

January 2016

TORRID LITERATURE JOURNAL

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VOLUME XVII: LAYERS & LEVELS

Featured Poets: Jolene Cardoza | Liana Kapelke-Dale | And Many More!

Must Read Fiction: "Perspective" by Bill Kirby

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CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

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

All positions can be fulfilled remotely unless otherwise noted.

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

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

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

FROM THE EDITOR

A new year presents new levels and opportunities. We have a choice. We can either step backwards into the past or move forward and embrace the future. I hope you will make the decision to move forward boldly with your head held high and your hope strong. Everything that did or did not happen in 2015 contributed to who and where you are right now. I say this in hopes that you will feel motivated to take a fresh look at your goals and intentions for the new year. At TL Publishing Group this is exactly what we have been doing. We are examining the roadmap ahead and making any necessary adjustments that will help us fine tune the execution of our goals. One of our continuous goals includes our humble attempt to provide readers with literary material that appeals to the senses. With the *Torrid Literature Journal* we are able to achieve this and much more. We look for literary material that is timeless in its relevance. We want readers to recognize the various forms of literature for the precious keepsakes that they are meant to be known as among society.

We're excited to kick off 2016 with the *Torrid Literature Journal* Volume XVII *Layers & Levels*. Our latest literary release will reintroduce readers to the power of the written word. The poems and short stories in this volume speak loudly and they will leave readers with an echo. It's a sound that demonstrates power. The writers have dug deep inside of themselves to reveal the best of what they have to offer.

Writers have layers to their creativity. They are more than what they appear to be on the surface. The same understanding applies to their work. Their outer layer is a manifestation of what is on the inside. What feeds their core, their inner muse? The answer to this question will vary for each writer because their motivations differ based on their experiences, emotions, beliefs, and much more. Every time a writer creates a work of art they are essentially diving deep into themselves to pull out a piece of truth so they stick this message in their final product. This is what makes the *Torrid Literature Journal* special. The contributing writers add flavor and life to each volume we release.

Volume XVII is also special in that it marks the four year anniversary of the *Torrid Literature Journal*. I remember vividly our first issue. Volume I *Rediscovering the Passion* was the start of an amazing journey where we committed ourselves to help support and strengthen the culture of literature. Since the beginning there have been highs and lows but no regrets. Right now, in this very moment we are right where we are supposed to be. The entire production of this journal is a collective effort and we are forever grateful to our editorial team and contributing writers. Our mission may have started with the journal but it definitely doesn't end here. Since our first volume we've launched multiple products, services, and events. This includes our Gateway Literature imprint, open mic shows, literary contests, editing services, and much more. With a new year ahead, our expansion efforts will continue.

After a brief hiatus, we are also excited to announce the return of our literary contest. The *Romancing the Craft of Poetry & Fiction* Contest will accept submissions from March 1st through July 31st. Our contest has a low submission fee and it is open to emerging and established writers. Three winners will be chosen during a blind

judging process. In addition, several writers will receive an honorable mention in our publication. We are also still accepting judges for this contest. Please visit our website for more information about our contest and judging opportunities.

The return of our contest isn't the only reason we're excited. We are still celebrating the release of *The Effects of Grace*. Our Christian anthology of poetry is available for purchase on Amazon. All of our Christian titles are published under our Gateway Literature imprint. It's been a pleasure to provide readers with inspirational literature that reflects the love of Christ. We look forward to continuing on this path. Follow our website and blog for news and updates about our third Christian anthology, which will open for submissions later this year.

In continuing with the updates, last quarter we hosted another open mic show at The Bunker in Tampa, Florida. The show was nothing short of amazing. Musicians, singers, poets, spoken word artists, and comedians blessed the audience with their gift as they left the microphone in flames. We look forward to hosting more shows this year. As always, we strongly encourage writers to take part in poetry readings, workshops, and open mic events. In addition to writing consistently, these other practices will help writers strengthen their literary skills and network with other writers in the field.

Be generous with your gift and share it with others. Seek out calls for submissions and other places where you can share your work. I guarantee you that if you have the desire to write then there are readers on the other end of the scale eager to listen to what you have to say. Whether your field is poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, make a commitment to your craft. Be determined to push yourself. To repeat my earlier sentiments stated in previous volumes, you can only fail if you quit. This doesn't apply just to becoming a successful writer. This applies to life in general.

It is true, you can have what you say, but you must take the first step and believe. Then you must take a second step and have a desire to succeed and not just a general desire but the fire in you must be so strong that it consumes you. This is what will carry you further up the next steps. This is what will push you the rest of the way when trouble comes because trust me, trouble will come and when it does, what will you do? What will your response be to the trouble? What motivates you to push through your circumstances and overcome your struggles?

With that said, the new year is here. Give yourself the benefit of a healthy fresh start. Don't be afraid to believe in your own forthcoming victory.

Be you. Be blessed. Be torrid.

Sincerely,
Alice Saunders

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

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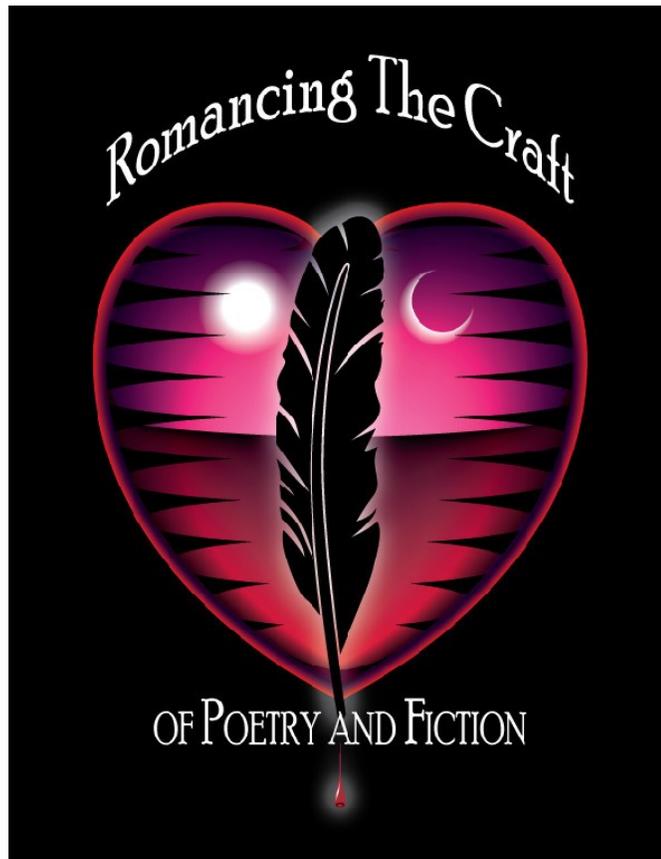
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2016 Romancing the Craft of Poetry & Fiction Contest

Our annual contest has a low cost submission fee and is open to all themes and genres of poetry and fiction. Emerging and established writers are encouraged to participate.

Guidelines:

- Submission Period: March 1, 2016 - July 31, 2016
- Seasoned and emerging writers are encouraged to submit. Also, there is no age limit or geographic location requirement.
- All work must be previously unpublished.
- For each entry, please upload up to three poems or a fiction story with 3,000 words or less. There is no word limit for the poems.
 - The entry fee per submission is \$2.00 USD.
 - There is no limit to the number of entries you may submit, but each entry requires a separate \$2.00 submission fee.
 - We accept simultaneous submissions, but please notify us immediately if your poem or story is accepted for publication elsewhere.
 - All rights revert to the author after publication.
 - All entries will be considered for publication in the Torrid Literature Journal.

