstein Discovered the Same Formula.
Newton's Force and Einstein's Energy Are the Same Thing.
The Distinction Is Only in the Speed Measurement.
 $E = m * (\text{speed of light relative to the mass})^2$ (Einstein)
 $F = m * (\text{speed of object relative to the mass})^2$ (Newton)
 $F = E$ (Newton = Einstein)
Either That, or a Music Man
Would Say They Are Harmonics.

An Investment in Love
Will Compound

Love Lives.
Hate Dies.

Do Not Wait for Heaven,
Heaven Can Be Now.

Jim Boswell was born in Plymouth, Indiana in 1947 and he grew up in Culver, Indiana. He graduated from Hanover College in 1969 with a B.A. in Mathematics. He was a Junior Officer in the U.S. Navy during the Cold War and Vietnam period. Boswell also graduated from Indiana University in 1976 and worked with the Department of Energy in Washington, DC, during the first major energy crisis period. Boswell graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1983 with an M.B.A. Afterwards, he worked for PricewaterhouseCoopers and he won a Vice-President Achievement (Hammer) Award for his work with Ginnie Mae. When Boswell left DC and moved back to his hometown of Culver, Indiana he began writing, first a novel, then a second, then a bunch of short stories, and more including "poetic sutras". When the Financial Crisis of 2008 landed, Boswell shifted his focus and wrote a book on the financial and economic matters called *Crush Depth Alert*. Now, Boswell focuses his writing, using as a basis, the portfolio of work I did during an earlier period, while starting to add to it again after about an eight year layoff.

NANCY REAGAN NURSING ALZHEIMER'S

By James Sutton

As resonance decays, his nights of bliss
compress to tiny flashes. He recalls
without significance; oblivious,
he can't remember loving me at all.
The essence that was him has disappeared.
There's nothing's left to mourn, except lost time
& opportunities no longer near.
Nothing remains inside his clouded mind.
Thunder that once erupted from his brain
now echoes hollowly against its core.
Lightning that flashed will never flash again;
"what matters" doesn't matter anymore.
 But I find comfort in one feeling yet,
 relief that comes from learning to forget.

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

QUALMS
By Gary Beck

When we are suffering
it's hard to imagine
why others should be happy.
Trapped in selfishness,
eager to share pain,
slow to share joy.
Confined in personal sorrow,
we refuse to accept
the injustice of it all.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks and 3 more accepted for publication. His poetry collections include: *Days of Destruction* (Skive Press), *Expectations* (Rogue Scholars Press). *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways*, *Displays*, *Perceptions* (Winter Goose Publishing). *Fault Lines*, *Tremors*, *Perturbations*, *Rude Awakenings* and *The Remission of Order* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. *Conditioned Response* (Nazar Look). *Resonance* (Dreaming Big Publications). His novels include: *Extreme Change* (Cogwheel Press) and *Flawed Connections* (Black Rose Writing). *Call to Valor* will be published by Gnome on Pigs Productions and *Acts of Defiance* will be published by Dreaming Big Publications. His short story collection, *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). *Now I Accuse* and other stories will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City.

UNDERSTUDY

By Patrick Theron Erickson

Just because
you remember everything
doesn't mean
you know everything

We're not omniscient
or everything we remember
would go differently

If putting yourself out there
means being okay
with not knowing or remembering
I'm not okay with that

even if I'm A-OK

If you've got to be
ruthless to survive

if that means killing
the part of yourself
that makes being alive
worthwhile

I'm not okay
with that either

And you're not okay
for eavesdropping

even if you're my alter ego
and I'm your understudy.

(Limitless, S1: E5, "Personality Crisis")

THE PROMISED INHERITANCE

By Patrick Theron Erickson

A public playground
neither sense nor reason
may enter

rests in child's play

That to which
fancy is oblivious

will alone
is not privy

and the sharpest wit
cannot penetrate

That is why the heritage
depends on child's play inasmuch as
it is the children who receive it

*in order that the promise
may rest on faith*

and be guaranteed
to all the heirs

who are playful
in the extreme

and quarantined
from unbelieving.

(Romans 4:16)

Patrick Theron Erickson, a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself, resonates to a friend's notion of change coming at us a lot faster because you can punch a whole lot more, a whole lot faster down digital broadband "glass" fiber than an old copper co-axial landline cable. Secretariat is his mentor, though he has never been an achiever and has never gained on the competition. Patrick's work has appeared in *Former People*, *Literati Quarterly*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Grey Sparrow Journal*, among other publications, and more recently in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Lavender Wolves Literary Journal*, *Futures Trading*, *Wilderness House Literary Review* and *Danse Macabre*.

MY FATHER DIED ALMOST A YEAR AGO

By Kevin Brown

The box is not heavy, just awkward;
I carry it on my own
most days, keep shifting
positions—one hand under,

the other on the side;
both under;
on my shoulder
with one hand balancing.

It is not as light
as the box I carried across
campus my junior year,
only contained three papers,

the one I used for a practical joke
when Gordon offered his help,
hit himself in the face
when he one-handed it,

nor is it as heavy as the box
of books from my office I stacked
on another, bigger box, tweaking
a muscle in my back, a slight
and steady pain that stayed with me,
as if in preparation.

Carrying it only becomes problematic
on days when major golf tournaments
take place or during March Madness
when it feels like I'm walking down

an alleyway with it, shifting it
sideways, putting it on a shoulder,
holding it in my hands, arms stretched above,
as if I could lift it high enough

for someone to reach down and take it,
crab-walking, just trying to make it
through without letting it fall on my head.

WE WILL ALL BE WINNERS, EVENTUALLY

By Kevin Brown

I feel a slight line of pain,
in my feet, as thin as thread
that holds my health

together, follows my fascia
or tendon—different doctors,
different diagnoses—

except on days it doesn't.
And on Tuesdays, under
my left arm—my upper ribcage,
perhaps—I wonder if I've

been stabbed, a feeling so like
a knife would carve when I carry
a book beneath my arm
I check my shirt for blood. Nothing

in my life should lead to such
discomfort there and on that day;
doctors admit they know nothing

that could cause it, either.
Every day is like the lottery:
digging through my pockets

for pennies that serve no
other purpose, scraping the silver
coating that covers whatever ailment
I've won this time around.

