

# [Alternate Route]

Issue 15 Fall 2024







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#15, Fall 2024

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*Thank you for reading!*

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## Debra Rymer

, better known as Ms. Rymer to her many students, has been writing poems for 48 years and feels at last she is ready to share them with others. When she isn't reading, teaching or writing, she coordinates international arts events via Second Life. Her poems explore dystopia-adjacent contexts with an adventurer's cautious optimism. Her poems have been accepted in The Passionfruit Review, The Font, Rez, Frontiers, The Idiom, and Past Ten. (The Font, Frontiers, and Past Ten poems will appear later in September).

## Constellations in a Multiverse

Don't worry which fork to use. This is a poem for spoons  
smooth as the mirror surface  
of a neighbor's midnight pool. A lifted latch,  
a quiet plunge. Shhh.  
This is the neighbor's pool, their trespassed yard.  
Even the hour is stolen.  
Sh. You hush into my open mouth just like in movies  
if I had planned a better bra. Some film  
where twenty somethings soft-land into kind lives  
from the cliff of a miracle fuck that synchs the clicks--  
tricked from the tumbler on a bonus safe. As if  
this film fucking guaranteed a happy ending. No.  
It didn't go that way. The ugly bra awkward smile was me.  
You the widely rumored maybe dad of some other  
pretty swimmer's baby. Thus the rubber  
buggy laugh I couldn't quiet. Then  
we didn't kiss. Just sank  
enough to ripple the sky and dance the stars  
as night grew still and quiet filled  
the neighbor's pool, that night, those  
sharply separate stories of the sky  
that led you west, me east.  
I remember it as if it were true—  
you called the stars by name and  
pinned them to their legends.  
As you explained the constellations,  
I slipped off, braless,  
into the nameless dark between.

*(previously published in Issue 8 of The Passionfruit Review)*

## **Race Relations**

*For Susan McCabe*

I never loved you more than  
when the City Manager's horrid  
wife declared the Irish drunks

you lied, "I'm Irish. My father's side."

Unless it was  
how much I loved you when  
you lied again to add

"and my mother's Jewish!"

*(Previously published July 2024, Rez Magazine)*

## **Last Year's Atrocities**

*For Bob Bauer*

God dips a pouch of newspapers  
between his cheek and gum  
ink sinking in, tips his hat back  
and squints to the sun

as one by one the obituaries  
are absorbed.

Then God spits  
all their names out to slip  
back in through  
layers of the planet's dead  
leaves and seas and fruits  
past the mineral trace of melted snows  
to dark deep where the earth recalls  
our ancestors by DNA and knows our names  
even those we never knew.

Mother carries, holds close  
her children, decomposing as she  
lullabies our bones

among galaxies  
ever more  
distant.



## **Terry Sanville**

lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been accepted more than 550 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including The American Writers Review, Bryant Literary Review, and Shenandoah. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.



## Shadows

The heat attacks Jackson, the air heavy on his chest, making it difficult to breathe, to suck oxygen from that moist miasma of gases. A headache pounds. He rubs his graying temples and opens his eyes, slowly, fearing what might await him.

Dense teak trees, their trunks scarred by shrapnel from past firefights, surround him. He sits with his back to one of their trunks, his body almost hidden by the undergrowth of ferns, vines and creepers. Clouds of buzzing insects blur the air. Songs of yellow gibbons and colorful birds echo throughout the jungle while a nearby stream offers a background chorus. Jackson knows exactly where he is, has been there many times. It never ends well.

Sucking in a deep breath, he pushes himself up, clutches his M16 and breathes slowly, listening. His heart thunders. He scans the trees upslope from his position. Filtered sunlight breaks through their canopy and catches the outline of a conical-shaped straw hat worn by a beautiful baby-san. Binh stands perfectly still, her flawless face smiling.

She raises a hand and waves, and then moves toward him. From behind her, great clouds of smoke blow through the trees, engulfing her. She turns, tears streaking her perfect pale cheeks, and disappears into it. The screams of women, children and old men overpower the jungle sounds along with rapid small arms fire and the thump of mortars.

“Wait, Binh, stop!” Jackson shouts and stumbles forward, every movement painful. He trips on a tree root and goes down hard. Struggling up he turns slowly in a circle. All directions look the same. The sounds of human anguish come from everywhere, the jungle a beautiful tangle of anarchy. He moves blindly through it. The smoke thickens. Choking, he drops to the ground and buries his face in his hands, old hands with bent fingers and brown spots. The air fills with a nauseating sweet smell of something roasting. The light and sounds slowly fade and a soft black silence envelops him. Then light.

“Are you back with us?” Dr. Lily asks and places her hand on Jackson’s shoulder. She holds a pair of sunglasses and noise-canceling ear muffs that she’s removed from his head.

“Back?”

“Do you know where you are?”

“I think so . . . in your office at the clinic, right? Still a bit out of it. Did you give me the medicine?”

“Yes, 25 milligrams of psilocybin. It’s powerful. You were gone for almost 10 hours.”

Jackson shakes his head. “Really? It didn’t seem that long.”

“Well, you were definitely in a different space.”

“I think I still am, at least part way. So . . . so now what?” Jackson asks and sits up.

“Now we talk.”

“About what?”

“About why you’re here and what we hope to achieve by administering such a powerful psychedelic.”

Jackson’s face reddens. “What do you mean, why I’m here? Christ, I’ve taken just about every damn medication for my depression. Had electro-shock therapy up the wazoo. And Zippo! I feel lucky just to get into this trial.”

“You’ve felt depressed ever since you came back from Vietnam, right?”

“Yes, yes, so many years ago. I tried to work through it, focus on my job, my family. But now I’m old and retired. It takes me down and I can’t climb back up.”

“Tell me what you saw today.”

Jackson sighs and lies back on the exam table. “I was back in the Central Highlands, in the jungle among the trees. It was . . . it was actually quite beautiful there.”

“So what happened?”

“I . . . I saw my Vietnamese girlfriend, Binh.”

“You’ve mentioned her once before.”

“Yes . . . yes. I was only 19 and she was so sweet, said she loved me. We’d meet in the jungle. It was so strange . . . in all that tangle of craziness, we fell in love. We were discreet. Nobody knew about us.”

“I know you’ve told me this story before. Can you add anything more to it?” Dr. Lily leans back in her chair, holds the tiny recorder in her lap and fingers her long black hair.

“Well, not much. It was after . . . after our unit destroyed her village and Binh was killed that I . . . I fell off a mental cliff and bottomed out. It got so bad that I couldn’t get up for reveille. They shipped my ass to Japan for a psych evaluation. The Army shrinks said I was showing symptoms of psychosis. I eventually received a medical discharge.”

“I know your history. But let’s go back to the jungle. You’ve been there before in your dreams.”

“Yes, often.”

“Did anything seem different this time?”

Jackson thinks for a moment. “Only little things . . . the images seemed clearer . . . I was more . . . more aware . . . and the jungle more beautiful.”

“What else?”

“Seeing Binh . . . hurt more. I know, I know, it’s been almost sixty years and I’ve been happily married for forty. Why can’t I shake it?”

“Was she your first love?” Dr. Lily tilts her head and smiles. For a moment Jackson thinks she looks like Binh.

“Yes, I suppose she was.”

“How close were you to where she died?”

“Close. Real close. I . . . I was one of the soldiers that lit the fire . . . I didn’t know . . . I didn’t know.”

Dr. Lily stays quiet.

Jackson sits up and rocks back and forth at the edge of the exam table. He squeezes his eyes shut. “I . . . I didn’t know.”

Behind his closed eyelids a flash of orange causes him to jump. Under enemy fire, a platoon of soldiers advances on the village at the edge of the jungle, the air already thick with smoke. Flames burst through the thatched roofs of simple houses, their wooden walls ablaze.

“Screams, oh so many screams. The Lieutenant thought they were VC, or at least feeding the enemy. I tried to tell Sarg and the Lieutenant but they wouldn’t listen. I . . . I was just following orders. We moved fast, taking sniper fire from the trees. I thought Binh had escaped from her family’s hooch into the jungle. But they must have stayed behind and . . .”

“But following orders wasn’t enough for you, was it?” Dr. Lily whispers.

“No . . . but I did it anyway.”

Dr. Lily lets the silence build. Jackson opens his eyes and wipes the tears away with a tissue that she hands him.