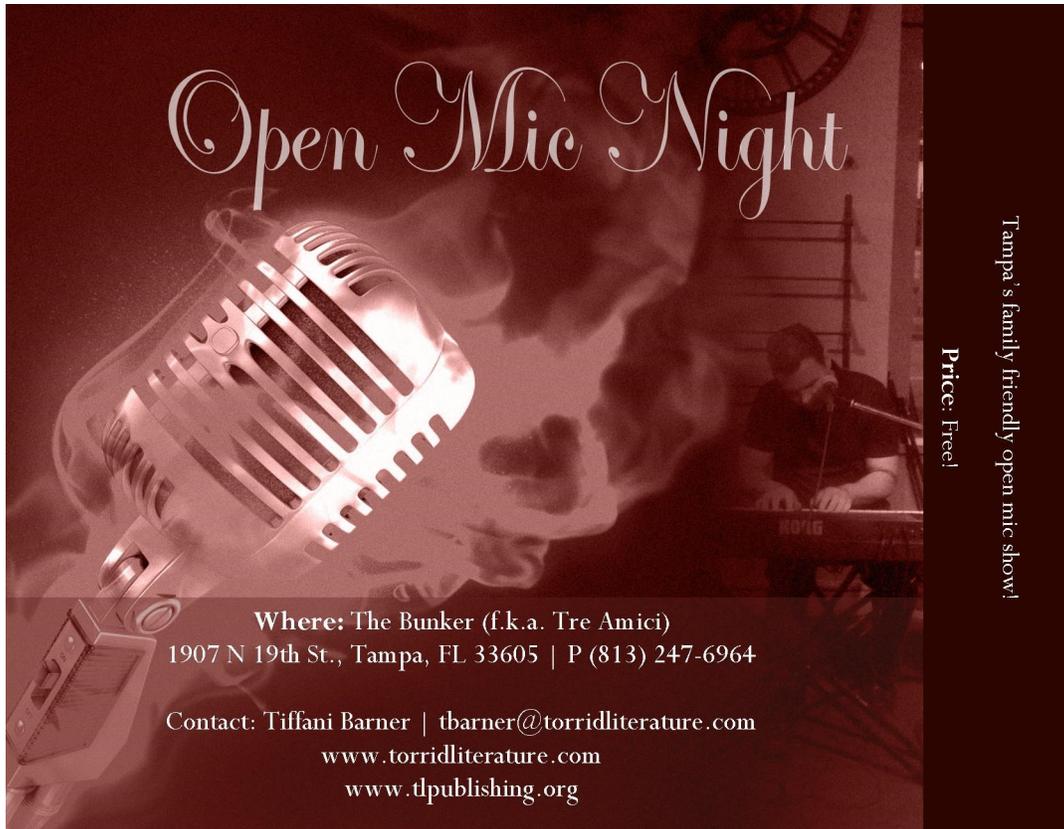
All entrants will receive a one-year digital subscription to the Torrid Literature Journal.

All contest submissions should be submitted through the use of our site on [Submittable](#).

Winners & Prizes: Three winners will be selected during a blind judging process. Winners and their selected work will be announced in the Torrid Literature Journal, which will be released October 1, 2016. 10 writers will receive honorable mention for their work.

Please visit www.torridliterature.com for a complete listing of prizes and awards.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Alice Saunders at asaunders@tlpublishing.com.



Open Mic Night

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

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
www.torridliterature.com
www.tlpublishing.org

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 events, we have R.J. Kerker as our special host. 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. There is no charge to attend our show. 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 our upcoming shows for 2016:

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

If you have any questions please contact Tiffani Barner at tbarner@torridliterature.com.

ODE TO LITERATURE

LITTLE BOYS IN RUBBER SHOES

By Megan Prestridge

Hot and sticky from dirt,
Candy and sweat, one puffy, pale hand
Clasps tightly that of another,
Similar but smaller,
Each belonging to a little boy
With rubber shoes.

Rubber shoes on tiny feet,
Walking down the path
Actively helping each other
Not to step on the cracks.

Rubber shoes in bright
And playful colors,
Meaningless holes all about
The emblem of childhood,
Or is it something more?

Above the rubber shoes
Goofy grins and funny faces
Keep the boys happy. The mother
Sighs deeply, sadly, as she showers
Her boys with smiles. There it is,
I see it, hidden, just a hint behind
Her widened lips, doubt.

Doubt that they will never
Be as happy as they are here,
Now, holding hands, playing
Silly games in their childhood,
In their innocence, in their rubber shoes.

Megan Prestridge is a 22 year old poet from Pineville, Louisiana. Graduating from the Humanities Division at Louisiana College in 2014, she has spent her post graduate time growing herself as a writer. She has explored, and continues to explore, the vast world that is writing. Prestridge does not limit herself to one genre, but were she to pick her favorite, she would cling to the art of poetry. One of Prestridge's favorite things to do in every-day-life is to try to find the poetry in the tiniest of details, to find the beauty in the most unpleasant circumstances. For the future Megan wishes to pursue an MFA in Poetry and one day help develop the Creative Writing program at her alma mater.

Kevin Murphy's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Heron Tree*, *Gravel Magazine*, *Cactus Heart*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, and other journals. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho and currently resides in Asheville, NC with his person named Shannon.

FOR BORGES

By Kevin Murphy

- composed primarily from his epilogue to *The Makers*
and his prologue to *The Self and the Other*

Portraying worlds: the task he sets himself
upon in life. His art a chessboard dream
where still his eyes (gone blind) can see the pieces.
Over the years he fills surfaces like shelves
of a vast library. He seeks the other tiger
through images: kingdoms, horses, mountains,
provinces, people, rooms, ships, bays and islands,
heavenly bodies – these pieces brought together
by time. The fate of a writer is strange.
He builds such worlds on top of solid plinths,
thinking he describes an outward maze.
Tracing back through in his final days,
he discovers this patient labyrinth
of lines is a drawing made of his own face.

Ashley Jackson is currently pursuing her MFA at Otis College of Arts and Design in Los Angeles, California. When Ashley isn't attending school or tutoring undergrads, she can be found, spending time with her beloved nephew, Joshua.

CLOTH

By Ashley Jackson

You need to comprehend this:
I love you because of her.
Please, don't get any false assumptions.

Because of her, you are now my beloved.
She and I are merely extensions of each other.
We're kin, cut from the same cloth.

I proclaimed you in the name of sibling adoration.
"She is mine, therefore, he is mine." I said to your father.
I claimed my blood dominion before you were born.

That cloth that she and I are fibers of—
Is a cloth that is strong, tough, yet, vulnerable
Its stretched past lost memories of oppression.

You are mine by way of lineage.
You are mine because I say so.
Therefore, now you are my kin.

You are now a fiber in that cloth.
And when my fiber withers, fades and cease to exist,
Remember that fabric we are apart of,
Tell your children of its strength, its beauty once I am gone.

Loving you, Isaiah is like an act of sacrament.
I am chanting a song that was incantation before my existence.
It sings the praises of all prosperity.

Leopoldo Michael Moraca enjoys writing poetry when he has time to spare while attending college full time and working two part time jobs. Most of his poems come to life while commuting the NYC transit – a solitary moment between home and the ‘real world’.

LOVE AGO

By Leopoldo Michael Moraca

When does a heartbreak end,
So that I may begin again?

Rejoice in all of life’s pleasures
And embrace the feeling of happiness once more

Yet all sensations of joy are on pause
As this heart of mine is frozen

Trapped in a period where this love I had
Was all I ever wanted, and nothing else.

As I am here alone now without her,
Time passes as it always has

Except now it passes with each tick of the clock
Reminding me that she is even further in the past, away from me
now.

How I wish I could grab the hands of time
And bend them backwards
So she could be mine once more

I can say it all, reminisce in what once were
But this is what she wanted
And the suffering I shall endure.

A great deal of time has passed now,
Enough to fully recover over such a term of love

Yet my heart is reminded each and every day of her
By the walls that surround me,
That surrounded us at one time.

How can one fall out of love?
For it is the most powerful feeling of all.
Its spell on me has turned poisonous,
Painfully reminding me that I once had control.

As I weep, I sigh knowing that it must come to an end
This endless turmoil of distraught sadness will have to be put to rest.

She is gone onto other worldly adventures,
Without me
I dare do not disturb her, for this is what she asked for.

What I thought was impossible, is now the reality of my love
Broken, beaten, left alone to wither away

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. She attended the University of South Florida in Tampa and is a graduate of the Eugene O'Neill National Critics Institute. She currently resides in New England.

INDOORS

By Jolene Munch Cardoza

I live in a very poetic house.

In the mid afternoon, the boys play tennis across the street.
The birds fly from tree to tree,
the bees buzz around the cherry blossoms.
There is a chair underneath a tree of redbuds, and across the street
I can hear the flag clanging against its metal pole.
Across the side street, our neighbor watches us from behind
binoculars.
I'm sure
we bore him.

My lazy cat stretches out upon the bed, yawning a wide yawn,
licking his paw, sighing a deep sigh.

There are cars and stars and flowers,
greens and pinks and blues,
there are bodies and figures and noises,
and sounds,
but not one single seahorse.

The clouds hang in the sky
like big white sheets out to dry.
I try to make shapes out of them, but today they are not cooperating.
Today they are hurried along, rushed, as though they have
somewhere to be,
or an impatient husband behind them.

I sit on the corner of the bed,
watching rackets hit balls,
that crisp sound of wire clocking the felt,
the little green sphere dreaming
of making it past the net,
bouncing in the box,
and sailing blissfully over the fence,
never to return to the game again.

Through the branches of redbuds, I can see the library
from my pillow.

At night the air cools and the smell of rainclouds drifts into my
bedroom.

I wonder why no one has filmed
how water gathers in the air,
up from the ground,
flying through the atmosphere,
up above our heads to make a storm center.
So far all I have seen,
though many years were not spent combing

through science books, I might add,
are illustrations.

Here are the aquifers, where the water sits, and zephyrs,
some underground pools
where fish must sleep
and mermaids dance,
tiny mermaids and not like the kind you find in a natural spring
or doused by salt near the ocean,
but tiny little baby mermaids,
a life in miniature,
playing among the shale.

And here is where, the artist portrays, here is where
the water collects,
before being drawn up,
past the ants and tulips,
the vegetable gardens and the houses,
the churches, courthouses and aeroplanes,
here is how the great cycle works,
and not once have I seen
the great rendition
of this water,
evaporating before our very eyes,
passing by us
on its way to the sky.