SYLVIA

By Clinton Inman

I hear they have placed
A pretty blue plaque
High above your flat
So that tourists can find you
And say that this is the spot
Where you killed yourself.

Lucky girl, you modern Sappho
To take the quantum leap
Like a comet to take your place
Among the darkest regions of empty space
With a brilliance that few can keep
And even less the mind to know
Where no dull planet can perturb you
As fallen flowers have no faces.

FRANKENSTEIN

By Clinton Inman

Color coded complete with picture I.D.
We will teach you to be like us.
Give you a turtle neck or bow tie
You will be our kind of Mensch
We'll give you a new brain, doesn't
Matter whose for they are all the same,
Complete with certificate of authenticity
Credit rating and charge account,
Security, savings, and even disability.
We'll teach you how to walk and talk
In circles as if you had some sense.
We will give you some brand named shoes
We will give you a new name like Frankie,
But why are you still reaching for flowers?

Cinton Inman was born in England in 1945 and he graduated from San Diego State University in 1977. Inman is a retired high school English teacher in Tampa Bay where he lives with his wife, Elba. Some of his most recent publications include the *Flagler Review*, *SawPalm Journal*, and *Belle Reve Journal*. As one of the last members of the Beat Generation (he recited poems in a coffee house in the late Fifties) Inman has always banged the drum (slower these days) for the cause. He is trying to gather his collection of poems together into a book called, *One Last Beat*.

3 STAGES PAST BASIC

By A.J. Huffman

I began

talking to my breakfast. Everything but
the eggs refused to respond;

walking on water. Puddles, too shallow,
struggled, eventually allowed me to sink;

listening to rainbows. Repeatedly, failed
in attempt to decipher chromatic coordinates to gold;

waiting for willow trees to lighten up. Releasing color,
I changed like the rest of the wood and the world;

learning the languid dance of tides. Ebbd
with the flow of my own rise;

speaking to the squirrels in the backyard. Understood
little of the conceptual dialogue of longevity;

writing patterns of the past. Believed they would eventually
show me the answers to the riddles of today.

UNSPOKEN WORDS

By A.J. Huffman

Spirited retorts and responsive pleas
echo inside head. Too late
or too soon, they tumble into mouth,
get stuck on tongue. Chewed, again
and again, become bitter,
get swallowed, aspirins that create
unsootheable pain.

HOSPICE

By Bruce McRae

for Steve A

Dream, tired people,
and build your fine houses.
Send death from your life.
Measure the rainfall.
Be safe as supper.

Another evening slips by,
gliding past on blue runners.
You return indoors,
having done good work
for another day.
Standing at the window,
you think of them,
the brutes and beasts
under the long shadow,
all the motherless dead,
their names taking wing
among the fiery reds.

Moments foam and branch,
your mind sliding
between time's ribbed pillars,
the ghost inside you pensive,
almost pining for rain.

This is how and when
a soul parts from flesh.
Going cloud to cloud,
you're little more than a breath
in a hospice –
where silence stalks
the infinite wards.

This is your home now.

We're putting our arms around you.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a Pushcart nominee with over a thousand poems published internationally in magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. His latest book out now, *An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy* is available on Amazon and through Cawing Crow Press. His poems on video can be viewed on YouTube's *BruceMcRaePoetry*.

1-A

By Jacob Erin-Cilberto

stood at attention
as you inspected my heart

then accepted your court marshal
for having scuffed feelings

took a shine to you
and smiled,

the next morning
received the firing squad

but died happy,
because of something worth reflecting

even if my shoes were a disgrace
and my eyes felt a bit dilated

my most intimate thoughts
violated,

by a love,
drafted without choice
given only muted voice,

a volunteer army of emotions
willed into service
simply by
being near you.

THE STADIUM AT DELIOS

By Greg Moglia

Look, an armrest in the best seats
The marble angled just so

The ancient world had its elite
I bow to the mason

Who took care to shape the stone
And two thousand years later

The weight of the detail
Still in place

While the troubles of the day
Lost in the air

Today I kneel before the work
Call back the craftsman and say

Carve for these times
In any shape you choose

I do not need or wish
To fully understand it

Only that it tell
Some bit of these days

Here in this world of questions
A break in the clouds

Greg Moglia is a veteran of 27 years as Adjunct Professor of Philosophy of Education at N.Y.U and 37 years as a high school teacher of Physics and Psychology. His poems have been accepted in over 300 journals in the U.S., Canada, England, India, Australia, Sweden and Austria as well as five anthologies. He is 8 time a winner of an ALLEN GINSBERG Poetry Award sponsored by the poetry center at Passaic County Community College. He lives in Huntington, N.Y.

QUITE SURREAL

By Jimmie Ware

Aging is quite surreal
No matter how great I sometimes feel
The mirror tells no lies
My face is replaced by my mother's
I wear socks under cozy covers
I think Joni Mitchell understands me
She communicates through melody
I hear the righteous harmony
My knees are not as strong as they used to be
I share the lessons learned
Lessen the bridges burned
I value my best friend
Fiercely like Chicago wind
I enjoy long naps warm caps
I adore scarves and silly jokes
Black and white movies and
Gunsmoke, Festus was wiser than most
I like thunder and rain ,I'll take joy over pain
I appreciate the silver linings in life
Still a mother, no longer a wife
I'm over fifty and still pretty
I feel blessed with happiness
This is the second chapter
I will fill it with purposeful laughter
I'll find solace among the trees
Nevermind my achy knees!

Jimmie Ware is a freelance write, performance poet and workshop facilitator. She has numerous publication credits including *F Magazine*, *The Good Men Project*, *Blast Furnace* and *No More Silent Cries*. Ware is the former host and producer of *Poetic Soul*, an award-winning television program that aired in Chicago and Anchorage where she was also a radio personality and resident poet on the *Morning Chaos* radio show on KFAT- 92.9. Ware has written for nearly 25 years and currently resides in Phoenix where she hosts a monthly poetry and jazz event called the *Uptown Love Experience*.

SOMEWHERE CLOSE BY

By Chelsea Rawlings

He stood as long as the day.

He knew my name
to be wrapped around his
like a long drawn out goodbye
in a Casablanca setting.