“So ... so now what?” he asks.

“You’re going to stay here for another four hours. One of my assistants will bring you breakfast and then if you seem okay, you can go home.”

“That’s it?”

“Hardly. We’ll give you a schedule for coming back to see us every few days throughout the next month and a half . . . to test how well psilocybin has treated your depression.”

“Great, more testing. So what are the results from these kinds of trials so far?”

Dr. Lily sighs. “More trials are needed, longer ones with more participants. Some trials have shown a significant reduction of depression up to a year after a single dose of psilocybin. Time will determine its long-term efficacy.”

After a huge breakfast, Jackson drives to his Portland home. The sun blazes, the sounds of ships’ horns echo in the Columbia River Gorge. As he pulls into his driveway, his wife, Sophia, rises from her chair on the old Victorian’s porch and comes to greet him.

“So did you enjoy those magic mushrooms?”

Jackson grins, “They were something. Took me out for ten hours though it felt like only a few minutes. Must have gone down a deep rabbit hole.” He chuckles.

“Are you all right?”

“I feel tired. Gotta lay down for a while . . . but outside in the air, under the sky.”

Sophia gives him a strange look but nods. She follows him into the backyard. Their home perches on a hillside that overlooks the city and the river. Adjacent pines scent the warm summer air. It had been a rainy year and the weeds and tall grasses had taken over. Jackson lies on their soft chaotic tangle, in partial shade, and watches overhead clouds drift by.

Sophia kneels beside him. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m . . . I’m feeling better already. But, I’ve got something to tell you that I’ve kept to myself until today.”

Sophia smiles. “Really, after all this time you still have secrets? Tell me. I really want to know.”

Jackson sucks in a deep breath. “Okay. I . . . I once loved a girl named Le Thi Binh, and I think I killed her.”



## **Estelle Bardot**

is the pen name of a teenage music student studying piano. Aside from composing music, she also loves to read. Her work has been published in the “Under the Madness Magazine”.



## *Grief*

I keep putting off writing this,  
knowing that if I do,  
I have to sit uncomfortably  
with the memories of you,  
and ponder what more could have been  
than what had already been of you.

The very thought of thinking about you  
distresses me to my bones.

It's not that you don't cross my mind at all.  
I think of you every day,  
but I don't think *about* you.

I must confess I haven't  
gone to great measures to do so.  
It didn't take avoidance, or repression.

It's not that I'm indifferent, I tell myself,  
Or else I wouldn't be writing this.

But I can't bring myself to face...  
you, them, it –  
I *shan't* call it grief,

for that is decidedly not  
what I am experiencing,  
(and yes, I know that not all who grieve  
are necessarily engulfed in sorrow) —  
whatever this is, then,  
head on.  
Cowardly, I know.

Even now I feel trapped,  
my mind walling in  
on whatever this is I unlocked within myself,  
things I had begun to think I had imagined  
burying within me in the first place.  
Surely whatever remains still lurked  
have long evaporated into dust?

I do have an escape.  
Except now, I cannot draw myself away.  
*The beginning is always binding*, they say.

Akin to hypnosis,  
inevitably, I am spiralling,  
just like I knew I would,  
and am thinking of you more deeply  
than just a scratch on the surface.

I hate that.

Both the thought that when I think of you,  
I think of you only fleetingly,  
because you deserve more,  
your memory is worthy of more attention –  
and the thought that I am sinking now.

I do not not grieve because I fear  
that behind the walls I built  
there is an unstoppable force of mourning  
that, should I consent to dams the being broken,  
would drown me.

I do not grieve because I fear  
that behind the walls I built  
there is nothing.

*The Baggage In-between Two Friends turned Strangers*

I look at her  
the way a deer  
with an arrow through his heart  
looks at the hunter  
from whose bow the shot was strung;

the way the cursed wives  
of Britain's infamous monarch  
did pardon their executioner  
whose axe lay at the ready  
to sever their lives from their spirits;

the way the sand chastises the sea  
for ebbing away a coward  
and leaving the beach a desert  
for as far as the eye can see.

Out of the two of us,  
only I,  
from the moment we set sail,  
knew,  
that the ship we boarded  
was bound to sink.

I was a fool to fuel the engine.

Mistake not my grudge for lack of mercy -  
she knows not she has sinned,  
despite my telling her  
one thousand times.



## **Nancy Wheaton**

spends summer and fall in Pennsylvania and now winters and springs in Naples, Florida. She spent her childhood years in Santiago, Chile and Evreux, France as a daughter in an Air Force family. She used to play soccer for a team named “Las Amas de Casa”. She volunteers for Habitat for Humanity and is a docent at a small art institute in Naples. She is the founder of Wheaton Writing Academy.

## Cloud Formations

The river reflects the sky

moving water underneath the clouds

the migration of the air ripples

on the waves

gentle currents seem to float up-  
ward

where some  
white, wispy lines

look like outstretched frogs

lounging near lily pads.

There are clouds strain-  
ing like roaring coastal waves

crashing into an  
invisible wall.

Toward the horizon



a rosy swath

a burial linen,

like an  
invitation to re-  
member.

## Stolen

I will find a place where no one knows me.  
I will believe again that I can captivate  
like that time you and I laughed  
so hard and joyfully and instead of thinking  
of a way out I hoped you thought  
I was smart enough. That  
you would want to see me again.  
I stole your confidence – if only  
for a moment I did not feel  
insignificant. Or alone.  
I stole you. Your beauty,  
so that when I looked in the mirror  
I saw myself as beautiful too  
like in my green eyes.

## **Glass Doorknobs**

I live in a house with glass  
doorknobs. The sea gleams,  
sparkling stars whisper.



## **Christian Hanz Lozada**

aspires to be like a cat, a creature that doesn't care about the subtleties of others and who will, given time and circumstance, eat their owner. He wrote the poetry collection *He's a Color, Until He's Not*. His Pushcart Prize nominated poetry has appeared in journals from California to Australia with stops in Hawaii, Korea, and Europe. Christian has featured at the Autry Museum and Beyond Baroque. He lives in San Pedro, CA and uses his MFA to teach his neighbors and their kids at Los Angeles Harbor College.

## I Wanted to Be More

My view in the mirror omits  
fresh scabs and old scars  
hash-marking up tanned arms  
picketing across a fat, white belly.

I concentrate on my eyes:  
one brown as brown and the other  
a green pool made murky  
a disturbed mountain pond

When I was younger, I wanted  
that eye to be more, for the brown  
to still and become green  
and submerge me in a world  
that worked. Older, I've accepted:  
it's just fucking Brown.

## The Jesus Competition

“Why is He white?” the white man asks  
about the hand-carved, life-sized Jesus.  
I answer, “because that’s how Jesus is.”  
but in my head: *He is what you gave us.*

“If a Mexican made it, why white?” he asks,  
unable to handle. His pale skin is getting flushed  
with frustration. It gets redder when I say:  
“Every picture I’ve seen shows him white.”

My repetition of fact forces him  
to leave the room, unable to talk,  
to question, to understand,  
the ambivalence a Brown person holds  
as near and dear as skin.

But here is where both he and I are wrong:  
whether Jesus was White, Brown, or Black,  
he still felt the fire and the ash.

## Love Like Poetry

Like any good heartbreak,  
this poem begins with a charming promise  
to hold your hand and search for meaning.

It begins with honesty but and only witty truth  
'cause, shit, poems can't live with expectations,  
but it will be clever and aggressive

and tell you that it loves taking risks  
but really it has a gambling problem.

It admits its problems to disarm

so you confuse honesty with intimacy  
and you relate and think you avoid risks  
but really you're just a shut in.

Let's be honest, though, poems are measured  
by starts and finishes, so this part is impressive  
filler, like choosing *Applebees* this time

over *Chilis* will attempt to impress

because the latter is the skank  
of mid-priced restaurants,

but the former has worse deals.

The poem exchanges skank restaurants  
for its couch and a tv because you wanted

honesty, and there's nothing more true  
than a remote control, sweatpants,  
shitting with the door open.

Where it began with charm and honesty  
it ends with just lies, not about other loves  
or indiscretions, but about fault

anything to make you smile again  
not that it cares about your happiness.  
It cares that you don't stab it in the face

with the nearest utensil.

It admits that fear as well.