Though I have, admittedly, noticed a cold early morning fog,
the mists of some grey and gloomy Wednesday,
the oppressive humidity of an unbearable Thursday,
the occasional "muggy" Monday... as my mother would put it.

Perhaps that is our picture,
our mind's photography,
of the adolescence and rite of passage
for the mighty raincloud,
soaring here and drifting there,
and gathering together again,
on its way to full-blown
adulthood,
right before our very eyes.

Jolene Munch Cardoza

Claire Gellis is a senior at Central Bucks West in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. She is a student, a part-time employee at Wendy's, and a full-time dreamer.

OTHERWORLDLY

By Claire Gellis

Spaceship, I decide to call my room,
Which, by magic, can whisk me off this dreary planet,
Into the galaxies I scribble with many, many different colored crayons.
I stock my shelves with favorite toys, books, and notebooks to track the journey.
I sit in my bed and wait for liftoff, patiently counting,
5...4...3...2...Nothing happens.
5...4...3...25...4....3....2....

Headlights shine through my bedroom window. I wonder,
“Is this it? Are the aliens here? Will they take me back to their planet?”
I hope and hope,
And though my further jaded mind knows better,
I still feel a tinge of disappointment
As my fantasy drives away.

Sitting on the swingset alone, I pump myself higher and higher,
Signaling the dragon that will fly down and take me away.
The recess whistle blows sharply,
And I hobble away on tired legs, unfulfilled yet again.

My stories told me to never stop wishing.
For several years, I call on every star in the sky,
Religiously freeze at 12:34,
Concentrate as hard as I can when I blow out the too-many candles on the cake,
Praying anything to take me anywhere but here.

Nothing.

Today, I realize the truth.
The stories preach to never stop dreaming.
They were never wrong.
I just need to live my own magical story, here on Earth
Where I belong.

Victoria Keogler is 17 years old. She just started writing poetry but has been in to writing for awhile now. She wrote this poem in the form of a Villanelle, except for the last line.

SHE WAITS

By Victoria Keogler

Mommy waits up to make sure you're alright
 This house feels tense and she thinks I don't know
You came home smelling like whiskey tonight

Where is my father? This doesn't seem right
 When the booze calls your name, can you say no?
Mommy waits up to make sure you're alright

Mommy is thankful, she sees your car light
 You were supposed to be home a while ago
You came home smelling like whiskey tonight

You used to tuck me in and say goodnight
 Don't you want to watch your little girl grow?
Mommy waits up to make sure you're alright

You flung through the door and started a fight
 Mommy looked nervous and told me to go
You came home smelling like whiskey tonight

This house is silent, as we sit in fright
 I'd do anything to hear your "hello"
Mommy waits up to make sure you're alright

But you didn't come home at all tonight.

James Sutton is a Graduate of Iowa Writers Workshop. He studied with John Berryman, George Starbuck & Marvin Bell. Sutton has published 14 books of poetry, mostly sonnets. He has worked as organizer, lobbyist & senior policy analyst for Iowa teachers union. His latest book, *Love, God & Country*, is available on Amazon. Sutton lives in Des Moines with his true wife & cat.

JOHN DONNE EXTENDING A METAPHOR

By James Sutton

Companion satellites, that's what we are:
a single point of light, seen from afar.
But magnified, the eye can quickly see
two points of light, in orbit endlessly
around each other, pulling to amend
a rigid arc that neither one can bend.
And since the two have insufficient mass
to break away or hold the other fast,
they spin together, asymmetrical,
within an arc that's so elliptical
that where the other is, the one is not;
so each plays hostage to the other's lot,
 till what appears a beacon in the night
 does not illuminate, but captures light.

Breanne Budaj enjoys screen writing and writing poetry in her spare time. She also edits movies and puts short films together.

5/17/14

By Breanne Budaj

Sometimes we feel things we shouldn't.
Or do things we don't believe in, just to feel that rush in our veins.
We speak without consequence.
We allow flowers to grow in our hearts, yet we water them with liquor & ashes.
We kiss people we shouldn't, letting the acid roll off our lips and pour
Into our beating hearts
We drive too fast, & think too little.
Craving any indication that lets us know we're alive
Yet I often think we never will be.

Liana Kapelke-Dale is a poet and law student whose other interests include classic rock, vintage clothing and Latin American travel. Her work has appeared most recently in *Devilfish Review*, *you are here*, and *Emerge Literary Journal*, and is forthcoming in *Duende Journal*.

DESPOTIC HEAT OVERTHROWS

By Liana Kapelke-Dale

Despotic Heat Overthrows
Frigidity in Sweaty Coup d'état,
reads the headline.

I sit, statutorily slumbering
on a bed of case precedent
and newsprint, sweetly
outside the scope of
humidity's yellowing teeth.

The law is not so great
an equalizer as the cruel
summer heat. The sun
has no discretion, but simply
burns with the violence
of detached disinterest,

while I wile away the dirty,
perspiring hours that
curl upwards like the edges
of an ancient scroll.

The words in the newspapers
trickle away into junk piles
of sad black letters.
Somewhere in the jumble
are stories of little lives,
hardboiled in their cracked
shells, struggling to hatch
against the oppressive air.

Summer claims these victims
summarily – lines them up
against a wall of burning
sunlight, harvests their sweat
for immediate consumption,
pounds their small skulls
into slivers of naked bone.

I can neither crush
the piles of inky letters
with my bare feet
as I would an anthill
spouting a geyser of ants,
nor argue the crown
from the head of a
tyrannical season.

So I sit, limp and wilting
into wetness. I wait for
seasonal subjugation,
anticipate autumnal
occupation,

mourn the dawn
that now melts the shadows
from our bodies.

TRIAL BY FIRE AND ICE

By Liana Kapelke-Dale

I

On winter mornings, frozen
Lake Monona becomes a shortcut
for those on their way to work.
They risk the sureness of their
footing, bodies cutting gingerly
through the cold air, not quite
trusting the ice's tenuous hold.

Fearing death will come for me
in the water's raw depths,
I take the dependable path,
locked in traffic moving slow
as a melting icicle.

I used to know a boy,
a vagabond messiah who walked
on the frosty membrane of
the Milwaukee River day after
day, winter after winter.
He'd take my hand, lead me
across the water, though
I'd always slip and fall.
One day, he didn't catch me.

II

My awkward stumbling tongue
trips over 'I love you,'
so I say everything but.
Embarrassment washes my face
in red. I feel like a child's
skinned knee after a fall, torn
and bleeding onto the pavement.
Shame is a fire in my belly,
burnt low to embers and ash
after so many flare-ups.

I remember bonfires beneath
the bridge in Riverwest and in
the backyards of so many boys,
kissing the smoke from their
lungs. The fumes choked our
clothes with residue as our eyes
wandered always back to each other,
in from the surrounding darkness.

There was one boy
who was full of fire.
When he spoke to me,
his words were blazing light
in my chest. When he touched me,
I felt through our skin
the inferno that raged
in his mind. His chaos drew me in,
arms outstretched, and burned
my fingertips red as beestings.
One day, my body was dynamite,
burning down to its core
until I exploded and there
was nothing left.

So for now, I'll feed myself
icy words, trace the frost-
bitten window that filters dawn,

try to forget the old flames
that flicker always
at my hands and feet.

Richard Hartwell is a retired middle school teacher (remember the hormonally-challenged?) living in Southern 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, Hartwell would rather still be tailing plywood in a mill in Oregon. He can be reached at rdhartwell@gmail.com.

GOOD LIFE/GOOD DEATH

By Richard Hartwell

Pilate did not jest when he inquired, “What is Truth?”
Along with ‘What is Reality?’ of which it is a part,
it is one of the important questions asked of Man. So,
is Truth, or Reality, the same from all perspectives?

What then is a good death, or at least a good life towards death?
Is there such a thing as good dying? If so, it should consist in amiable
remembrance of treasured details; it should contain serrated stabs of
pain and punctuated agonies of love as well as oft-recalled highlights.

It is not unknown tomorrows that are of significance, but the
wealth of yesterdays, recalled; that can be counted, recounted,
towards the sum of life lived well. Commemorated successes
serve greater significance than to memorialize the inevitability of
death, or dramatic failure, of one’s continuous search for Truth.

Is life uniformly complete, whole? If it is subjective to the observer,
inquirer, then it loses pertinence. It is this search for Truth, for Reality,
that is the single most important aspect of an ongoing and involved life.
Without pursuit of Truth, of Reality, without movement to uncovering
meaning, life loses all importance and spiritual entropy can result.

What is Truth? – Reality? These are the grand quests of mankind.

Debbie Richard is listed in the Directory of Poets & Writers as both a poet and creative nonfiction writer. Her poems have appeared in *The Shine Journal*, *WestWard Quarterly*, *The Storyteller*, *Halcyon*, and others. A chapbook of poetry entitled *Resiliency*, was published in 2012 by Finishing Line Press. *Hills of Home*, a memoir about growing up in Appalachia, was released in 2014 by eLectio Publishing. Visit her website at www.debbierichard.com.