He looked like a hero
in the mirror
when he thought of me;
a firefighter
pulling a kitten from a tree.

He whispered rehabilitation
into my ear,
gave me a Coca-Cola
and a verse.

He drew inspiration
out a sideways turned Yankees cap;
spit the remnants
right into my lap.
I ate it quietly
and grew from it inane.

He was swiped by a lie
that wasn't aimed for him
but it knocked him cold,
and when he woke I was gone.
If there were tears
I wouldn't know.

He is somewhere close by
with a Coca-cola,
standing as long as the day.
I could have been next to him.

Chelsea Rawlings has conceived over one thousand poems from her cerebral loins in her fourteen years of creative writing experience. Most of her work can be found on *Allpoetry.com* under my alias *Alexandrathegreat*, where she's posted over six hundred poems throughout the years. With a degree in Literature and Social Justice from Lehigh University, writing is far more than just a hobby for Rawlings. Her work has been featured in *The Wolfian*. Her penmanship can also be found in *The Zombie Logic Review*. Her poetry collection, *The Angels' Trumpets*, was published by Purple Unicorn Media.

IF I HAD A WALL

By Fabrice Poussin

If I had a wall, I would cover it with smiles
Collected through the days, the weeks, a lifetime.

When the old man grinned on the sidewalk for
The dollar I gave him so he could go home

The young girl who lost her book at the station
But I helped her find it since I had time on my hands

An old friend who had lost almost all hope to laugh
When I tripped and fell in the pool, in my tuxedo.

The twenty strangers who realized that in fact
There was a joke in the speech, though a little one

I will build a wall some day, perhaps in China
Or maybe around the world, for all those smiles

How pretty it will be in tones of lipsticks so varied
A painting on the canvas of an existence filled.

Those smooth lips, pearly whites and jolly tongues
Like photographs, sculptures to last ad infinitum.

I will have my wall, far into the ends of the galaxy
Gift of gifts to a humanity which has forgotten how.

Then I will go, perhaps I will shed a tear, yet too
I will smile, for it will be my only, my dearest legacy.

AFTERMATH

By Sterling Jacobs

It was an early morning
When a tornado came and hit
Tearing my family's house apart
Shredding it to bits.

Me, my dad, sister, and mom
Were flung out into a field.
I could barely open my eyes
To that bleached out somber sky.

My body felt so heavy,
So frail, and so weak.
My mouth was forcibly silent
From the absence of its speech.

I was drifting in and out
In flashbacks that occurred
As images shifted in and out
In moments quite disturbed.

I felt a pair of hands
Take hold and lift me up
I heard the siren sound
On a stretcher I was bound.

Then I heard the slashing sounds
Of a knife cutting my clothes
The fabric ripped and tattered
On my body bruised and battered.

I saw myself as a victim
Confined in a helpless daze
Alone in such uncertainty
In a most conflicting craze.

Then I saw a whitened light
In an unfamiliar room
I was floating towards the ceiling
Like a red balled balloon.

Looking down, I saw people
Carefully taking hold
While tending to my wounds
And the feeling soothed my soul.

People were coming to and fro
Staying by my side
I didn't feel so alone
Then my eyes had opened wide.

I awoke within a room
Filled with many dolls and toys
And get well cards from classmates
(From both girls and boys.)

A change then came upon me
Forming on my face
In the form of this sentiment
I thought was never meant to be.

After all I had been through
As hard as it was to cope
In the 'Aftermath' of adversity
I found a glimmer of hope.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

By James Piatt

The tiny sparrows are gone, even
The blue jays and woodpeckers
Are more hushed awaiting the
Cold brisk wind and blustery
Rains, yet the Indian-summer
Warmth lingers on giving me
False hopes. The lakes are dry,
As are the once flowing rivers;
The frogs that sat lazily in reeds
Along side the streams are silent
With no place to linger in
Wetness. The earth is barren and
Dry; the tree's leaves have long
disappeared. The garden is
Empty of flowered life; and the
Roses are showing a readiness
For their winter sleep.

My bones are starting to sense a
Change in the land, and I fear it
Will not be good. I sense invisible
Thorns being thrust into my mind,
Harsh words shattering my well
Being into ashes. The rhythm of
The land is changing; its strident
and raucous voice intrudes into
My soul causing an existential
Ennui. The future, unknown and
Faltering, looms like a dark omen
In my dreams, making the
Threshold of hope diminish.

I try to catch my breath in the
Haunting discordant rhythms of
The oncoming times, but a
Sudden dread halts its journey.
Unwritten poems lay by my side
Covered with a dark pall. Ashes
from dashed optimism cover my
pen. My mind sighs with a
Longing for a kinder time, but I
Can only see a harshness.

MEMORIES AND TEARS

By James Piatt

Muffled echoes rumbling in a box
canyon once reflected the cherished
dreams of ancient warriors, now nothing
more than silent symbols of ancient lore.

Dead warriors propel their ghost voices
into the wind as they ride their wild
phantom mustangs in imaginary
mountains and meadows. Fading
memories, thin lines of whispering
yesterdays relating a never-ending tale
of that which is ephemeral collapsed in
a cacophony of untruthful words.

An aged Indian sits alone, and cross-
legged near boulders and a Yucca plant
in the high desert; the flowering plant
emits aromas of the rusted dreams of
his lost people, waiting for time to vanish
in the modern world. The sun reaching
for twilight, casts an apricot hue upon
the far mountains as the Indian's tears
try to wash away a poignant reality.

A TIME OF TELLING

By Margaret Holbrook

of best friends, made that day
when you were barely five years old

of shaped stickers on coat pegs
yours a rabbit, Sarah's a banana.

Of reading books, Janet and John
Nip the dog and Fluff the cat

of all those new words religiously learned
the 'ch' sounds that caused you trouble

of toilets in the playground
dark brown tiles and brick, cold, unlit;

of cloakroom basins in a row
and the smell of buttermilk soap

of canteen dinners and ladies in nurses hats
and pastel plastic beakers of water

of hoping you would be chosen for extra milk
mildly warm at three-thirty in the afternoon,

of listening to your teacher say
hands together and eyes closed

of peeping to make sure you're not
the only one. Saying prayers and going home.