So it seems poetry, like love, ends  
and begins with charm and the idea of honesty





## **Gary Lee Barkow**

practices Tai Chi and walks around feeling loved.

He keeps a flashlight by his futon in case he has a “brilliant” idea at night. He doesn’t know where poetry originates, so he enjoys the mystery. He likes: God, the Earth, mathematics, earthworms, propellers, the San Francisco 49ers and AC/DC's, It's A Long Way To The Top. He taught his son, “The best time to scream is when the bagpipes play.”

## Disappear

If I resurrect my story,  
maybe I'll overhear,  
Child who could barely whisper,  
*When I die, do I disappear?*

That Thing was the fear of my own voice  
(when the wildlife ran away);  
that Thing preached there are evil thoughts  
(teaching the dirty look);  
Thing, Mother likes alibis;  
Thing, when I guessed I would die --  
how could I say,  
*wish out of here,*  
I was so ashamed of death,  
couldn't speak a marble's worth  
in kindergarten.

## Say What?

She tilts her head like a quizzical puppy –  
it's like she's listening twice.

Just once when I go, "Cock-a-doodle-do,"  
but twice when I go, "I love you."

*Hey, she says, You still talking to me?*

She lovin' my insincerity.

We laughed and laughed and held, "Ooh-ooh."  
rocked and rocked, "I love you."

*So, what kind of love is this, anyway?*

"It's pizza love, My Dear.

When I can't overcome my fear,  
I hide in the fun."



**Egon Baxter**

writes “literary,” mystery, and humorous fiction as well as ghost stories. He has lived in Boston, Athens and Amsterdam and has stopped riding horses. He has published sixteen short stories thus far.

## Murder in the Foyer

Naomi's loins were hot. (*More later!*)

"Yuck!" Did you have to open that way?" Leslie sneered. Everybody ignored her.

"Murder! It's pure and simple!" Caravas exploded.

Leslie loved him for that, "Please Caravas, please, again and AGAIN. Scream, baby, scream. Explode again if you want to!" God how she sniggered.

The resolute gong had sounded, its resonant Ding DONG momentarily causing the cast iron chandelier to quiver its rows of pristine white candles. The flames flickered. Caravas screamed, AGAIN.

"Baby do it to me, scream baby, scream," Leslie tittered. He was *quite* the screamer.

Barabbas snarled from the paneled wall leading to the day room. He most frequently snarled from his frame. He had to. He was painted that way.

But Delores was vexed, “Where’s the body gone to, Bob?” she asked. “For God’s sake. Where’s Bob? What’s happened to Bob?”

They all were staring at the door. “That’s right,” Julia gasped, “for God’s sake! Bob!”

Bob was out at Fine Wine that carried the ultimate vintages. Fine wine at Fine Wine. Ha! They had all just wanted one nice bottle and Bob was out the door before you could say, “For God’s sake! Bob!”

The candles kept on writhing and quivering in the wrought iron holder. They knew what was what. Julia gasped. Billy-Bob giggled. The robo servant just fell forward. “All of you will know Mrs. Pennydinger. All of you before the hour is out. Even Delores!” Caravas whispered.



Julia gasped. Again! She's prone.

Delores sighed...audibly, "Pennydinger doing you dirt, Billy-Bob? You know the oddest ducks, don't you?"

"I am a duck, Delores. Now enough dilly or dally, I say. It's time to raise the stakes and figure out what happened here in the foyer. You can see the candles are *writhing* and all that."

Bob chimed in, "What's what with writhing candles, Billy-Bob? Ye Gods."

For God's sake, Billy-Bob is not Bob because one-name Bob was back. With the fine wine from Fine Wine. "Anybody for a chug, uh, Delores?" one-name Bob guffawed. He had it for her. Forget Naomi.

"The body? Where's the body gone to?" Delores whined.

"What body, Delores? And who are you, anyway? Just met you here in the foyer. You weren't at table were you?" Leslie

whined. She was suspicious. Delores didn't know that Leslie had just stashed her wig in the foyer end table.

Caravas screamed. Again!

"Baby baby baby!" Leslie burst out and clapped her hands violently. What a sweetie!

"They really all are odd ducks, I must confess. Or dull dodos. Nothing against ducks or dodos you understand," Billy-Bob whispered against all odds. He wanted the chug. Also, the body. In that order.

"Really we've got to confront the murder thingee right here in the foyer. It won't go away on its own," Delores whispered hoarsely. Or hoarsely whispered? Same thing or...

"It sure seems to...or did. Mrs. Pennydinger is no more." That was Leslie. Figures.

"Was that Pennydinger? I thought it was Fracas," Delores uttered, surprised.

“You’re right,” Caravas muttered, “you’re right, Delores, it’s the dinger babe, not Fracas.”

“I’m right about it not being Pennydinger? That’s not what I said. I thought it was Fracas. Then where is the dinger babe?” Delores demanded.

“Mrs. Cummings wants us back at table. She spent a good of time with Mrs. Jackson getting that extra special humdinger cherry thingee ready for dessert and she says you better think about Pennydinger tomorrow,” Billy-Bob interjected.” Oh yeah, interjected! You sure read it right, baby.

“The dinger baby anybody? In the cartouche or out on the lam? Barabbas certainly doesn’t know,” Delores moaned.

“This is all getting confused—so confused. What lam? Do we even own a lam? The table is on the lam? And Barabbas is a painting,” Joanie exploded, “and forget that line about Naomi’s loins. What a low hook! I thought this was literature. Veddy veddy fine LIT-TER-A-CHUR!”

Delores nearly had a baby over that one, “You don’t own a lam, ditzkrieg, you go on one. Like honeymoon, but it’s illegal.”

“Barabbas is a portrait!” Caravas screamed. Again. Tiresome, isn’t he?

Delores screamed at Leslie, “It’s not getting any easier. Think again, sister, think AGAIN.”

All this screaming. We’ll lose the reader. It’s confused isn’t it? And these characters if you can call them that. BUT...

Delores was even more vexed than she could stand. “These people, these people,” she moaned out loud, three or four times her usual vexation peak. “Where was Pennydinger?” she wondered.

They wanted to go back to table because when Joanie was in a snit the whole universe knew about it. And Delores really wanted that extra special humdinger cherry thingee. Delores is a natural blond you know. That brings you things. It used to.

But this thing about Pennydinger. Miss or Mrs. notwithstanding. Nobody ever trusted her. But there she had been, neatly draped over the bottom stair with a bullet in her lovely dinger brow. Now she was just lying there looking most inconvenient. Suppose someone dropped by? Then what were they supposed to do?

Someone had hated her more than usual. Everybody agreed that everybody hated as much as could be expected. Whether that was more than usual was something on everybody's mind. But then again, nobody could explain what was going on with the Barrabas gem in the portrait. He kept sliming now. That's right. That's what's written. Not smiling. *Sliming*.

"I won't have it!" Julia screamed as she dragged Pennydinger across the foyer. "I want answers now about Pennydinger. It's only getting worse. He was in my bedroom last night in the South Wing. Do I have to be any clearer? I want him exorcised from this screaming mansion!" Then she dropped the corpse and the head made a big bumping sound. Everyone gasped. No one knew Joanie could pull a corpse as she did.

“The Dinger’s a babe, not a boy, Joanie.” Delores uttered. This time she *uttered*, notice. Not screamed.

Leslie tittered again. Yes, really. Tittered. *Because she could readers.* Because she could.

“Come on, Julia, just come on,” Delores mooned and beamed and did all sorts of interesting mood things with her face, “he’s dead and we need to know more.”

“He’s a she, Delores,” Julia sniggered this time.

“How would you know? You just got here last night. You don’t know the lay of the lam. You’re brutal and you’re a no go.”

“Lay of the what? What is it with you folks and lam? Lam is flight, it’s escape, it’s all the things that you don’t say it is,” Julia huffed.

“Lady, as you say, of the manor, if you must know, Joanie. But you don’t, do you? Anyhow, where’s the corpse? I don’t see her on the stairs myself.” Delores was miffed.

“She’s been removed. Can we get that on paper? Get it straight?” Billy-Bob busted out.

Delores was tickled about that. “Get what straight? Billy-Bob? Who is the Joanie biddie? I’m not Joanie and I won’t be called Joanie. I’ll be called by my name if you don’t mind, and don’t be bothering me about finding these things you’ve lost. How could I possibly know a body is missing. Isn’t it in the library? That’s where we usually put them.”