HARMONY

By Debbie Richard

I recognize your footsteps in the hallway,
among so many others. My breath catches
as I sense your nearness, even though
I haven't seen you yet. The soft touch
of your hand upon my shoulder
sends pulsations through every nerve ending
of my body like static electricity to a wool sweater.
Your fingers running up and down my spine
are as familiar as ivory keys to a pianist;
a concerto only I can hear, only I can feel.
We sense everything so deeply, you and I.
The poetry we compose ourselves
and read aloud to each other,
the music we listen to – classical, operatic.
I want to step onto an empty dance floor,
with no one else there but you and I,
and I want to hear the music and dance.
I want to float across the stage
as you take me in your arms,
the passion in your eyes transfused into mine.
How could we not belong together,
we're already one.

Priya Prithviraj is a writer living in India, graduating as an English Major at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her works have appeared in many literary publications that include the *New Plains Review* and *Eastlit*, a journal of East and Southeast Asian Literature. Other than being a writer, Priya has been working as a Curriculum Developer. She also maintains a lit blog where she interviews writers. Visit priyapriithviraj.com or tweet to her [@priyapriithviraj](https://twitter.com/priyapriithviraj) to connect with her.

SUNLESS SEA

By Priya Prithviraj

The sun has hidden
behind a pall of nimbus.
And the sky has turned
into an infinite stretch
of nothingness
dyed blue.
The new emptiness
within my womb,
it seems to reflect.
I sit here, lost
in remorseful contemplation.
It all seems strange,
as I watch the waves
roll out of the shore
that hums a sad melody
which hides grief.
I forget to hide mine.
The sound of little feet on sand.
It gets closer.
I turn back.
It's a little boy
selling peanuts.
I buy a packet of peanuts
to see him smile.

THE WIND REMEMBERS

By Priya Prithviraj

I still remember
the feeling we shared,
when on that cold December night,
the sweet cinnamon scented breeze
strewed the yellow flowers of Ginger Thomas
all over the green grass
which was wet from the midnight mist,
and blew away the smoky clouds
revealing the silver moon
as we watched.
The wind remembers
what you have forgotten,
and whistles through the barren trees,
like a long lost melody.

Beau Boudreaux teaches English in Continuing Studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. His first book collection of poetry, *Running Red, Running Redder*, was published in the spring of 2012 by Cherry Grove Collections. He has published poetry in journals including *Antioch Review* and *Cream City Review*, also in anthologies along with *The Southern Poetry Anthology*.

DIZZY DEAN BASEBALL

By Beau Boudreaux

I'm sitting in the aluminum stands
hoping James makes contact

before his third strike but he has not hit
this season so I'm told

four fathers coach
and pitch—its humid, steamy

grandparents under umbrellas
and this game runs by time on the scoreboard

my nephew in shades is an all star at second
and makes the important outs

into the double-header I'm a die-hard
on the edge of my hot seat

as James draws a long count
waits for a perfect pitch

from my brother-in law Freddie that he fouls
down third, I applaud, elated

as if a pop up is caught
or the rare fly over the fence.

WORRY BONE

By Beau Boudreaux

I left Jackson on the patio

sunning himself on his back
pushing 100 degrees I forgot

the pond and could trace
his wet paw prints on the kitchen floor—

to the hose and an oatmeal bath
where he does not complain

during a scrub down
on his neck, a knot balloons

and over the course of the day
I become concerned, deliberate

if he should get checked at the vet
oh the woe of the waiting room

the verdict is in just another
lipoma on an aging beagle.

Joy Roulier Sawyer received the Herbert Rubin Award for Outstanding Creative Writing from New York University, and since then has published poetry in many diverse publications, including *Books & Culture*, *Bohemian Chronicle*, *LIGHT Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Ruminate*, *St. Petersburg Review*, *Theology Today*, *Volta*, and others. Sawyer was runner-up in the 2011 St. Petersburg Review poetry contest for her eight sonnet cycle, "Following the Piper: An American Elegy."

CAN YOU BE A WOMAN WRITER

By Joy Roulier Sawyer

and wriggle static-free
from frayed designer labels
of "charming" or "brilliant" or "brave"—

you know, spy a *real* novelist
in the literary buffet line
who reads you up and down and sideways and finally sighs:

Damn, girl. You sure do make me wanna show-not-tell.

Can you be a woman writer
and shrug off the predictable huff and frump
and finger-wag of strident sisters—

you know, kick off sturdy lace-up shoes
of poop-brown protest, slide those
poems into sassy red sling-backs and sing:

Damn, girls. Come on, now. Even these couplets got legs.

Can you be a woman writer and disregard
archaic rules all square and angled,
all boxy and stingy and snarly—

you know, all "parceling out the joy"
in teeny little eentsy-weeny
munchkin-sized portions?

Hey, boy. Wanna clue?

Say you left my house after coq au vin,
whistling, half a French silk pie
tucked snugly underneath your arm,
when suddenly you realized:

Well, now. There's more where that came from.

It's like that.

Eli Miles is a middle school English teacher living in the foothills of Rome, Georgia. He is a graduate of Shorter University. His favorite writers include Fyodor Dostoevsky and Flannery O'Connor.

THE YEAR OF THE DROUGHT

By Eli Miles

In the year of the drought,
My father did his father's work.
The rivulets sounded like the dying echo of a bell.
The sky withheld its rain like a confession.
Planting stillborn seeds in the sun-choked earth,
His skin baked and blistered.
Leathery, bleeding hands tilled the dead soil,
Burying seeds like an axe,
Hewing into the mewling dust.
His face was awash with crimson sweat
While he stood in the furnace.
He set his hands to the plow
To cut open the veins of a corpse.
His work was in vain,
But his work was not done.

I bear witness to my father's work.

The earth was not fertile.
My heart was a barren womb.
Desperation carved furrows into my mummified heart,
Yet nothing flourished.
The grubs of memory gnawed at the roots of my heart,
Boring deep inside.
My heart held no love or fertility.
My heart was a heart of sand and scorpions.

Then, like the scorching Arabian sand,
My heart began to burn.
Burning like a fallow field
In the presence of God.
He dug his fingers into the dead clay between my ribs.
Leathery, bleeding hands tilled the dead soil.
He made a petrified heart beat
Like a cloudburst
Rattling the stones of Heaven.

I stand in awe of my Father's work.

Vincent Klein is 30 years old, and recently divorced. He is a Paralegal in the United States Navy, and currently resides in Guam with his German Shepherd/Labrador Retriever, Sammy, named after Samantha from *I Am Legend*. He has been writing poetry since he was 16 years old, and draws much of his inspiration from hip-hop culture. His greatest inspirations in his work are his heart, and *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, a book of Tupac Amaru Shakur's poetry that was published after his death. His recent works chronicle his struggle to win the heart of the love of his life, despite having to overcome obstacles at every turn.

TIME'S END

By Vincent Klein

The stars don't even compare,
To the sparkle in your eyes,
So enamored by your presence,
In your absence, I cry,
You mean more to me,
Than anything on this Earth,
Merely the thought of losing you,
Makes my heart hurt,
Sexy, strong, and independent,
Yet delicate and vulnerable too,
Anything within my power,
I wouldn't hesitate to do,
Although I don't have your heart,
For mine to keep and hold,
I will continue to Love you,
For my Love cannot be sold,
Even if we simply,
Only remain friends,
I am committed to Loving you,
Until Time's End.

Lisbon Tawanda Chigwenjere (The Lord's Poet) is a young poet from Harare, Zimbabwe. He was born a twin on the 28th of May 1993. He is currently pursuing an honors degree in Politics and Public Management at the Midlands State University in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Three of his poems, "Days of My Youth", "The Tongue of the Learned", and "Fight, Soldier, Fight", have appeared in *Enter the Gateway*, a Christian poetry anthology published by TL Publishing Group, Florida. His poems have also appeared in Zimbabwean newspapers such as *The Sunday Mail* and *News Day*, and in the official newsletter of the *Midlands State University - The Pulse*. He has been published both in print and media.

KIM, WAIT FOR ME TO FINISH SCHOOLING

By Lisbon Tawanda Chigwenjere

It will not be fair,
If I write not a poem for Kim,
Please, do not hide my ink Sir,
I will write till the lamp goes dim,
My one and only is one of a kind,
I've searched all over the world, but her replica I couldn't find,
She will wait for me to finish schooling,
Because right now my pocket only has a shilling

Kim, you are as lovely as the Biblical Sarah,
Dear, you are even fairer,
You are the perfection of beauty,
Loving you will be a simple duty,
At the moment, let us hush,
There is no need for us to rush,
The money I have is for buying my books,
Not for you to keep up your looks,
Kim, my pocket only has a shilling,
We will date after I finish schooling

Kim, I would get you gold if I were a miner,
I would join the mining company if I were not a minor,
I would get you gold without a doubt,
If only I was an adult,
But if I can't get a job because of my age,
I might as well lock love in a cage
These feelings tell us that we are growing,
We are not yet there, we are still rowing,
To everything there is a season,
Love is for marriage's reason,
Kim, wait for me to finish schooling,
Right now my pocket only has a shilling

Erren Geraud Kelly is a pushcart nominated poet based in Portland, Oregon. He has been writing for 25 years and has over 100 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. His most recent publication was in *In Our Own Words*, a Generation X poetry anthology; he was also published in other anthologies such as *Fertile Ground*, *Beyond The Frontier* and other anthologies. His work can also be seen on Youtube under the "Gallery Cabaret," links. He also the author of the chapbook, *Disturbing The Peace*, on Night Ballet Press. He received his B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He 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.