A STUDY IN RED AND BLACK

By Margaret Holbrook

Paper, and the imagery of life
is traced out in black and red chalk.
Notes fill the page, are reflected upon,
as the foetus filled the single chamber
and the mother felt its being.

The child is breech, just a few
weeks left to birth.
Its feet are crossed, right over left.
Hands rest on knees, relaxed, safe.
The cord, the connection to life is
beautifully trailed.

Paper, all that's left; thin as wafers,
crisp and starched as fresh linen.
Ink washed and left to dry, an image
traced out in red and black.

Everything was almost ready
then fate took a hand,
stopped further progress.
A scrap of humanity lost.

Margaret Holbrook grew up in Cheshire, UK where she still lives. She writes poetry, fiction and the odd play. Her work has been published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, US and Ireland. Her novel, *About Us*, was published earlier this year.

SHOWING GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE

By Jeremy Caldwell

Excuse me as I sit in the chair
where grandmother stitched
her last piece quilt draped
above the alcove in her Victorian.

She moved out three months ago,
but I never got to ask where
to store the rust from your
souvenir spoons that formed
in the shape of your step,
heavy and intentional,

Or will the house follow you,
brick by brick, like so many days
built upon themselves?
As the new owners visit
each nook I hid in as a boy,
each protracted creak of attic stairs,
each scent of canned green beans,

I'm reminded of etched years
she made with a bent letter
opener on painted pine, or the
bolted Conn electric organ
on the floorboard. Two men
attempt to remove the quilt
forgetting the dowel, dragging
my memory down with it.

Jeremy Caldwell lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. He has poems published or forthcoming in *Poetry Quarterly* and *Tule Review*. He's currently pursuing a MA in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he's also an Editorial Assistant for the *Prairie Schooner*.

HANDS UNSEEN

By Mickey Kulp

Everything happens for a reason. Yesterday, I got to see that clearly for the first time, and it was freaking amazing.

During a home repair project, I discovered that I was missing one bolt I needed to finish the job. I dug around in my basement stash of hardware lovingly hoarded from dozens of old projects. No luck.

The next stop was Bigbrandname hardware store. After fruitless searching, I tore a corner off my Man Card and asked for an employee's help. But, he couldn't find it either. Unbelievable! Now what?

I tore another corner off and called my wife. She's the brains of the outfit, and it took her ten seconds to deliver the right answer.

"Go to Mom's house," she said. Then she went off to solve String Theory or something.

At her mother's house, there is a legendary cache of hardware that we speak of in the same hushed tones as archaeologists use to speak of King Tut's tomb. My father-in-law, Jim, was raised poor in rural L.A. (lower Alabama) and never, ever threw anything away. Ever.

I was honored to write his obituary a few years ago, and part of it said, "He was a smart worker, a pleasant neighbor, a doting father, and a devoted husband. His basement seemed to contain one of everything."

"Sure, honey, get whatever you want," Frannie, my mother-in-law, said happily, ushering me down to King Tut's basement.

The room was small and full. The far wall had a tall, two-door locker, and the left wall had a work table covered with plastic containers, metal storage boxes, and large pill bottles hidden here and there like orange Easter eggs filled with goodies. My target was a scratched metal cabinet with 18 small drawers, like a card catalog cabinet from a Reagan-era library.

I girded my loins for a long night. This was going to be like finding the Arkenstone buried in Smaug's vast lair. I needed to find a bolt in this densely packed, unlabeled room that was so unique, even Bigbrandname store didn't have it.

Then things got freaking amazing.

In the first drawer I opened, I reached under a stack of zip ties, and put my hand directly onto the bolt I needed. Totally without laying eyes on it; it was as if it had been placed miraculously into my hand. No way!

I stared at the bolt, and I felt a little tingle of... something. It was as if there was another person or another purpose actively participating with me in that room.

My rational mind, Mr. Smartypants, reminded me that I'm never that lucky. So, I pocketed the bolt without more thought (at which I'm very good) and kept looking. But that tingle kept tickling my cortex as I continued to paw through the treasures.

I found a few more of Jim's goodies that required liberation, and just as I was about to call it quits, I found an old group photo of kids from the 1940's. I felt the tingle again. Stronger.

This was Jim's man cave. His old ham radio equipment was still here. Each carefully saved nail told of a project, an improvement, that he would have loved to chat about over coffee. It was the room of a man with dreams who had more skills than money. His life, in some ways, was still echoing in here like a wistful whale song.

And, amid all the fasteners and wires and debris of his dreams, there was this photo. Why was this one of his treasures? I was illogically certain that this was something important. Mr. Smartypants shrugged.

Then it got better.

In a deeply reflective mood, I went upstairs. The small house was dark except for the kitchen light and a small blue glow coming from a wooden replica of a 1930's cathedral radio. Gentle banjo music filled the room; Jim used to play the banjo, before the stroke mugged him.

"You have to play that radio every now and then, or the parts will stop working," Frannie said. It sounded like a line of BS Jim had sold her long ago so he'd have an excuse to listen to bluegrass when he wished.

Frannie sat at a mid-century metal kitchen table that hipsters would call 'vintage.' She was uncharacteristically still, looking through a photo album instead of flitting around the kitchen like all grandmothers are required to do at all times. She seemed to be in a reflective mood too.

She was looking at a group photo. It was from her recent 50th high school reunion.

"Look what I found." I handed her the old 1940's photo.

She looked it over, brow furrowing as if she was flipping mental pages back to a long-lost era. Then she gasped and brought a hand to her mouth.

"These are the same people," she said behind her hand. She laid the two photos side-by-side, one showing child faces in grainy black and white, the other showing aged faces in vivid color. "Where did you find this?"

"It was in a wooden box under his work table."

We started talking about the two photos, comparing faces, discussing the twisted trajectories that those grainy children had taken before landing in her color photo. At times, it became a lot like gossip. "She got married three times. He was a drunk until he wrecked his motorcycle."

Hell, I just tore my Man Card in half and sat down to cackle over some juicy stories. The banjo music serenaded our happy conversation, and the stars wheeled overhead.

"Well, this was sure fun," Frannie said as I waved goodbye. She wore a big smile when I closed the door.