Betty came in with her hair in a bob. Hah. Bob again. She rustled her head her back and forth so her hair bounced. Betty’s bouncing bob. At least it wasn’t anything about the Penny-dinger babe.

“We haven’t had a really good body to put away. A long, long time. A good dead one. We almost placed ads. No one’s been in the library for ages, Joanie. It needed something. Not just books. I suggest a toast to the body, Joanie. A tasty toastie for Joanie,” Delores guffawed. Oh yeah.

Caravas guffawed, too, then he screamed. “It’s just not working out,” Joanie was heard to say. She knew where she put the body. They’d all been too busy with the guffaw. Talk about distraction. Guffaw. So much effort. So much to think about. It was like ancient Rome. No one had guffawed in that district since Superman was George Reeves with those baggy tights. Bob had a hankerin’ for Lois and Jimmy just all of sudden. Right like that all of sudden. It was the wine. Straight to the cortex, baby.

“I don’t have time for the guffaw. The body’s on the couch near the fire and it’s not getting any warmer, babes.”

“Who you callin’ ‘babe’ Carvie?” Delores demanded, “and you said it’s right by the fire. Should be toasty soon.”

“Must we do this again? What am I doing here? This is an odd little thingee and it’s going nowhere,” Joanie exclaimed.

“Awwwwwwwww, now she’s ‘exclaiming’ boys and girls. Or pricks and bitches I should say,” Bob tittered.

Caravas screamed, “Can it babe, it’s tired.”



“I will not and I shall not. What are we talking about here? Getting close to a corpse. Who knew about Pennydinger anyway? And what the hell is a Robo servant? This is 1966! We’re not about Robo servants...not yet.” Joanie in a snit was something to see big time. At least, Bob thought so. He’d had some fine wine finely etching his frontal lobe.

Caravas screamed.

“Seal it, Carvie.” Delores tittered, “Wow that’s a verb babies. Take note.” Now Delores was tittering. She caught it from Leslie, Billy-Bob mused, “My knee’s a mess boys. It’s time we wrapped up this little dirge. That’s what you call it isn’t it? The dinger caper. The Pennydinger ravioli affair.”

“Ravioli affair? But we haven’t got a good sauce!”

“Look bubba or should I say sugar tart or Tarte Flambée. This kind of thing is going nowhere. It’s not modern and it’s not post-modern. The author, whom I met on the sly, wants us to play up the details at the expense of the really skimpy plot. He’s

all about Pennydinger and the dialogues. I say let's give it one last 624 words and tell him to get off his you-know-what muffin and turn this thing into a real dinger. It's not even a fragment or a flash thingee. Got it, Delores?" You got it. Bob again.

"No one's gonna buy it. And that thing about Naomi's loins. Yuk. Who is Naomi anyway? That was just a hook. A cheap one, if you ask me." Fuckin' A Delores!

"Pennydinger's dangling from a wing chair in the library where she should be. We haven't got much time left. Mrs. Cummings wants us back at table, remember? She spent a good of time with Mrs. Jackson getting that extra special humdinger cherry thingee ready for dessert, like I told you up there in paragraph twenty-seven or wherever he put it, and she says she'll think about Pennydinger tomorrow."

"What does Cummings have to do with anything?" Joanie shrieked (yes, that's what she did!), "and who is she, buster?"

"It's the cherry humdinger thingee. Pound cake, fresh mind you, loads of glistening drippy butter butter butter, soaked in

rum and dumped with preserved maraschino cherries smothered with whippy and then sandwiched with another humdinger thingee and voila!” Bob barked.

“Woof!” Joanie exploded. I mean, out of her mouth, the woof, you know. She didn’t explode. Delores made a face.

“Yummy I think and I think of humdingers all the time, babes, because I got no love life. And now we’ve got that corpse. Drag-o,” Bob added, no barking this time.

“Maybe the humdinger thingee killed her. The butter could really waste you, right Bob?” That was Delores. She had to know. Joanie smirked. AGAIN.

“We’ve got to stop getting stuck in this weird syntax; we go nowhere and the body’s on a couch in the library. What are we going to tell the police? About the humdinger cherry thingee? That’ll be a cute response. It’s old, it got old fast like Bob’s fine wine from Fine. What’s the point? This isn’t the mystery I signed on for!” Joanie really whined that last line.

“Joanie phonie she’s just baloney its gotten old for me oh my wonderful guy.” Delores again. What else *could* she say?

“What did you ‘sign-on’ for babe? I can call you babe without you getting weirded in?” That was Bob the other one. Billy-Bob. “You’ll see if we can get out of this foyer. I can hear the sirens, wailing yes sir, yes sir, they’re coming for the dinger babe it must have been Mrs. Cummings. Oh my oh well this is it everybody.”

“What was this anyway,” Bob asked as he chugged on the dregs of fine wine, “I get sad about these things. So confused, but I like Joanie and the thingee. Even Delores gets to me. Aw, I’m gonna cry and I don’t even care a hoot about the loins thing. What was it? A loin of pork? But how would all of you know? Bye, bye blackbird.”

Delores had had enough. Mind you, this was just supposed to be an hour’s visit. It was turning into a soirée. And she didn’t like the way the narrative was decomposing.

“The narrative is decomposing. I thought we’d all be in a fine story together less the fine wine from Fine Wine. It’s the same for me every time. And who is Naomi anyway? Do we need a slut like that around?”

“Delores!” Leslie screamed.

There was nothing that anyone could do, Joanie concluded. It was the end. The body would just have to be moved. The police were used to it. They’d have questions, but if they plied them with the humdinger thingee, they might just eat their words along with the humdinger thingee. Whose words? Everybody’s. She just dropped in and died. No one to blame. End of story. The end. Arrivederci Roma.



### **Nicholas Viglietti**

is a writer from Sacramento, CA. He started writing in high school. After which, he served in the Americorps; two years rebuilding houses on the gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and one year working on a trail crew in the Montana/Idaho wilderness. He graduated from Humboldt State University. Now, he works for the cheap and attempts to get words published under his name. Nicholas is a Hawaiian-shirt aficionado, a pina-colada connoisseur, and enjoys hot, lazy days by the pool with his wifey.

## Think Outside the Breakers

Harsh breakers smashed the shallows. Up the street, where the concrete boardwalk edge meets the sand is a vantage point, to evaluate the waves. A group of trunks hung over dismal toes, itching to paddle-out. You could tell from their crusty faces; the shoulder effort wasn't worth the gas money it took to get here. My boots scuffed against the uneven alley pavement walking up to peep a glance, for myself. Another lumber-hucking workday in the yard had put a lil' more wear on these soles. It barely covered the bills, but I had a spot in a cramped, too many dudes' apartment, right on the sand; dude's trying to become men, or men trying to remain young dudes.

The May-Gray, or was it June-Gloom? Hard to say in retrospect...still might be some sand affecting my brainwaves...in any case, the clouds seemed to hang around heavier and longer like a foul mood during those transitional summer months.

The old toes, in desperate need of lotion from years barefootin' in the sea, waited near wet-suits and longboards – conditions pumped hard, and a board snap was guaranteed. The lifted trucks would be firing up soon, bound for East County. A wasted after-



noon, no waves and stuck in “America’s Finest City” traffic jams, but at least they were retired.

“How’s it looking, bro?” I asked, swiping away leftover sawdust, at one of the mangy, desert-rat-beards. The others garbled slurs in their golden-year frustration.

“Shitty...like the price-tag on these gaudy beach-front porches popping up everywhere...shit was better before the wealth ruined things, round here,” the desert-rat said, his skin had a year or two till a melanoma diagnosis. Then he shuffled off, angry arms struggling to hoist up his single-fin log (long board).

The remainder of the frustrated, elderly men filed out after him. Sheezer arrived, fresh off his office – third-eye blinded from artificial light – job; located in the Gaslamp Downtown. We evaluated the stupidity of paddling out to the line up with boards in an 8 to 10-foot punishing swell. The fresh, sea air was better than our muggy, stuffy bro smelling apartment for hanging out.

“Water’s prolly warm ‘nough to not fully suit up...what you think ‘bout tossing fins on, and body sliding these nasty breakers? Green-room action is better than no action at all,” Sheezer said, catching the lip of a bright idea.