DOWN FEATHERS...

(AFTER THE PHOTOGRAPH BY LEX DOSHAS)

By Erren Geraud Kelly

Down feathers make the
best pillows,
which rests on cotton sheets.
Because she feels like
An ivory snow baby.

Like cotton sheets ,
And. Down feather pillows,
She is an acquired taste ;
Not pretty,
But amazingly beautiful , as
She lies on her brass bed

She's always been good
At getting what she wants .
She's more trouble than
She's worth ;
but she's all the trouble
You Need

DIANN

By Erren Geraud Kelly

who i see running on the road
a melody i lost, then found again
who fills the hole in my heart
with sunlight
whose presence is eternity for me
who is a dream found
in snow, desire lost
in days
eyes leading me to a place
only we know
every time she walks away
my heart loses itself to a
storm
she is the gospel i
eagerly praise

Ron Riecki's books include *U.P.: a novel*, *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works* (a 2014 Michigan Notable Book), and *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula*. His play *Carol* was included in *The Best Ten-Minute Plays 2012* and his short story "The Family Jewel" was selected for *The Best Small Fictions 2015*.

RUDOLF OTTO

By Ron Riecki

At a fair in Lille, I think of Das Heilige.
Something about the spinning of children,
their screams of ecstasy, triggers the awe

of Otto, the way he saw God in all of these
numinous moments, the sky so large we
feel as if we're being swallowed, the odd

love of the stars, where the ghosts of sky
wink; in the middle of a thousand people,
I look straight up, waiting to be salvaged.

CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS

By Ron Riecki

I wish I could surprise the world
with joy, lead you from closets
to snow; I think how the word

lion means hero, how he'd set
up characters who all would
change so significantly, sunsets

of souls, their lives whirled
to whole new rich mindsets,
learning from what they wished.

FICTION

JOLLY MOUSE

By J. Marshall

Jonathan Barber is an up and coming fiction writer. He is native born in Denver, Colorado and has been an avid writer and reader for over 20 years. Barber's favorite author is Steven King and he can only dream of emulating his writing style in the slightest way. It is a life long dream of his to become a published author therefore he works on his craft daily.

When Gary Sanchez woke up in the king-sized bed of his spacious loft he felt sick enough to wish that he'd never woken up at all. Yesterday, as he knelt down in front of his sink and reached blindly into the cabinet beneath for the powdered bleach, he had been bitten by a mouse. The pain had been intense but brief, like a lesser version of a bee sting. It didn't keep him from freaking out though, shouting in shock, and shoving his arm back into the cabinet to grab and crush the pest. It jumped out however, shooting through the space between his bent legs, and scuttled along the black and white linoleum, its small pink tail swinging behind it.

Gary Sanchez had turned to chase it, but it was out of sight, likely under one of the two living room couches. Gary looked at his hand, examined the break in the skin and the quickly reddening area where he was certain blood would soon ooze out. He wondered how in the world a mouse could make it this high in a building. He lived on the twentieth floor!

"Yeah, I'll get you," Gary had muttered, ripping two squares of paper towels from the roll on the countertop. He pressed it to the webbing between his right thumb and forefinger, his eyes on the living room. He wanted to deal with the rodent now, lift up the couch and hopefully be quick enough with his foot to stomp the life out of it, but he'd had to meet up with his coworkers from the local auto sales lot for a drink that day.

He had cleaned the wound with disinfectant and left his apartment and had forgotten the incident five minutes later.

Presently, Gary sat up, his head throbbing like a marching band was in it. His nose was clogged and dried mucus was caked on the area above his upper lip. He knew it was there by the feel when he stretched his arms and opened his mouth up wide to yawn. Mid-yawn he broke into a fit of wet, thick coughs, tearing through a throat that felt as if some sick doctor had doused it with acid in his sleep.

Gary took the top off an Advil bottle at the bathroom sink and turned it over and spilled three brown pills into his open hand. He bit his bottom lip and furrowed his brow in thought, and a second later emptied another pill into his open palm. He took them, showered, dressed in his work clothes and left the apartment for work.

If you have a job, you got to work, he thought.

An hour and a half later, strolling down one of the aisles of the car lot he worked at, listening to questions from an elderly lady who seemed to have an issue with letting him speak for more than ten seconds, he fainted. The combination of the blazing sun, his throbbing head, sore throat, and weariness had been too much. The Advil hadn't done jack.

A few hours later, being granted a few days off from work by his manager, and fresh home from the hospital, Gary Sanchez worked on breaking the resilient plastic name band around his left wrist. The hospital had given him something that worked, and he felt good again; good enough to go back to work tomorrow if Mr. Khan—his boss— would let him. The look in Mr. Khan's eyes as he'd knelt over him in the scorching car lot had suggested otherwise though.

It wasn't until then that Gary thought of the mouse and that he'd been as healthy as an ox until the mouse from under the cabinet had bitten him.

Gary managed to get the band off his wrist and threw it in the kitchen trash. He plopped down on the living room couch, grabbed the remote and flipped on the TV, and just as he was about to settle into *Wolf Blitzer's Situation Room*, something stung his foot.

He shouted in surprise and shot up from the couch, looking frantically in all directions, unaware of how crazy and Einstein-like his hair looked. He spotted the mouse from yesterday scuttling away from the couch and down the hardwood floor of the hallway, toward the three rooms of the loft.

"Oh no you don't," Sanchez shouted, started after the mouse, stumbled over his own foot and fell hard to the floor. "*You damn mouse!*" he screamed on the hardwood. "*You damn mouuisse!*"

Gary Sanchez woke up two points down against *Mr. Jolly Mouse*, which is a nickname he gave the mouse as he was escaping into sleep the night before. Gary felt worse than ever. So bad in fact, that at first he thought he'd died in the night and had woken up in hell. His mouth tasted like he'd been eating vomit in his sleep, he couldn't suck any air through his nose which was clogged like Houston traffic on I-45, and his head was screaming like a madman. All this despite having cleaned the wounds with disinfectant each time.

"*Mouse,*" Gary muttered, slid out from his covers, and put his feet down on the cold floor of his bedroom. *Then he was bit.* As sure as he felt sick he was bit. In his shock he fell off the edge of the bed and to the floor, and reached out and clenched his right foot in both hands.

Jolly Mouse scuttled out the door and banked right as sharply as a criminal in a car chase with the police, its familiar pink tail trailing behind him.

“*Damn mouuuussee!*” Sanchez screamed, shaking a fist at it. “*I’ll get you mouse! I swear I’ll—*”

Gary vomited then, all over himself and the floor, a blend of meat, cheeses, and soups that amounted to a hot steaming and smelly mess.

“Damn mouse,” Gary muttered, and coughed up the last bits of vomit. He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. “Damn mouse.”

Gary struggled to get up, almost slipped when his bare foot touched on the chunky hot mess below him, then he limped to the bathroom with two separately bitten feet. He took two of the pills that the doctor had given him, limped back to bed without cleaning the wound and went to sleep.

Gary didn’t get out of bed for nearly twenty-four hours, and when he did he felt better, but not quite one hundred percent. It was Saturday, and when he looked outside at the few clouds in the sky and the sun making its way to its high point from the east he knew it was going to be a nice day.

But first things first. He had to get rid of the mouse. Gary moved slowly around his apartment, feeling his stomach clench and his head get light if he moved too fast. He grabbed his keys off the counter and wallet off the dining room table and left to go get some stuff for *Jolly Mouse*.

When he came back from the grocery store, he placed ten mouse traps around the house, baiting them with his favorite Swiss cheese, feeling a bit dismayed that he had to waste such good food on such a prick of a mouse. But at least he’d finally be free of the mouse and be able to focus on other things besides having to deal with a virus. Gary sat back down on the living room couch and watched TV, this time making sure he didn’t take his socks off like he normally did.

He kicked his feet up on the couch an hour later and went to sleep there, hoping to rest away what was left of this virus and that the mouse would have his neck broken under the metal bar of a mouse trap when he woke up.

A few hours later he woke up with a headache, stood up from the couch and went to the bathroom to get some pills. Besides the headache he felt pretty much new again, and was ready to cook himself a big meal for dinner tonight. Maybe spaghetti or hot wings.