I left feeling that I had been rewarded too lavishly for accomplishing a mundane task. In seeking a small thing for myself, I had found a better thing for someone else.

If I completely ignore Mr. Smartypants (at which I am getting better), it's easy to fancy that I had been skillfully guided into playing the role of an unwitting emissary between a widow who needed to have a pleasant evening and her caring husband watching from the other side of a thin, thin veil.

Mickey Kulp is a writer and father of two mostly grown children who have survived his shenanigans through smarts they inherited from their mother. His creative non-fiction, fiction, and poetry have appeared in consumer magazines, newspapers, and literary journals. His first book, *Random Stones: A book of poetry*, was published in 2016.

THE RESURRECTION OF JANE EVANS

By Simon Lee-Price

I mourned Jane Evans even though I hardly knew her – or knew her only as well as you can know a distant work colleague who copies you into group emails from time to time or whom you occasionally pass in the corridor, heart beating fast in case they greet you, because you can never quite remember their name. But I did remember Jane Evans' name. The name was created for her, or she for the name. If I'd had to pick out a Jane Evans from a crowd of women, without being acquainted with any of them, I'd have pointed to my Jane Evans immediately. That is to say she was utterly unremarkable, somewhere between forty and fifty, dressed smartly but plainly, and kept you guessing about her real feelings behind a pair of sucked-in cheeks and a tight, all-purpose smile. I was never really sure what her role was in our enormous company, something to do with international partnerships is about the most I could say.

Our paths crossed maybe half a dozen times during all the years I worked there, so when the all-staff email was sent around informing us that Jane Evans had died after fighting a long battle with cancer, it was entirely possible the cancer had not yet been diagnosed the last time I'd last seen her. That short encounter was at a staff briefing, held in our state-of-the-art conference facility the previous year. We'd brushed lightly against one another in the congested foyer and I'd acknowledged her abrupt smile with a nod of my head. But 'long battle' is such a vague and non-committal timescale that it was also conceivable she had already been diagnosed before the day of the briefing, had perhaps come straight from the doctor who'd given her the devastating news, and was putting on her bravest face.

It was impossible for me to miss Jane Evans in the conventional sense; for that, you must be at least moderately acquainted with a person. No, I missed Jane Evans precisely because I had never gotten to know her. In truth, I had disregarded her. Yet, how easy it would have been to write a friendly response to one of her emails, to have said thank you now and then, or to have made small talk with her on that single occasion I stood behind her in the queue for the canteen. But now such easy opportunities for human communication had been taken away for ever.

The email provided no information regarding funeral arrangements or where former colleagues who felt so inclined could send a card or flowers. I made a generous donation to a cancer charity and committed myself to a long period of private mourning. Jane Evans' death and quiet slipping away had opened a chasm within me. During meetings, I found myself staring at colleagues, especially those I barely knew, and feeling alarmed at the terrible fragility of all our lives. "Would I ever see these people again?" I wondered, gazing from face to face. Or was this wet winter morning under punishing fluorescent lights our final encounter, our very last chance to say good bye?

#

More than six months after the email announcing her death, I saw Jane Evans again. I was in a wing of the building in which I had never set foot before, on my way to yet another meeting, and when I turned a corner there she was, as if from out of nowhere, heading toward me. At first I couldn't believe it was her. But it had to be. She was exactly as I remembered her, down to those unattractive brown loafers with the silver buckles across the front. Her pace was brisk, and in every respect she looked like a real human being who had never got sick and died. She seemed not to notice me right away, and I had a moment to compose myself.

But how do you respond to a miracle? I stepped to one side and stood with my back close to the wall. The corridor was windowless, yet Jane Evans appeared to be walking through a channel of bright sunlight. I blinked uncontrollably, marvelling at her every living step.

She changed course abruptly and opened a door to one of the offices. Just before she disappeared inside, she turned her head and glanced at me. I cannot be sure she recognised me, but she flashed me one of her smiles. The hollow in each cheek had bored a little deeper. Otherwise she had come back unchanged.

I remained standing in the empty corridor for quiet some time, and then I approached the door. It had a narrow glass panel down the center, and when I drew level I could see Jane Evans hunched over a keyboard at the other side of the office. I gazed at her, fascinated, as she typed, and I wondered if this dutiful revenant, this echo of the once living, was composing an email that would also be copied to me. I was so absorbed in watching her animated body that for a long while I didn't notice the aluminium name plate mounted on the wall next to the door.

Four names were engraved on it. All of them were women's names, and one of them was Jane – not Jane Evans, but Jane Van Houten. I read it several times and felt sick with disappointment, just like I do when a mystery is explained at the end of a film and the laws of nature and logic re-establish their tyranny. I had misremembered her name – that was all. She had introduced herself during a meeting we'd both attended years ago; but I had subsequently conflated her with her half-namesake, because that bold Dutch surname, Van Houten, simply didn't suit an everyday face like hers.

And the real Jane Evans? The sender of those emails? I couldn't picture her at all.

I peered through the glass panel again, now at Jane Van Houten. But still I saw a person who had returned from the dead. It was this dimple-cheeked woman with her cautious smile and flat brown shoes I had imagined afflicted with disease, suffering and dying, and never dreamed I would see again. I took hold of the door handle. She and I had been given another chance at life, and I was bursting to go into that office and shout at the top of my voice, *You're alive!*

The moment passed. I let my hand fall to my side. Some experiences are not made for sharing. They're like dreams, sublime and ridiculous at the same time, keeping us shut inside our separate and silent lives. I hurried on my way in search of the meeting.

As I drew near the end of the corridor, I heard a woman's voice calling.

"Jason?"

I turned around, though Jason wasn't my name. Jane Van Houten was approaching with quick, erratic steps.

"Jason Shields? My God! It really is you, isn't it?"

I shook my head. "Wrong man, I'm afraid."

She halted, as if she'd hit an invisible wall. Her shoulders dropped. Her smile flickered and died. "I'm sorry," she said. "I could have sworn . . ."

I watched her retreat to her office and silently close the door. And in the three more years I worked at the company I never saw Jane Van Houten again.