We rushed back to our cramped casa and changed into faded trunks that displayed our dedication to logging beach hours. We

tossed on wet-suit-tops – just thick enough to keep ya comfortable, out there. The water isn't hot by any means. SoCal is a desert, and those invasive, purely for appearance, palm trees breed a false tropical vibration. Dress for the image you want to convey.

Shanders arrived and no update was needed to get in the flow.

We sprinted to the whitewash, rubber flippers in hand, slid them on and swam like shark bait out to the action.

Straight belly-surfing bad boys, making the most of a situation that older eyes couldn't see the value in. Our heads bobbed like buoys markers snapped loose from crab-pots, snagging free-range barrels. The red shorts (lifeguards), back on dry sand, shook nervously on rustic perches, dressed up with a fresh coat of paint for a new surf season.

"I'm bet they wished they had caught us before we swam out to the weighty breaker sets," I hollered, as we dove between heavy swell crashes.

"Hell yeah, they think we will drown out here...and they don't wanna get wet. The power of the ocean is an optical illusion...it looks inviting from the shoreline view, but rapidly gets dangerous in the action. It can be a regretful type of sandy miscalculation that sends tourists swiftly to the depths of a Davey Jones

death,” Sheezer added, short of breath – maybe we were pushing our luck.

Although, it wasn’t our first wave-sliding-rodeo. We were good swimmers, and rip-tide-relief – using the ocean’s energy – removes lung busting effort that comes with aggressive shoulder strokes. Constant water treading can tire a man out quickly, and by the time you get into proper take-off position for a wave your too zapped to catch it – perhaps that’s life...keep pushing through rough water.

“Some days, it just ain’t perfect, and you gotta be fluid with what the days given to ya,” Sheezer said, as we treaded momentarily.

“Alter your mode and manipulate your approach for anything life serves up – let the other mouths drown in complaints and frustrations,” Shanders added, and I snaked the next wave.

Later that night, at the Coastal – our local dive-bar – the neon lights complimented the glow in our teeth, and we heard old-timers, sitting on packed wallets, spew complaints about crappy waves unable to shift objectives.

Sheezer said, “Why don’t you fellas' belly-glide out there...we did, and didn’t miss a wave.”

The irritable old-timers brushed off the remark that opposed their conventional approach to surfable standards. We let them be

and drank with bikinis that didn't care about sunlight. The bartender dropped off fresh margaritas with a touch of mango, and the old-timers looked sour; their grimaces sipped beers that had only changed labels in recent years.



## **Randall Watson**

is the author of *No Evil is Wide*, (Madville Publishing), which received the Quarterly West prize in the novella and was a ‘favorite’ in the NYC Big Book Award, *The Geometry of Wishes* (Texas Review Press), a finalist in the Juniper and Tampa Review Poetry Prizes, *The Sleep Accusations*, which received the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize at Eastern Washington University, (currently available through Carnegie Mellon University Press), and *Las Delaciones del Sueno*, translated by Antonio Saborit with an Introduction by Adam Zagajewski, published in a bi-lingual edition by the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa, Mexico. A new graphic edition of *No Evil Is Wide* came out in August of 2023 (Madville Publishing). His essays, reviews, and poems have appeared in many journals, including *Artlies*, *Chautauqua*, *Chelsea*, *Confrontation*, *The Georgia Review*, *Literal Magazine*, *North American Review*, *Portland Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Texas Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Willow Springs*. New poems are forthcoming in *Willow Springs* and an essay, “Nestor Topchy at the Menil” is forthcoming in *Abstract Magazine*.

## Houston Falls

The house went first. Then the poodles, wet  
with bathwater. Then the repetitions  
of work and sleep, the day  
a crystal owl with eyes  
that wouldn't open, palm trees  
bowing towards a distant  
glacier, the silver tip  
of a dropping thermostat. Soon a woman's  
strapless evening gown  
even though it was morning.  
A girl's mascara.  
And the diastolic blip in the slack bicep  
of her extended arms, her voice, diminished,  
on the black asphalt behind  
the departing camaro.

We were like clowns who imagine  
a frozen sidewalk. The dull red  
leaves of the crepe myrtle  
in early December, the leaves  
that even turning we were turning  
to, each thought a fertile,  
desperate mosquito, a nursery  
rhyme about the plague, a battered  
soufflé. Even our sacrament of bread,  
the slick dough in its terrycloth shroud  
by a cooling oven--the bubble  
in the throat we swallowed  
that couldn't feed us.  
Not a word.  
That's how flat it got.  
Not a single swell  
on the Gulf.  
Not even a burp  
to scatter the gulls.



## S.A.T.

Say that Cindy's baby is Mary's baby's daddy

And Mary's boyfriend works for Metro

and Frank loves Cindy but he drinks too much

So she won't have him.

And Mary's baby's daddy isn't her boyfriend.

And Cindy whipped her son because she loves him.

And Mary's sister is in rehab

And Frank's son is on patrol in Kandahar

And Mary owes her cousin money

And Cindy's feeling a bit self-righteous lately

And Mary's boyfriend's father moved away.

Say we call this a wealth of experience.

Who's the richest?

## My Bi-Polar Girlfriend

You were a dance troupe. a bad, a fond of garages.

A bright, yes, with the big door open.

An affluent cipher fond of appearing.

All evening long the late snow, bright specks of dust, emerged  
from darkness,

stylish in its winter fashion.

You said I love you and I love you

and I love you was a cherry and a plum.

I love you was a bushel.

I love you was a 10 gallon tub with a metal handle.

You wanted the metal handle to be your poem,

you wanted the 10 gallon tub to be our poem,

but the poem wanted to be a mirror.

A mirror is a clash of repetitions.

A metal handle a 10 gallon tub a metal handle a poem.

Easy to lift but hard to carry.

The cold thin handle.

The greave in the palm.



**Cliff Saunders**

is the author of several poetry chapbooks, including *Mapping the Asphalt Meadows* (Slipstream Publications) and *The Persistence of Desire* (Kindred Spirit Press). His poems have appeared recently in *Quadrant*, *The Rockford Review*, *Concision Poetry Journal*, and *Portrait of New England*.

## **SWEET SPOT**

Awakening begins at full roar,  
at memory's where and when.

It's highly wobbly,  
like a balloon of gelatin.

The sky's full of all kinds  
of balloons that serve as

wedding bells, as blind fools.

The city of dreams may topple

tractor-trailers, eat of tornadoes,  
and burn like an old shoe,

but it still has holes that want  
to find the sweet spot at which

romance blossoms all the way  
to the forgotten age of forgiveness.

## SUCKING IT UP

When you sound just like a river  
drowned out by highway noise,  
you learn how much to release,

how much to live for yourself.

But steer clear of butterflies escaped  
from the belly of a sleeping man.

Don't slip into the abyss like them.

Suck it up and look for a place  
to flap your wings of enduring love!



## TRIGGER WARNING

If all the world's a stage,  
then I'm its mezzanine.

Always standing in the wings,  
I have no lines to speak,

no grand soliloquy or aside.  
Think of me as a stub,

a ticket torn in half:  
only partly in this world,

but no less dangerous for that.  
My silence is an assassin.

Cocking the trigger on my pencil,  
I will pump you full of lead.



## **Sam Hendrian**

is a lifelong storyteller striving to foster empathy and compassion through art. Originally from the Chicago suburbs, he now resides in Los Angeles, where he primarily works as an independent filmmaker and has just completed his first feature film Terrificman, a deeply personal ode to the power of human kindness. You can find his poetry and film links on Instagram at [@samhendrian143](https://www.instagram.com/samhendrian143).

## “Initials in the Sand”

Heard her name called by a stranger  
Then ran the other way,  
Terrified of losing the affection  
Guaranteed by anonymity.

For the more one knows  
The less one cares  
Despite bedroom attempts  
To prove the contrary.

Home was where she wasn't home,  
Familiarity was where she'd never been,  
The mystic comfort of a menu  
She actually had to read.

The only kisses she craved  
Were saltwater waves on her toes,  
Sunset breezes on her shoulders,  
Mourning dove songs in her ears.

Felt most alive as a ghost

Passing through walls with no doorways in sight  
While watching corporal consolations  
Crash into the ground right after launching.

Neither triumphant nor defeated,  
Staying in a Goldilocks state of balance  
Because the fewer chances you take to win,  
The fewer chances you have to lose.