He stepped into the bathroom, flicked on the light and lifted one arm as he yawned and used the other to open up the medicine cabinet. After he took some pills he might—

Jolly Mouse flew off the middle shelf of the medicine cabinet and latched his tiny teeth and claws onto Gary’s face and Gary screamed. He gave a loud curse. His nose erupted in a flare of pain as he fell to the ground and landed hard on his tailbone. He attempted to reach for *Jolly Mouse* with both hands—hopefully to squeeze it to death—but missed by mere inches as it jumped off his face and ran out the door, banking right toward the living room.

Gary scrambled to his feet, fully awake now and the headache forgotten for the moment. Blood ran down the tip of his nose and his eyes watered.

“*I’m going to get you Jolly Mouse!*” he screamed. But when he arrived in the living room, his face red, bleeding and sweating, *Jolly Mouse* was nowhere in sight. Gary looked to the right, toward the coat closet and a window. Nothing. He looked to the left toward the dinner table and the balcony. Nothing there either.

He moved for the couch, lifted it up with two hands and looked under. It was one of the places that he’d left the cheese in the mousetrap but the mouse wasn’t there. Just a couple of quarters and a piece of lined paper, and the undisturbed mouse trap.

Gary put the couch down with a thud, and then stood there, hands on his sides, biting his bottom lip. He gave a wet cough, cleared his throat, and went on standing there, not really looking around but instead thinking hard. He gave two more wet coughs and put his hand to his mouth as he did.

“The mousetrap will get you,” he said quietly, and nodded. He smiled. “Yeah, the mousetrap will definitely get you *Jolly Mouse*.”

Gary shuffled back to the medicine cabinet with a hand over his mouth as several wet coughs ripped through him. On the last one he had to break into a run to reach the toilet in time, the cough turning into a need to puke. More of the hot, wet and chunky mess from his stomach came up and spilled into the round opening of the toilet bowl.

“Damn mouse,” Gary muttered, his head resting on the cold porcelain of the toilet rim. He swiped at the puke dripping from the corner of his mouth and flicked his hand absently toward the tiled wall of the shower, splattering drops of bile like a spray of blood.

Gary struggled to his feet and shuffled to bed. He woke up the next morning sicker than he’d ever been in his life. His face felt swollen; his head, throat, and stomach hurt. His nostrils felt as if they’d been filled with liquid cement that had dried overnight.

When Gary managed to grab his pills and make it to the kitchen for a cup of water, he finished what was left. As he drank the water to swallow the last four pills, he rested one arm against the counter to keep on his feet. When he’d swallowed the pills he fell forward, hitting his chin hard on the tiled floor and knocking himself out, the blue cup he’d used for the pills spinning on its side a foot away.

The cheese hadn’t worked apparently. Two days later, when Gary felt well enough, he contacted a black market dealer through a coworker at work, saying to the coworker to tell the black market dealer that he was in desperate need of some firearms. The coworker didn’t give Gary so much as a prolonged look—being the one who always let Gary know he knew people on the black market in the first place—and said he’d get back to him as soon as he could.

After giving the coworker fifty dollars for his trouble, the coworker provided the address and meeting time that Gary needed that same day, and on a Wednesday night Gary Sanchez met up with a guy named Roberto Marks, in a trash-littered alley behind a soul food café.

It was cool out, and Roberto Marks wore a blue hoody with the hood up, and for most of the conversation kept his hands shoved in his pockets. He was professional but impatient the whole time.

An hour and a half later Gary arrived home with a black duffel bag containing one machete, two nine millimeter pistols, an Uzi, and a shotgun. It also contained plenty of ammo and some green army fatigues neatly folded on top of the weapons. He locked the door, turned on the light, dropped the duffel bag, and began undressing right there. Gary hadn't touched a gun in over a decade—when he'd been in his late teens—but something about this mouse told him now was the time.

When he had the fresh, unwrinkled set of army fatigues on, he went back toward the duffel bag for a gun. That's when he was jumped on, Jolly Mouse leaping on him from above (God knew how!). Gary felt Jolly Mouse's sharp, tiny teeth sink into the nape of his neck, felt Jolly Mouse's claws sink into his skin. For a moment Gary was still, eyes watering under the pain of the germ infested teeth that Jolly Mouse had pierced him with. He knew if he reacted too quickly Jolly Mouse would be gone in a flash, like a lightning strike.

Yeah, I'm going to get sick as hell again, Gary thought, but that's okay. It's perfectly okay.

"That's a good mouse," Gary said, and cracked a big smile in the confines of his loft. He slowly reached back and was surprised when the mouse remained latched on his neck, as he touched the warm fur on its back side with his fingertips. There was a squeak and Gary was bit again. More pain flared up in the back of his neck.

He can sense an attack, Gary thought. He's letting me pet him because I haven't made any sudden moves.

He decided not to grab him yet. Gary took the tips of his fingers off the mouse and leaned slowly toward the duffel bag, and peered inside. He examined the weapons carefully for a moment, and reached in and grabbed the cool metal surface of the nine-millimeter.

Squeak!

The mouse bit him again and Gary winced. He carefully put his hand back on the mouse, and closed his palm around it.

"That's a good mousey," Gary said, still grinning, and gave a loud stupid chuckle. He sounded like his own ridiculous impression of a mentally challenged person. The mouse bit him on the inside of his palm, but Gary knew Jolly Mouse was done for.

Gary could feel warm blood spilling down the back of his neck where the mouse had been, and soon felt warm blood inside the hand he held the mouse in. For a moment Gary did nothing, considering the nine-millimeter he held, his brow furrowed. He tossed the unloaded gun back in the bag. It'd be too difficult to load while he held Jolly Mouse anyway. But he didn't want to squeeze the mouse either. Doing that didn't seem to fit the situation.

Squeak! More sharp pain stung his flesh as he was bit again. Gary's eyes centered on his pained hand and he closed his other hand over it.

"So," Gary Sanchez said to the mouse inside his palms. "You like to bite people, huh?"

Fresh blood trickled out of his hands like he was squeezing the water out of a balloon. Gary brought his closed hands to his face—close enough to keep the mouse from being able to get away—opened his hands the tiniest bit, and began sinking his teeth into Jolly Mouse's furry white flesh.

Jolly Mouse struggled, scratched with his tiny claws and tried to bite Gary back.

Jolly Mouse squeaked again.

And with a thin spray of blood Gary Sanchez bit down and tore off half his tiny body with his teeth.

PLANTING SEED

By Jennifer Schanne

Jennifer Schanne was born in Buffalo, New York, but grew up in Minnesota. She graduated in 2013 from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls with a bachelor's degree in English with a creative writing emphasis and a minor in professional writing. She currently lives in Hastings, Minnesota.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Early September 1945

"I can't believe you're in college already," Libby Saunders' mother said as she helped Libby unpack her clothes and put them in the dresser of her dorm room at the University of Minnesota.

"Yeah," her father, who was putting her books and notebooks and folders on the desk in front of the window, said. "It's hard to believe my little girl's all grown up."

Libby thought of it as bittersweet. "I just wish Jeff was here to see me go off to college."

Jeff was Libby's older brother, killed in May in the Battle of Okinawa. It had only been recently when Libby could talk about Jeff without dissolving into tears.

"Let's just be glad the war is over and celebrate you being in college," Mom said.

Libby smiled. "Yeah."

"Excuse me."

Libby and her parents turned around. A man and woman carrying suitcases stood outside the doorway. Standing between them was a girl, also carrying a suitcase, who looked to be about Libby's age with long pale blond hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Hi," the man said as the trio entered the room. "I'm Richard Jensen. And this is my wife, Helen, and daughter, Amanda. It looks like Amanda and your daughter are going to be roommates."

Libby and her parents introduced themselves.

"Nice to meet you, Amanda," Libby said, extending her hand.

Amanda smiled shyly and shook her hand, but looked down at her shoes instead of at Libby.

Mrs. Jensen gently elbowed Amanda's shoulder. The girl looked up and said, "Nice to meet you, too."

"Do you like college so far?" Libby's best friend, Sandy, asked two weeks later as they were drinking coffee at a café near the campus. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Sandy had driven from Hastings, the town not far from the Twin Cities where they were both born and grew up, to spend some time with Libby. Sandy had no interest in education and had decided not to go to college after graduation, but live with her parents until she married or figured out what she wanted to do with her life.

"Yeah," Libby answered, taking a sip of her cappuccino. "It's been great. Except for my roommate. I've tried to talk to her, but every time I do it's like she puts up a wall. It doesn't help that we only have one class together, Philosophy, and that we have different majors." Libby was a Journalism major while Amanda was a Chemistry major, and that was about all Libby managed to get from the girl. That and the fact she grew up in St. Paul.

"Well, at least she's not being mean to you."

Libby laughed. "Yeah, that's something to be happy about."

Two weeks later on Monday afternoon Libby walked into the dorm room after working in the newspaper office. Amanda was sitting at the desk and in the process of putting a large text book and notebook into her book bag.

"How was your day?" Libby asked as she walked to the closet to hang up her fall jacket.

"Fine," Amanda said, not looking at her.

"What were you studying?"

"A chapter from my Chemistry 101 book."