Simon Lee-Price is a UK-based author and university lecturer. His most recent publications are short stories in the literary journals *Prole*, *Interpreter's House* and *Sein und Werden* and he has forthcoming short story publications in *The Ham* and in an anthology of speculative fiction, *Restless*, by Frith Books.

DEAD NIGHT

By AN Block

“Do me one favor,” the man with the mirror sunglasses said, folding his arms on the table, “do not over-react. Again.”

The tanned woman facing him slouched in her chair and lowered her eyes to the candle stub flickering between them.

“I just want to tell you something, Marco. I felt you had a bad time last night,” she said.

He leaned forward, lit a cigarette on the flame, removed his glasses, and eased back. “Bad time?”

“You were distant.”

“Hardly got any sleep the whole night. Remember? Hey, if we’re up dissecting our feelings and I’m totally wiped, I mean, how do you want me to be?”

“So, is this all happening too fast for you? Are you scared?”

“Oh, come on,” he said.

“Is that it?”

He covered a yawn. “I don’t want to talk about it. Not here, anyways. You know, I’m not into…” He broke off, running fingers back through his thick curly black hair. “Can we give this a rest? Let’s just have our dessert. Can we do that?”

“So, that’s the type you are? Brush everything under the rug? Let’s party! Woo-hoo!”

The spoon he let drop onto his porcelain side plate echoed throughout the otherwise still and empty restaurant. Exhaling, he crushed his cigarette into an untouched Mousse Citron. It sizzled. “Hey, waiter,” he said, beckoning with his finger, “I’ll take a check.”

“Thank you very much,” I said, placing the tip tray containing their bill on the table. “Hope you enjoyed everything.”

It was another dead night and I’d been hovering, hoping they’d get lost, the reason I overheard their whole messed up conversation.

“Excuse me,” she said, “I’m not ready.”

“Look, let’s get into this someplace else,” the guy said, half-rising and jerking his head toward the door, reaching for his wallet. “This dip in the bow tie here wants to close up.”

“What do I care? We need to talk. I’m not leaving.”

He cocked his head sideways and stared. “Hey, whatever. Stay all night. Talk it over with him, why don’t you?” He slammed a fistful of twenties on the table and stormed out the door.

“Have a wonderful life,” I mumbled, counting the money, which it turned out was a few bucks short.

“What is it with him?” she asked. Her hazel eyes pooled up as they met mine for the first time.

“You could catch up to him still if you hurry. Go find out.”

“Oh, the hell with him. I’ll grab a taxi.” But instead of getting up she dropped her head to the table and, I mean, the flood gates opened, full bore.

Go ahead, I told myself, go burn one down by the dumpster. Hopefully, by the time you’re good and wrecked, Marco’s Girlfriend du Jour here will be history.

“Sorry, Carlos,” I said, passing through the kitchen, “there’s one party lingering. Break it down and in fifteen I’ll lock up myself.”

“Okay, Irwin, thanks bro, but what if someone walks in?”

“Snowy Tuesday in February? 9:45? Go put the kiddies to bed, I got you covered, babe, I’ll fix something cold.”

“And if Rocco drops by?”

“Ooh, Rocco. I’m shaking.”

Carlos bit his upper lip, then removed and folded his apron. “You know how to set the alarm, right?”

“Duh.”

“Heading over to Ruby’s?”

“I’m so far down this month, I probably shouldn’t.”

“Bad luck?” he asked. “Or you playing your cards wrong?”

“Hey,” I told him, “when the force is against you.”

I took my sweet time out back, gazing at the constellations, inhaling the night’s garbage, feeling like a pebble on the beach, but ten minutes later, there she was still, peering into a hand mirror at the table, dabbing her cheek with a tissue and erasing streaks of mascara.

“Sit down,” she said, without looking up, her voice a deeper breathy contralto.

I took in her pink Good-and-Plenty-like nail polish, leathery skin, and crossed sculpted legs. Then I swung around a chair from another table, leaned my chin on its low back, and positioned myself within sniffing distance. When our eyes met, I forced a smile. I tried to exhale sympathy.

She said, “Buy yourself a drink, garcon. On me.”

“It’s against the rules, Ma’am. My name, by the way, it’s Rocco. Not garcon.”

“Go on,” she said, shaking my hand, “take a little chance. Rocco.”

“Secret of our success here at Champignon, the customer’s always right.” I unlocked the bar. “What’re you up for, some more wine?”

“Whatever you are. I don’t care. Make mine double.”

I reached for the Ouzo, then decided, screw that. I poured two healthy belts of 151 over plenty of ice, splashed in some Cherry Coke and returned, clinking, to the table.

“Talk to me,” she said. “But first, stop grinning like a trained monkey.”

“So, what exactly’s the problem? And how can we fix it?”

“Men,” she said.

“Come on. Expect me to believe that? Classy lady like you?”

“You saw what happened. What do I do that’s so godawful? Tell me.”

“First date?” I asked, taking a serious gulp, wincing to the side, my throat on fire.

“No.”

“Don’t roll your eyes.” Her perfume hit me, essence of apricot, or maybe it’s peach, a thick wave, a little too savory. “So how long’ve you two, you know?”

“How long?” Her eyes crossed now, staring down at the drink she enclosed in both hands. “That happens to be the wrong question, young man. Irrelevant. The first two weeks were remarkable.”

“Yeah, well.” Leaning forward, I snuck another whiff, picturing two remarkable weeks with those legs of hers. “You know how it is. The thrill of attraction. The exotic.”

“Oh, please. This goes a lot deeper than hormones, sonny. We happen to have this connection.”

“Yeah, I noticed. People change though. We’re all moving targets.”

“People! You mean ‘men.’ Because you’re all like that, aren’t you? Shifty.”

“Well, Ma’am, I’d have to respectfully disagree. All men are not like that. Far from it.” I removed my clip on bow tie, undid the clownish buttons of my vest. “Take me, for instance. I’m not a thing like him.”

“Oh? You’re a real lover boy, I can tell. Aren’t you, tiger?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Do you have the slightest idea what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah. I read you.”

“Can you enlighten me, why men act so goddamn interested in you right up to the point you reciprocate? As a representative of the species.”

“Well,” I paused, took another sip, tried to scrunch my face like I imagined a deep serious thinker would. “With all due respect, that’s a broad generalization.” I held up a finger. “No pun intended.”