Every now and then though she saw her initials  
Namelessly etched in the expanse of sand  
And momentarily paused to ponder  
If she got lost just so she might get found.

## **“Children’s Hospital”**

“Welcome to Disneyland!”

The lobby seems to say

Despite the prominence of the clipboards

With all the papers to sign.

No one dares utter “Have a magical day”

Although “Have a good one” is in frequent use

Just to keep with the theme

Of speaking in generalities.

The calendars have all been removed from the walls

Along with the digital clocks

To create a sense of eternity

Or perhaps the preparation for it.

Reruns of PBS Kids shows

Haunt the barely-watched television screens

Blending in with the heart monitors

And the pictures of smiling faces.

A hotel without a checkout time  
Lest anyone be frightened  
By the shape of “11:00”  
On their room flyer.

There’s a chamber at the end of the first-floor hallway  
That no one speaks of  
Unless someone asks the desk clerk  
Where they can go to be nowhere.

Echoes of muffled sniffing  
Filtered through colorful ceiling tiles  
Suggest premature endings  
And the hope for divine beginnings.

## “Eulogy Elegy”

We toil and suffer for years

Just to be condensed into a couple of bullet points:

He did this, he did that,

He loved peanut butter cups.

All the minor details perfectly remembered

And the major ones taken for granted:

Good husband, good father, good 9-to-5 laborer

Who barely saw a dollar of the pennies he earned.

Usually our greatest hits

Are those that are never released,

The smiles tossed at strangers on the side of the road

That made all the difference.

Then it's off to the cemetery

To seal the deal on anonymity

Since it's hard to distinguish between graves

Despite the grandchildren's crafts and notes of gratitude.

There are those who equate endings with new beginnings



And those who believe both are equally irrelevant,  
A pompous attempt to deny  
Our cosmic insignificance.

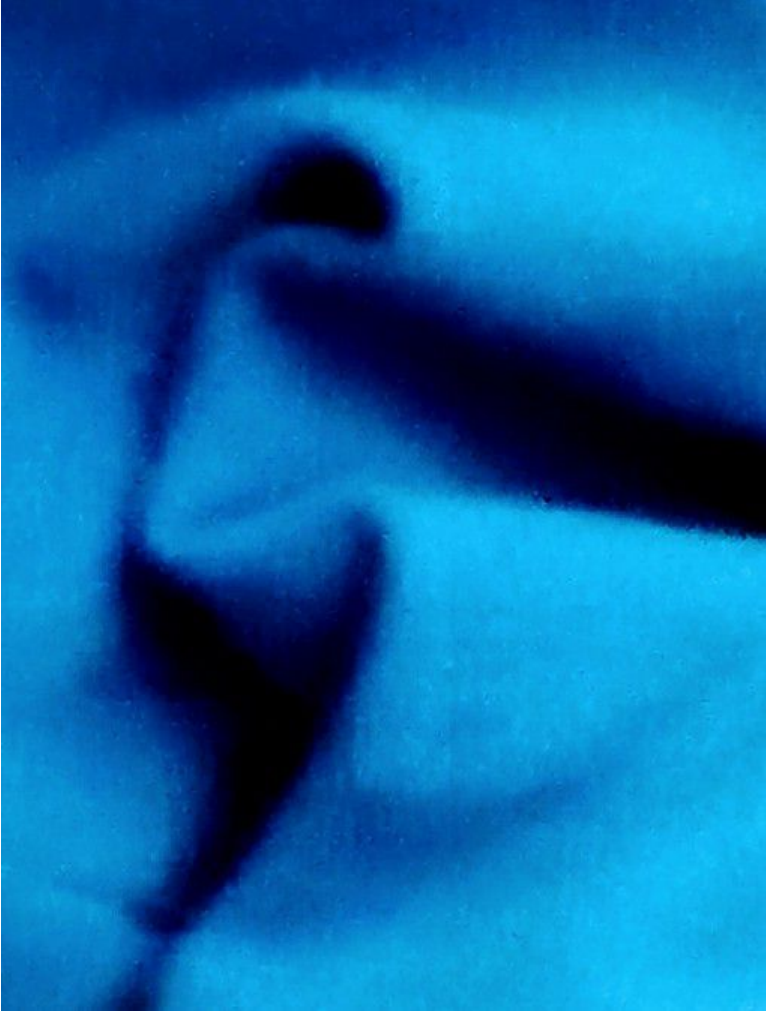
But as sure as they're sure we loved peanut butter cups,  
There must be some semblance of seamless Truth  
Towards which we each continue traveling  
Long after the eulogist says "You'll be missed."



**Andrew “Andy” Graber**

is a self taught artist.

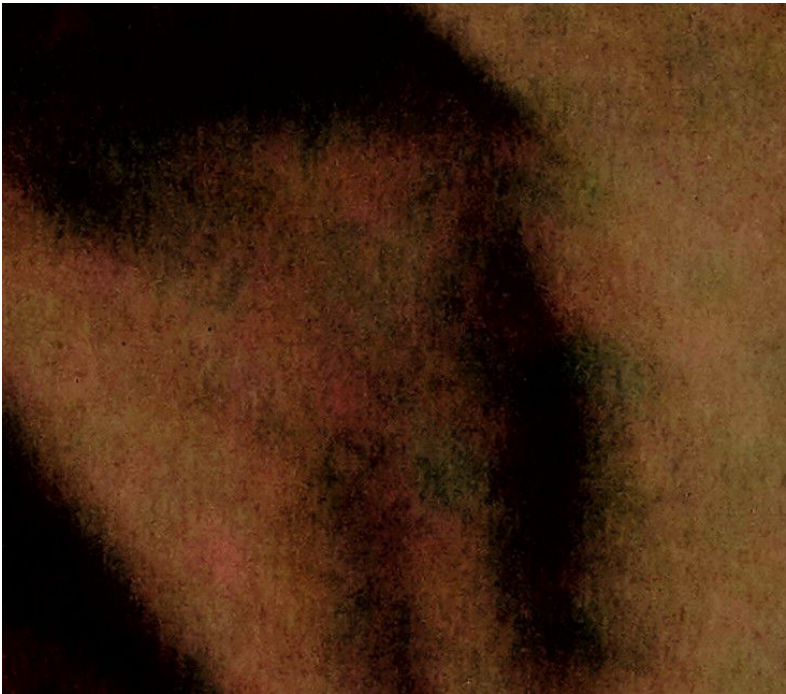
Besides creating various forms of visual artwork and images, he is also interested in learning new languages and karaoke.



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For the last sixteen years,

**Tim Hanson**

has taught high school English, a passion rivaled only by his love for writing. His short stories and essays have appeared in nearly two dozen journals and anthologies, and he recently won Flash Fiction Magazine's flash fiction contest. You can read more about Tim at [TSHanson.com](http://TSHanson.com).

## Crossword

Every morning before work, I do the New York Times crossword puzzle at The Coffee Emporium downtown. I'm on my second cup of coffee now and trying to figure out a six-letter word for 'without shame,' but my mind keeps wandering, as do my eyes, to a stranger one table over, writing answers in her own newspaper.

In pen.

In my hand is a pencil I keep twisting back and forth, using each side almost equally.

By the end of breakfast, I've completed more of the crossword puzzle than this stranger, but oh, how I long for the day when I can be so brazen to use a pen, to write my answers unapologetically and work with what I've written, no matter if it's right or wrong.



**John Sweet**

sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in compassionate nihilism. His published collections include NO ONE STARVES IN A NATION OF CORPSES (2020 Analog Submission Press) and THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY THIS IS GOING TO END (Cyberwit, 2023).

## in the palace of exiles

walk to the far edge of the  
field and shoot yourself  
and  
would this be considered *lost*  
or would it be considered  
*found?*

believe in christ  
as a fever dream

scream at the hills

throw the baby in the river

no one offers you hope  
without wanting something  
in return

## hangman's blues

friday morning and cold in the  
slow approach of april rain, and we  
broke that fucker's hands when  
he asked us for money

we burned that building to the ground

six million dead and the  
ovens lit up for twenty years straight

piles of women  
piles of children

my oldest son with a fever of 103

scream of brakes from out in  
the street

of all these things you love,  
which one would you be most  
willing to lose?