"Sounds complicated," Libby said, sitting on her bed, facing Amanda. "I'm enjoying working for the student newspaper. It's nice to get the experience. I hope one day I might even get to work for the Hastings Gazette. Or even the St. Paul Dispatch."

Amanda didn't make a comment.

"Are you going to work in a lab?"

Amanda nodded.

"I have to give you credit. All that science stuff goes right over my head."

Silence.

"Math and science weren't exactly my best classes. I always did better in English and history."

Amanda didn't respond.

"Do you like our Philosophy class?"

Amanda nodded. "Yeah. It's interesting. I have to agree with what Frederick Nietzsche said about God being dead."

Libby was taken aback that Amanda had taken the conversation in that direction, but decided to be honest about what she believed.

"I don't. I believe God's alive."

Amanda shrugged. "Good for you. I don't, and if you went through what my family went through, you wouldn't, either."

"What do you mean?" Libby asked.

Amanda sighed and, looking at Libby, said, "My brother Tommy was killed in the war."

"I'm sorry," Libby said. "My brother was killed, too. His name was Jeff. He died at Okinawa. He was only twenty years old."

"Tommy was twenty-one," Amanda said, face turning red with rage. "Those filthy Nazis murdered him at the Battle of the Bulge. You remember hearing about how those SS soldiers killed those 84 American POWs at Malmedy?"

Libby nodded. "Yeah. I heard about that."

"Well, Tommy was one of them." Amanda took a deep breath, and tears started streaming down her face. "I could've stood it, maybe, if he was just killed in battle, but for him to be shot for no reason..." Amanda looked down at her lap, then looked up at Libby. Libby noticed the pain and rage in her eyes. "How can I continue believing in God after that? Why would a loving God allow such evil?"

Libby saw the anger in Amanda's blue eyes, as if there were a volcanic explosion going on inside of her and the lava flow had leaked out into the room. She could remember the grief she felt when they first got news of Jeff's death. While she had cried and asked God why, she never lost her faith. In fact, it was their faith in God that had kept her and her parents from losing hope or growing bitter. "I'm sorry about your brother, but being mad at God won't help you. God is not responsible for the evil people do; people are."

Amanda laughed bitterly. "That's the answer all you religious people give. Well, it doesn't satisfy me."

Libby thought, then finally after a few seconds said: "Well, it's true. We live in a fallen world, where there's death and sickness and war and suffering. It all goes back to Adam and Eve disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit. Ever since then this earth has been cursed. But one day Jesus will come back and set everything right. The Bible says that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. That is what keeps me going, even though I miss Jeff a lot. I have the hope that he's safe in the arms of Jesus."

Amanda glared at Libby. "I told you. I don't believe in God. If God is all powerful and loves human beings, why does He allow all this pain and suffering and evil when He could just end it all? Why is He waiting?"

"Because He's patient. He wants to give as many people as possible a chance to repent. And besides, did you ever think that since we know what is good and what is evil, that there has to be a standard outside of ourselves to judge what is good and what is evil?"

Libby could tell Amanda was thinking. Finally, she said: "We probably know right and wrong because of evolutionary instincts."

"Well," Libby responded. "I guess Hitler and the Nazis didn't evolve enough to get those instincts."

Amanda sighed. "I'm getting tired of this conversation. I'm going to do some more studying about things that are real, and you can go on believing in fairy tales."

Libby sighed. Heavenly Father, she silently prayed. Please soften Amanda's heart.

The next Tuesday, before Philosophy class, Libby was talking to one of her new friends, Gail, when she saw Amanda walk in, looking like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"She always looks so miserable," Gail commented as Amanda took her seat.

"She's been though a lot," Libby said. She had told Gail about Amanda's brother being killed by the Nazis and the conversation they'd had the week before.

Gail nodded. "I wish she'd come to the Bible study."

Libby had been going to a Bible study every Tuesday night that Gail and her roommate Elizabeth had started. It consisted of, other than Gail and Elizabeth, herself and a girl named Maxine. She had invited Amanda to come, but Amanda had flatly refused.

"Me, too," Libby said.

The next day, Libby was working on an article for the newspaper when Amanda burst into the room. She looked on the verge of tears as she threw her backpack on the floor and sighed as she plopped down on the bed.

"What's wrong?" Libby asked.

"I'm failing English Lit," she said, showing a test with a big fat red F at the top.

"Oh," Libby said, not sure what else to say. "I'm sorry. You could always get a tutor." Then a thought occurred to her. "Wait! I could tutor you!"

Amanda looked at her, clearly surprised by Libby's offer. "Really?"

Libby nodded. "Sure. I'm good at English. We could start tomorrow since I don't need to work at the newspaper."

Amanda smiled. "That's very nice of you. If I was you, I wouldn't help me."

"Why?"

"Well," Amanda said. "Because I haven't been so nice to you."

Libby smiled. "Well, Jesus teaches us to love and forgive those who sin against us."

Amanda didn't seem to know what to say to that. "Well, thank you."

The next night Libby helped Amanda to understand Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallot."

"What in the world does this mean?" Amanda asked, pointing to line 22 of the poem, which read: "The shallop flitteth, silken-sail'd."

"It's an alliteration," Libby explained. "Tennyson is using the repetition of the 's' consonant to give the reader the imagery of the Lady working on her weaving as well as create a feeling of relaxation."

Amanda stared at Libby, clearly confused. She sighed. "I'll never get poetry."

Libby smiled. "Yeah, you will. What you have to remember about poetry is that every word, line, and stanza is significant. You have to ask yourself: 'Why did the poet use this word instead of another one? Why did they express themselves in this way rather than another way? What is the mood they are trying to convey with these choices?'"

Ever the dedicated student, Amanda wrote down what Libby said in her notebook. As they went on, Amanda slowly but surely started to understand the poem.

"So," Libby said, "Do you think you'll pass English Lit?"

Amanda smiled. "I might have a chance if you keep tutoring me."

Libby smiled. "I'd be glad to."

Amanda started getting better grades in English Lit, and she and Libby became good friends. But even though Libby kept trying to share her faith, Amanda kept stubbornly resisting. Libby thought she'd never reach her.

Then the Tuesday before finals week, as Libby put her Journalism 101 book in her backpack, grabbed her Bible from the night stand next to her bed, and was heading out the door for Bible study, Amanda jumped from her bed, where she'd been doing some studying herself, and said, "Libby, I know this is going to sound crazy, but do you mind if I come with you to your Bible study?"

Libby looked at her quizzically, then, shaking her head to snap herself out of her shock, smiled. "Sure, but why? You've made it quite clear you think my faith is dumb. Why the sudden change?"

Amanda looked down at her feet, then looked up. "Well... I'm not saying I still don't think that. It's just that, as much I hate to admit it, what you said about there needing to be a standard outside ourselves to judge what is right and wrong makes some sense."

"Really?"

Amanda nodded. "Really." Then she looked sternly at Libby. "But don't get your hopes up that I'm going to get down on my knees and surrender my life to God, not that I'm sure He exists. I'll listen to what you and the other girls have to say, but that's all."

Libby couldn't wipe the grin off her face as they made their way toward the dormitory stairwell. "All right." She laughed. "I'll try not to get my hopes up." Lord, Libby silently prayed. Please use what we talk about tonight to at least plant a seed in Amanda's heart.

"Don't worry," Libby said as she and Amanda stood outside Gail and Elizabeth's dorm room. "These girls are nice."

When they walked in, Libby introduced Amanda to everyone, then they sat down and began the Bible study.

"We're on John 14 now," Gail said. "It's Elizabeth's turn to read." Elizabeth read John 14, and then the girls discussed it. Amanda sat quietly the whole time and didn't say anything, except for at the end when she thanked the girls for letting her come. Libby tried to read her expression, but couldn't decide if she was irritated or just thinking about everything that was said.

As Libby and Amanda walked back to their dorm room, snow crunching under their feet and their breaths visible in the chilly December night air, Libby said, "I hope you enjoyed the Bible study."

"It was okay. I'm still not sure there's a God, though."

Libby laughed. "Well, just a few months ago you were pretty sure that there is no God."

"Like I said, I'm not sure. Maybe there is. Maybe there isn't."

"Will you come to the Bible study next semester?"

Amanda shrugged. "I don't know. We'll see."

They were silent for a minute, then Amanda giggled. "I just thought of something Tommy used to do. When I was having a bad day he'd do finger puppet shows. I remember one day in sixth grade when I failed an English test. Tommy did a parody of the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet with the puppets. He gave Juliet this funny high-pitched voice. It made me laugh so hard I forgot all about the F."

As they entered the dormitory, memories of Libby's brother made their way to the surface of her mind like flowers blooming in spring. "My family used to go swimming in Lake Prescott every summer. Jeff liked to pretend he was a lake monster and go under the water and grab my legs and pull me down. He loved to tease me. It annoyed me sometimes, but other times it made me laugh." Libby took a deep breath to stop herself from crying, then smiled. "We should be thankful for the time we had with our brothers."