“It’s all about the hunt. You want to suck us in and then, bang, when you’ve got us.” Tossing back her head, she took a mouthful of the drink, made a “Yuk!” sound, and spit an ice cube back into the glass. She waved air into her open mouth. “Excuse me, this is revolting. God! What are you trying to poison me with? Turpentine and Coke?”

“Ease up. Look, every guy out there’s just trying to be a man. Best way he knows how.”

“Yeah, well, I’m done getting kicked around in the process.”

“So what happened? What’d this jerk do?”

“Oh, like you weren’t listening the whole time. And, by the way, he’s not a jerk.”

“You always attract guys like that?” I didn’t want to stare, but couldn’t take my eyes off those glittering lips.

“Like what, sonny?” She looked to the window, shaking her head. “Successful, good-looking men of the world?”

“Okay, lady, tell me, what should I say? That we’re all superficial?”

“Do I just have lousy luck? For over a year, when I first moved to Boston, each guy I met was married.” Sticking her tongue out, she exhaled a *yicch* sound. “Looking for a little side action. And now it’s one after another of these, I don’t know, things. Do I come on too strong?” She lowered her eyes to the tissue she was squeezing and I rested my hand on hers.

“No, you’re beautiful.” I grabbed a clean napkin from the next table and put it beside her. “So beautiful, I’m all tongue tied.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” she said, pulling back, folding her hands, teary again.

“Hey, you don’t have to apologize to me. So, how’d you two meet? Back like two weeks ago?”

“Three actually. Does it matter? Marco can be charming. He’s got this magnetism. Why am I even telling you this?”

“Wait, have we ever met before? You and me?”

“What?”

“Never mind, sorry, it’s just this wave I get. Déjà vu or something, it’ll pass. So, I get why you’re bummed. Mr. Wonderful, turns out he’s a creep.”

“How many times can you try?”

“Once more? Hey, come on! Don’t pound the table like that, Miss.” I picked the overturned water glass up from where it landed, patting the spill with my side towel. “Please.”

“He says I’m possessive, demanding. You should have heard him last week! The things he said.”

“Okay, excuse me, but the part I don’t get is how supposedly you could be, whatever you said, have this deep connection, two

weeks in.”

“It’s a figure of speech,” she said, sighing. “What’s love? This big scare word, to you guys, at least. My ex was right. ‘Lisa,’ he used to say, ‘take it from me: religion, politics, psychiatry, love. Commitment. It’s bullshit. Even me, sitting here, telling you what a crock it all is.’ God, he was the worst, phoniest quack on the planet, all he cared about was money. That got him off. A former Communist! If I’d have stayed with him, probably would’ve wound up so depressed I’d commit suicide. Still might.”

“Hey, come on! Are you kidding?”

“What went wrong?” She was starting to sway, her unfocused eyes drooping. “Pour me another. Something palatable.”

“You don’t play your cards right, I bet. You’re too vulnerable.”

She stared at me, uncomprehending. She suddenly looked worn out, deflated.

“Call this Marc up,” I told her, “right now. Just ask him, *What’s the story, dude?* Don’t sound like you’re going to fall apart if he’s mad. Control yourself. Like you said, he’s just scared probably. Of being close.”

“He as much as admitted it, didn’t he? Said he didn’t want to talk about it though.”

“In the restaurant.” I glanced at my watch. “Plus, you know how us guys are. We have a hard time saying how we feel. We’re not always comfortable talking things out.”

“I don’t know, maybe he is just a game-playing creep. He was so nice though. Before. You don’t believe a word of this, do you?”

“Well, he seems inconsistent. I mean, off the record, the guy’s been in before. He likes taking women here, okay? Women, shall we say, a few years his senior.”

“Thank you, for sharing. I want to order another drink. Are you okay with that, waiter? Something not disgusting this time?”

I got up without saying anything and poured a short one, the Silver, then spilled some water in. Five minutes we’re talking, she’s on suicide watch. Who knew what she might try if I forced her out now?

“Maybe it’s my fault,” she said.

“It’s worth considering.”

“So what happens now?”

“My theory? It takes two to tango. Break the ice. Call him up.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t think I have good reason to be mad?”

“Could I ask, what makes you think I’m qualified to give advice? I was a Philosophy major at U Mass. I mean, all I took was Intro to Psych, got a B minus. Should’ve been a B but the prof was a real ball breaker.”

“Well, if you’re going with someone and,” she paused to insert her right thumbnail between two teeth, “you don’t know if they care about you as much as you do about them, how would you try and find out? Philosophically speaking.”

“Personally? I might leave them alone in a restaurant. As a test. Tell them: drop dead. In a manner of speaking. Then, if they came running after me, I’d know their love is true. Because I’m a big believer, love conquers all.”

“What if they get the wrong impression though and you never see each other again?” She leaned forward and squinted.

“Certain things aren’t meant to be. This is 1984. The future is now, you’ve got to seize life by the you-know-whats and go for it. Express how you feel but give the guy his space. Before it’s too late.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes brightened, she kept nodding. She took a sip. “Right.”

“Reassure him, you don’t want more now than he does. You don’t want him running, like all the others, right? Hey!” I snapped my fingers. “I got a great idea. You ready? Give him a call. Right now. I’ll call you a cab.” I glanced at my watch again. “Say you’re sorry about what happened. But be cool. Guys love that. It shows you’re on top of the situation, you’re not too fragile. Just tell him this.”

“Wait!” she put a hand over my mouth then took a jewel-studded silver pen and some lavender note paper out of her purse. “Okay, go ahead, Rocco. But slowly.”

“Did I say my name? Never mind, just tell him, ‘I don’t care if we’re in love with each other, we’re not in love with each other, I really don’t. It’s just a word people use. Hey, I want to be your friend, go out, see what develops. Whatever. Undefined.’”

“You think so?” she said, scribbling. “Really?”

“Absolutely,” I told her. “Go for it. I’ll call the cab.”

“You’re so nice,” she said, patting my cheek. “Could I use the phone?”

FOCUS

By Sean Callahan

They teetered on the edge. The edge of dissatisfaction, the edge of disillusion, the edge of distance. The edge of oblivion.

“You know how this is going to end, right? Don’t you?”