## a gift for the diamond eaters

in the desert and  
still worried about drowning

in a room with crow  
waiting for the news that some of my  
fears might actually matter

waiting for a message from the  
queen of open wounds but  
it never comes

thirty years wasted in california and  
then another thirty in upstate new york but  
nothing you could call a life

blue skies and drunken phone calls

every letter ending  
**THIS WILL BE THE LAST LETTER** and  
all crow can do is grin at the  
stupidity of it

drive up and down state line road

looking for the trailer park she  
used to live in but  
it's a different world these days

it's the ghost of morrison and the  
ghost of cobain and the  
memory of dancing to slow songs in  
the half-light of the high school gym

the possibility of escape but  
never the reality

endless days of sunlight  
and never enough oxygen

never the sound of  
anyone else's laughter





**Alaina Hammond**

is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and visual  
artist. @alainaheidelberger on Instagram.

## **Desdamona**

Your name was longer than your day.

They chiseled both upon the stone

With grief, precision, care.

Praise God that you enjoyed your play

Before you left for realm unknown

Forsaking dirt for air.

## **Solomon**

Hello sweet boy, of science, love and cells

Already well held by your two fathers' hands

You're everything the world needs you to be.

I see your ruddy cheeks and my heart swells

In harmony with certain other glands

My dear friends' son, how dear you are to me.

## The Cruelty Of A Kind Man

Why did I put such faith in you?  
You, who never requested my trust  
Better, then, ask how, not why  
Dry wisdom cut me, light burst through  
But it was my hand made that thrust  
You scarcely had to try

My love for you, a constant wound  
While you won't give me due respect  
Much less an hour of your day.  
You're casual and still fine-tuned  
I attempt to deny, to repress, to deflect  
The ties that neither break nor fray.

## **Titan of Titin**

Adorned in laboratory robe,  
He holds the beaker in his palm  
A scepter for a king.  
Before him, pupils deftly probe  
Electrified yet somehow calm  
As atoms on a spring.

He catalyzes learning's fire  
And strengthens bonds within design  
Complex, constructed, clear.  
Titan of Titin and nanowire:  
Through him, fine art and math align.  
His chemicals adhere.

## Heisenbergian Friendship

My walk toward you has rocked and waned

You're rarely where I aim to be

If anywhere at all

I lost a step for each I gained

Yet time and you reveal to me

I didn't ever stall

We always kept uncharted course

Adhering to a moon-made wave

But kept to it, the same

I'm carried forward by a force

I'm not in charge but still I'm brave

And happy that I came

I came before you, then, now, then

I'm not sure each event was right

Results most vastly ranged

I made a choice—and chose again

Stayed focused in imperfect light

In that way, never changed

I can't predict what happens now  
If we stay close, or start to shift  
To where we used to stand  
Should physics deem it, I allow  
Myself to turn into the drift  
But I can add an "and."

The "and" is my continued care  
My love for you, the man you are  
And were. My warm affection  
Cannot be vanished into air  
Nor burn out following a star  
Nor ever change direction.





**Susan Cossette**

lives and writes in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Author of *Peggy Sue Messed Up*, she is a recipient of the University of Connecticut's Wallace Stevens Poetry Prize. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rust and Moth*, *The New York Quarterly*, *ONE ART*, *As it Ought to Be*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *The Amethyst Review*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Loch Raven Review*, and in the anthologies *Fast Fallen Women* (Woodhall Press) and *Tuesdays at Curley's* (Yuganta Press).

## Peggy Sue Messed Up

Maybe it was the crinolines which itched.  
I don't know.

Or my mother's unrealistic expectations of perfection,  
the ideal girl with her Aquanet curls.

I gave up

I ditched the dance,  
dumped the dude in the sharkskin suit  
with his flask in the ass pocket,  
his whiskey breath and cheap promises,  
and his cock grinding against  
me during the cha-cha-cha.

I gave up.

Watch me in my yellow Edsel,  
accelerating onto the football field,  
perfect figure eight infinity-shaped donuts.

I drove clear across town  
to the bluffs of Ithaca,  
overlooking the glittering lights  
from the heights of the world before me.

The prom queen is complete.  
She is done.

You, Neptune, take my tiara.  
I never wanted it.

I give up.

## Waiting for the Borealis

You will be the amber and green lights tonight  
the night before Mother's Day,  
the show in the anthracite sky  
confirming you endure.

Atomic particles of you will crash  
into the atmosphere at impossible speed,  
then rebound into an embrace of  
sparkling arcs and dancing ribbons.

Mother, tonight I am Earthbound,  
fetal in my blue plastic lawn chair,  
swaddled in fleece,  
small cold hands curled  
around a glass of wine,  
whispering prayers  
the waiting hours will pass quickly  
and the heavens remain cloudless  
for your visit.

*Originally appeared in No Country Magazine*

## Medici Slot Machine

*-after Joseph Cornell*

My quixotic desires of travel persist,  
crouched in mother's basement,  
gazing at pushpins on old maps,  
but never arriving anywhere.

Armchair voyager,  
caught in the brass compass's quivering vibration.

I scour the grimy streets  
of Utopia Parkway in Queens  
for trinkets and toys and stumble upon  
a willowy eyed adolescent Italian aristocrat  
dressed in fine velvet robes.

Massimiliano Stampa, the third Marchese di Soncino,  
forever suspended between childhood and adulthood.

He now presides in sepia grandeur  
in this tiny shadow box cosmos  
of marbles, balls, cubes,  
wooden game markers,  
brass jacks, and colored glass.

Fixed in a five and dime store,  
the gilded penny arcade of my dreams.



**Lynn White**

lives in north Wales. Her poetry is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality.

She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award. Find Lynn at:

<https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com> and  
<https://www.facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077/>

## **Powerman**

The masked figure  
bristles with power,  
unmistakable  
untouchable  
the spirits and demons  
held close inside him  
to be released at his behest.

But only in Africa.

When he leaves,  
stolen  
taken  
then  
he's powerless  
defrocked  
unmasked  
like all the other  
stolen ones.

So much power  
left behind  
in Africa.

*First published in Ekphrastic Review, Nkisi Power Figure Challenge, May 2024*



## To Rest In Peace

They were men of the north  
suitably suited  
in black dense as new hewed coal  
or dark grey shiny as wet slate  
or, rarely, the midnight blue  
of a northern night sky.

It was a formal occasion  
this laying to rest  
of the dull grey  
past known,  
of the bright red  
future hoped for.

They laid them to rest  
with broken flowers  
petals crushed  
with ashes  
and dust.

It was a formal occasion  
this laying to rest  
in peace  
or not.

*First published in The Poets Republic, Darg Anthology, August 2019*

## Nativity

There are no Magi to adore them now,  
the women giving birth  
in ramshackle sheds  
or freezing tents  
or in the rubble  
and cold  
and dirt  
of what's left.

There are no Magi to bring gifts,  
no shepherds to bring succour  
to the women giving birth  
in ramshackle sheds  
or freezing tents  
or in the rubble  
and cold  
and dirt  
of what's left.

Maybe artists will paint the scene  
but I doubt it.  
None are needed

when we can already see,  
when we already know  
and then we don't see  
anymore.

*First published in New Verse News, March 2 2024*



## **Bill Kitcher**

's stories, plays, and comedy sketches have been published, produced, and/or broadcast in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Czechia, England, Germany, Guernsey, Holland, India, Ireland, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, the U.S., and Wales. His stories have appeared in Fiery Scribe Review, Ariel Chart, New Contrast, Spinozablue, Helix Literary Magazine, Granfalloon, Eunoia Review, Defenestration, Pigeon Review, Yellow Mama, and many other journals. His novel, "Farewell And Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep", was published in October 2023 by Close To The Bone Publishing and is available on Amazon.

## Crystal Palace

I leaned on the pillar of a wall on Langley Way, West Wickham, Kent, and looked at the house.

After a while, a young couple in their thirties came out of the house, and the man said to me, “Can we help you?”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but is there still an apple tree in the back garden?”

“No, there isn’t. Why?”

“I used to live in this house, when I was a boy. We moved to Canada in 1964. The apple tree had two branches coming out of it, parallel to the ground. One branch was the perfect height for me, and I used to swing on it. The other branch was a little higher up so my older brother used to swing on that one.”

“No, there wasn’t an apple tree when we moved in here.”

“The house has changed a lot,” I said. “So has the whole neighbourhood. There used to be a lot more hedges between gardens then. My parents bought this house about 1949. I don’t remember what they paid for it but it was only a few thousand.”