When Amanda looked at Libby, Libby could see a brightness in Amanda's eyes she had never seen before. "You're right. I'm glad you're my roommate. You've been nice to me, like taking the time to help me pass English Lit, even when I was being mean to you about your beliefs." She laughed. "And, like I said, you and the other girls got me thinking maybe there is a God after all. I might even read a bit from the Bible over Christmas break!"

Libby could feel her heart fill with joy. I've planted a seed. Hopefully it grows!

PERSPECTIVE

By Bill Kirby

Bill Kirby is a teacher in the South who has been published in various literary journals, including *Fourteen Hills* and *Avatar Literary Review*.

He eased the car up to the curb. Rather than leave the car immediately, he sat back in the driver's seat and took a long look at the house. It lay in the subtle shadows of the April afternoon, the stark white wicker furniture of the old school screen porch highlighted by the dappled silhouettes of the two towering oaks that stood like sentinels in the front yard. The scene spoke of cozy Saturday afternoons and tall glasses of tea, of scrabble games and family TV nights. A pink bicycle left leaning against one of the azalea bushes near the front steps served as an exclamation point, the visual amen to this vision of rightness and spiritual symmetry. A faint flicker of a smile crossed his face, and with a sigh he exited the car and made his way to the front door. He rang the doorbell that sat embedded in the screen door, and in a few moments a woman emerged from the front door of the house. She stepped purposely to the screen door and opened it, stepping aside to let the man onto the porch.

The man spoke diffidently. "Hello, Mary."

"Hello, Frank." She stepped to him, giving him a quick hug, then stepped away and gestured toward the wicker chair and tables. "Let's sit here. It's not too cool this afternoon."

Frank glanced briefly at the front door, then turned and made his way to the table. He sat down in one of the chairs. He sat stiff-backed and alert. Mary made her way to the table, sitting herself in a chair directly across from Frank. The man looked at her blankly for a moment, then reached into the pocket of his jacket and retrieved an envelope from it. In one fluid motion he placed it on the table and slid it over to Mary.

"Everything's in there, signed and notarized. I made sure to date it."

Mary looked at the envelope for several seconds, then slid it slowly to herself. "I'm sure it's all done properly. I appreciate you getting it to me so quickly."

Frank's head gave a perceptible jerk in response, and some thought flashed through his eyes, but his voice remained the same. "Right. You made it clear that you wanted it sooner than later. I aimed to please."

Mary looked off into the side yard momentarily, lost in thought, then turned back to the man. "I'll get you the rest of the copies as they become available. It shouldn't take long." She glanced down at her fingers, and for some reason she thought of her mother's long and graceful hands and how they had grown chafed and red over the years from all the scrubbing and washing and cooking. Mary's hands were more at home with legal briefs and depositions than Dawn dishwasher soap and scouring pads. She wondered what her mother would make of her soft delicate hands and the expensive jewelry that accented them.

"The paint job's holding up real well, Mary. I like these colors more and more." Frank glanced around at the corners of the porch as he said this. The colors of the various elements of the porch--- the ceiling, the wood trim, the wooden siding--- had all been chosen after much debate and speculation and many, many trial dabs and splashes, and the results were worthy of Southern Living.

"Yes, it turned out well. Lots of people comment on how nice it looks."

"I remember Israh saying he felt like Michelangelo when he was painting the blue ceiling. Said he wanted to paint a big God Hand pointing to people as they stepped onto the porch."

Mary straightened up in her chair. "How is Israh? Is he still working with you at the plant? Didn't he get married?"

Frank glanced at the front door again and noticed that the cobalt paint needed retouching. "Oh, he almost jumped into that unholy fire, but he came to his senses. He and Ella decided to just be "friends. I guess it's like having a 'sleepover' buddy." He cast a knowing look at Mary. A frown clouded her face.

"That's not necessary, Frank."

"You're right. My bad. Anyway, he's doing fine. I told him I was coming by, and he said to tell you hello."

"Tell him I said hello as well." Mary shifted in her seat, squaring her shoulders unconsciously.

"How are the kids, Mary? Did Sean ever get rid of that nasty little cough?"

"He's fine now. I gave him some cough syrup and the cough eventually left, little by little." She pulled at the doily centered on the table, straightening it when it didn't need straightening. "Will you have the rest of the paperwork soon, Frank? I need to get all the papers turned in."

"I'm working on it. Not like I can undo fifteen years in two weeks."

"Sixteen years, Frank, and you don't have to be angry. It was a simple question."

Frank sprang bolt upright in his chair. "Whatever the exact number of years is beside the point. The point is that you are destroying any relationship I have or will ever have with my children." With his index finger he stabbed home on the tabletop the last several words.

"You are determined that I will no longer be in their lives."

Mary's eyes flashed back at the man, the color of her face beginning to warm. Her voice rose an octave. "No, what I am trying to do is make sure that the children will always be taken care of. I want to make sure that they'll never have to worry about their father's faulty

judgment creating stress and turmoil in their lives. That is what I'm attempting to do."

Frank's teeth were clenched now. His hands pressed into the edge of the table as if he were going to turn it over, like a cornered card player in one of those Western saloon scenes. His voice broke when he spoke. "Faulty? Faulty? I catch my loving wife with a 'sleepover buddy' of her own, one she's evidently been enjoying since she made partner, and my judgment is faulty? You gonna tell our children that, Holy Mother? Tell them that Mommy has a 'sleepover buddy' and they play games and cuddle? And I have a problem with my wife cheating on me for months, maybe years, and suddenly I'm an unfit parent?"

"This ground is already plowed, Frank. Whatever happened in the past is just that, the past. No need to become violent."

"Violent? Because I'm upset that you destroy our family, our lives, and it works out just hunky-dory for you, and I'm living in a section 8 house and see my children every two weeks? That's violent? What's violent is the way your ego and self-centeredness have ripped apart three lives." Frank pushed away from the table as he said this, making his way to the screen door to stare out onto the street at the edge of the front yard.

Mary sighed once again, unaware that it was a very audible mannerism she employed in the courtroom or in meetings to indicate her disdain and exasperation. It caused Frank to turn back sharply to her, a grimace on his face, eyes red.

"Mary, I understand you don't love me, may never have, but that shouldn't poison my relationship with my kids. I just want to be a part of their lives, and that won't happen as long as you treat me like some illegal squatter." The fight seemed to have fallen out of him suddenly, and Mary wondered if he had always been this maudlin and melodramatic. She decided that perhaps he had.

"Frank, again, what you and I did and felt before is no longer an issue; what's at stake here is deciding what's best for Sean and Maggie. That's what's important."

Frank could see a long series of arguments and pleadings and cross-purpose talks in the future, all the way to the point where Sean, the younger of the two children, graduated college, and he shuddered with the thought. He had always been intimidated by Mary's intellect and her cold calculations and no-nonsense attitude toward everything, whether it was the number of cylinders that their cars should have or whether God was Catholic or not. He made his way back to the table and sat down, a petulant child returning to the dinner table.

Mary looked at Frank for a long moment, and he was right, perhaps she had never really "loved" him; perhaps she had been enthralled by his boyishness, the way everything touched him deeply, the dimples in his cheeks; whatever it had been, it had vanished long ago. And his mid-level management job at the plant wasn't going to help things, either. Frank wasn't privy, as Mary was, to the corporate secrets of their small city, so he had no idea that in nine months his career, along with the careers of the other six hundred and thirty two men and women who depended on the plant, would vanish as well, outsourced to Jakarta.

"Frank, you will always be an integral part of the children's lives, and you know it. All this anger and angst is not helping. Whatever animosities and hurt feelings you and I share with each other, we must be united in what's best for Sean and Maggie." It struck Mary that her mother would have winced at that little speech; she so hated stuffy and pretentious people, and Mary realized that what she just said would qualify in her mother's eyes.

"I've got to get going, Mary. Tomorrow is turn-around at the plant and I've got to make sure the schedules are firm and in place. I'll try to be more civil when we talk; it's difficult, and I'm the low man in this situation, that's all. I'll come to terms with it. I won't see the kids right now; they'll sense I'm upset. I'll call them tonight, if that's alright with you." He stood up once again.

"That's fine, Frank. They'd love to talk to their father. Do try to call before nine, though. Bedtime is at 9:30."

Frank flushed again, caught himself. "I'll be sure to do that, maybe call around 8, 8:30; that okay?" He headed for the screen door.

Mary stood up and went to him. "That's fine. Frank. Here." She moved to him and gave him a hug. He gave a little shudder, weakly hugged her back. "Take care, Frank."

"You, too, Mary." he opened the door and made his way down the lawn to his car. Mary stepped out onto the porch steps and watched his car until he turned at Ninth Avenue.

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- Editorial Staff



“The fate of a writer is strange.” - Kevin Murphy

“My stories told me to never stop wishing...” - Claire Gellis

“The stars don’t even compare, to the sparkle in your eyes...” - Vincent Klein

TL Publishing Group LLC enters into 2016 with their latest release of the Torrid Literature Journal. Volume XVII Layers & Levels will prove that literature brings people closer to life.

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