He most certainly did not. She very well may have, though intuition is a flawed mechanism – it can be subconsciously warped to match a perceived outcome. But he didn’t have intuition at his disposal, not like a woman’s, not that electric and manipulative tool.

He had what men have – a scale.

Not to say he was the fair and unbiased arbiter, but he knew the weight of things. He knew how to measure. He knew how to assign value, and he had a good idea about what mattered. He had the capacity for memory.

They teetered on the edge. He, the voice of reason. She, the force of gravity.

So he started stacking blocks, trying to read ahead. He wanted to see from her vaulted plane, to look across experience and determine the outcome.

“Don’t you?”

Like their last visit to his parents’. She resisted those trips and he could see why – to be held up to the critical light, to squirm under forced conversation, to see the side of his life he was utterly bound to. Two parties, his parents and her, each unable to engage the other. Two worlds, not clashing, but dancing around like magnets, each trying to flip the other to complement its own polarity, when all understanding would take was a bit of acquiescence from both.

They teetered on the edge.

But that was only one night, and he explained to her, it’s a necessary annoyance that would get better with time – like all things. They followed up that visit with a trip out to the coast where they pitched a tent on the beach and counted the cricket chirps against their own beating hearts. They made love in the wake of overwhelming perspective and to the rhythm of the tide.

“Don’t you know?”

He traced it back.

There was the drive to her sister’s wedding, the one where he had claimed to know where he was going. He told her he knew what he was doing, time and time again, even in the face of her frequent requests to put it in the GPS, to stop and ask for directions, to consider the possibility they could be going the wrong way. He wouldn’t do it and it cost them the following: two extra hours of driving, one heated argument, 90 minutes of silence, an evening of phony conversation, the most stilted slow dance since middle school, and a night on opposite sides of the bed.

He weighed, he measured. He stacked the blocks.

The time he raised his voice, scaring himself, listening helplessly to words he didn’t intend to utter. He knew how to check his frustration, how to keep his cool – most of the time. The one time he didn’t stand in his memory like a monolith erected from the cold granite of regret. Immovable, indestructible, permanent. He wondered how it stood in her mind – that same stone statue? Or maybe something more akin to a leaky faucet – a consistent and unrelenting drip.

There was no way to plug that leak. But better to wipe up the mess than to collect it in a bucket and watch it overflow. Apologies don’t solve anything, but they are a first and necessary step, followed by three other active ingredients: space, repentance, and action. She fell asleep with her back to him but awoke with one hand resting on his chest. They turned to face each other as dawn illuminated the dust on the blinds. They didn’t speak, just observed, silent and spellbound. He broke the silence after what must have been hours, saying, ‘I’ll go make breakfast.’

“Don’t you know how? Don’t you know why?”

They teetered on the edge.

He began to trend these data points, forming in his mind a scatterplot. Positive and negative. For and against. The search for a pattern – a pattern emerged.

Balance. No overwhelming weight on either side. Balance. And still they teetered, threatening collapse, their status clearly indicating his data was somehow still wrong.

For every event, a counter. For every instance of digression, an act of progress. Down, and then up again. On average, a steady line.

Then he considered the micro-events – minute details that are nevertheless innumerable, enough to tip the scales one way or the other when taken in totality. These would require an entirely new account.

The cooking, the movies, the sex both bad and good, the lateness, the work, the envy, the boredom, the running, the mornings, the evenings, the long afternoons, the surprises, the let downs, the travel, the car, the money, the meals, the speaking, the not speaking, the friends, the new, the anticipation, the tears mostly hers, the laughter mostly hers, the dreams all his, the bed, the fear, the couch, the future, the past, the present.

Sean Callahan lives in Somerville, MA with his wife, where he runs, writes and plays guitar. The two work conventional jobs to support a travel habit they can’t seem to shake.

Still they teetered.

“Say something.”

“I don’t know how this will end. I don’t know that it ever will.”

She examined him in disbelief, then wonder, then pity – apparently, nothing she’d said to him in the last 10 minutes had sunk in.

“Babe,” she began, smiling at him the way she might at a child who’d just had a bad dream, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck.

They locked eyes and he watched hers move just barely from his left to his right. They were never the same color each time he looked at them – one day brown, the next day green, the next day hazel. Now they were a golden ring around the pupil, fading into an olive green and then a chestnut brown. His were far paler, shallow and striking, now a yellow-blue-green, the color of spring.

He tried to predict what was coming, what that smile meant, why she had embraced him, what she was feeling, he tried to understand it all, to weigh it out, to resist that gravity. Now he considered that force – the thing that drags us down but also the thing that keeps us grounded, locks in our atmosphere, and prevents the Earth itself from spiraling into the frozen void of space.

He thought he knew what was coming, but he didn’t. He couldn’t possibly have known. The thing she said next was the only problem she had ever had, the only thing that had ever mattered to her, the only thing she needed and the only thing he couldn’t possibly provide.

“Babe,” she’d said before uttering those fateful words: “You never listen.”

“Show me the answers to the riddles of today...” – A.J. Huffman

“He still put me back together, giving me His blessing...” - Jason Kirk Bartley

“You’re little more than a breath in a hospice ...” - Bruce McRae

TL Publishing Group LLC closes out the year with Volume XX Bend, Don’t Break. This latest issue of the Torrid Literature Journal is a refreshing reminder of the aesthetic appeal rooted in fine works of literature. Volume XX starts off with an interview featuring Nikita Hernandez, a pushcart prize nominee who takes the time to share her thoughts and advice on writing.

The Torrid Literature Journal also contains a beautiful collection of poems and short stories that highlight the flexibility and power of the written word. Lovers of literature will truly appreciate the lengths writers go to just to create these beautiful works of art where they embed their truth and skill. The final result is nothing short of astonishing as these writers come together with the flexibility and grace of a ballerina who knows how to dance dutifully around the beats of life.

Change is the one factor that remains constant in life. It teaches us how to adapt to our surroundings. As a result, there is always something to say which means artists will never run out of material. This also means TL Publishing Group’s journey will never end. Join TL Publishing Group as they continue on their journey to connect writers with readers who are thirsty for literary material that feeds the senses, soothes the heart, and ravishes the mind.

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