The woman laughed. “A little more expensive these days.”

“Yes, I imagine it is,” I said. I patted the pillar. “We also had a wall here but it wasn’t this one. This looks new. Well, new-ish.”

“We like the wall,” said the woman. “It gives the place some originality.”

“Do you mind if I walk down the alley and take a look behind the house? My dad had what he called an ‘allotment’ back there where he used to grow potatoes.”

“No, not at all. I’ll come with you,” said the man as the woman went back into the house.

We walked down the alley to the back. There was no longer space for an allotment. There was a double garage instead. I turned and looked back at the house.

“There was a bush of wild raspberries at the end of the garden. And over there was a dilapidated old shed. Our dog, a Jack Russell Terrier, used to catch rats in there. It’s a nice house. You’ve done a good job. Seems familiar but somehow unfamiliar at the same time, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.”

As we walked back down the alley to the street, I said, “Can you still see the Crystal Palace tower from the front window on the top floor?”

“Yes, you can. Would you like to come inside and look at the house?”

“That would be wonderful,” I said. “As long as it doesn’t inconvenience you and your wife.”

“No, not at all.”

I undid my overcoat as the day had become warm. We went up the front steps and he opened the door. A springer spaniel greeted me. I peeked into the living room, where the young woman was sitting, reading the Financial Times, then made my way to the back of the house. It didn’t look the same. “This room,” I said, “used to be our dining room, but I think we



also had a television in it. I can remember watching a Test Match, must have been 1963. England-West Indies. Ah, you still have French windows at the back. New ones, I'm guessing, but at least you still have them. I always liked French windows."

"Yes, we like them. Would you like to go upstairs?"

"Yes, very much. Thank you."

The man and I went up the stairs, followed by the spaniel. Halfway up the stairs, I stopped and pointed ahead of me. "We used to have a painting there. It was 'The Laughing Cavalier'. I always thought it was the original but it probably wasn't considering we didn't take it with us to Canada." I laughed, and continued up the stairs.

"That was my sister's room. Over there was where my brother and I slept." I turned to the front of the house and went into the front room, which was the master bedroom. Over the roof of the house across the street, I could see the Crystal Palace tower.

"Oh my goodness, this really takes me back. My mum used to have a hand mirror and I would take it and reflect the sun off it down to the street and at the other houses. I don't know why I

remember that.” I started to cry, and I put my face in my hands.  
“I’m sorry. I’m just overwhelmed by nostalgia.”

“I understand completely,” said the man. “Why don’t you sit down?”

He took me by the elbow and moved me over to the end of the bed, and I sat, my head in my hands.

“I’ll give you a minute,” said the man. He retreated from the room and left the door to. The spaniel sat beside me, and I petted his head.

I looked up again at the Crystal Palace tower. Then I looked around the room. On one of the dressers was a camera and two jewelry boxes.

Easiest twenty thousand quid I ever made.



**Zhu Xiao Di**

is the author of *Thirty Years in a Red House* (memoir), *Tales of Judge Dee* (novel), *Leisure Thoughts on Idle Books* (essays in Chinese), and some poems lately at *Blue Unicorn*, *Eratio*, *Eunoia Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Beatnik Cowboy*, and *WestWard Quarterly*. He contributes to *Father: Famous Writers Celebrate the Bond Between Father and Child* (anthology).

# You Do It, And So Do I

You do it, and so do I

No one else can

Escape the routine

You do it, and so do I

Anyone else does

The same thing

You do it, and so do I

Everybody else

Has done similarly

You do it, and so do I

Why do we all do

The same thing

Nothing else but

The truth is that

We're all human

You do it, and so do I

Everyone does it  
Yet so differently

Why is that  
Because we are  
Humans alike

We can never copy  
Exactly one another  
Though you do it, and so do I

We all do the same  
Yet always differentially  
You do it, and so do I

## Pronouns

I've watched you my whole life  
You never follow my expectations  
Surprising me is your fun  
Absorbing the results is my fate

He behaves as if he doesn't know me  
Always doing what he wants  
Never considering my feelings  
Except when he needs my condolence

You don't need to worry about him  
He'll grow out of himself  
Becoming whoever he wants to be  
Or whom he must be nevertheless

I'm not talking about anyone else  
But myself and only myself  
Just the difference in using pronouns  
Has fooled you and me and him too

*(Note: This poem has been previously published in Eratio on 02/26/2024.)*





**Alan Brayne**

A retired teacher and lecturer from England now living in Malta. Recently self-published a book of poems, fiction and essays, *Digging for Water*. The

author of three novels set in Indonesia: *Jakarta Shadows*, *Kuta Bubbles*, and *Lombok Flames*. Interests include art, film noir, the I Ching, philosophy, walking.

Just recovered from working out how to set up his website: [alanbrayne.com](http://alanbrayne.com)

## I SING THE ARTIFICIAL

I sing the artificial

because, like an honest magician,  
it taps its wand, breathes a magic word,  
and a rabbit pops out of the hat.

The natural, in contrast,  
stares you in the eye as it shuffles its cups  
and insists you trust its surface  
while all the time it knows  
where the ball is hidden.

I sing the artificial

because truth is the surest trick  
of he who wishes to lie.

I mistrust a noonday sun  
which casts no shadows, or a humble man  
who isn't truly humble.

I sing the artificial

because it knows that bricks  
are mostly empty space  
and phantoms lurk in stairwells,

glimpses of see-through selves,  
and that depth is an illusion  
of our eyes.

I sing the artificial  
because it's a trashy glitterball  
spinning in a disco, a toy to entertain,  
a backcloth of mirrors and mist.  
The tinkling diamonds twist  
and the fireflies all switch on,  
one by one, off and on, as we dance  
and vacate our minds.

I sing the artificial  
because it doesn't exist,  
but there's no alternative.

## NICHE

I need a niche. Every artist needs a niche these days.

Take Mary Oliver. Almost every day one of her poems pops up in my Facebook feed. I've no idea why. She's much too upbeat for my taste.

Yet up she pops, with her spiritual cheer. Best of luck to her, I say. She did it well. She found her niche.

So what is mine? What else is in the catalogue?

Mmm, stiff competition. A person of colour. A woman. Lesbian/gay male. In the process of transitioning. Disabled. Hey, whoa there, a bit too depressing. Where's the last verse redemption?

My problem is, I'm a bit of everything. Sometimes I rhyme, sometimes I don't. Sometimes I argue, sometimes emote. I know it's out of fashion, but I even do a bit of philosophical musing. Ooh la la! Where's my USP?

How about being old? Could that be my USP? Coffin-dodger poetry, the Baby Boomer bard. Old is boring, though. It smells of urine. Who wants to read a poem and be reminded that they'll be old and stink of piss one day?

Quick, click on a link, get me outa here, guys!

Ah, an echo chamber. Phew, that was close. Hey, that's just what I was thinking, bud. Great minds, uh? Can I take this opportunity to tell all you guys that you're so unbelievably cool?

Maybe my niche could be having no niche. Kinda clever in a way, don't you think? Rather French. But some bastard probably got there first. Like half the poets in history.

A niche of having no niche. Hmm. Best of luck with that. Let's just call it brave.

# HUMAN ZOO

The dogs chained in their kennels,  
The birds locked in their cage,  
The humans in their human zoo  
Which they, not gods, have made.

The lions pace their prisons,  
The gladiators preen,  
The humans on the thirteenth floor  
Gawp at their TV screens.

The goat is safely tethered,  
The bears and boars all killed,  
The humans view the big bad wolf  
And swallow happy pills.

The soundless elevator  
Glides to a different jail,  
The humans in their metal box  
Touch ground on asphalt trails.

The lion's claws extracted,

The tethered goat gets slain,  
The humans in their human zoo  
Go one by one insane.

## CRACKING UP

She's cracking up, the witch:  
Trolls lurk in her bedroom,  
In her wardrobe, under her bed,  
They lie in wait.

She's cracking up, the witch:  
Although she looks so fragrant  
In her trailing chiffon scarf  
And marble face.

The moat around her castle  
Just got deeper,  
She stares at traitorous hills;  
The flowers in her vase  
Hold secret poison,  
False feminine wiles.

She's cracking up, the witch:  
The cost of fame and fortune,



Believing her own magic,

When magic fails.



