

[Alternate Route]



Issue 9 - Spring 2023

[Alternate Route]

#9, Spring 2023

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ISSN 2767-0317

Issue #9: Spring 2023 (Date of online publication: April 9th, 2023)

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This periodical proudly produced without institutional funding.

To submit, please see our website at <www.alternateroute.org>.

Online edition free-of-charge.

Patronage is gladly accepted at our Patreon: <www.patreon.com/alternateroute>.

Edited in California.

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Biographies precede the writer's and/or artist's pieces.

Typefaces

Cover text: **Esteban**, size variable and large

Internal text: Bell MT, size 11

Headers & footers: Calibri Light, size 11

Image captions: *Bell MT*, size 11, italicized

Footnotes: *Bell MT*, size 8, italicized

Bio text: **Calisto MT**, size 12

Thank you for reading!

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James Croal Jackson

works in film production. His most recent chapbooks are *Count Seeds With Me* (Ethel Zine & Micro-Press, 2022) and *Our Past Leaves* (Kelsay Books, 2021). Recent poems can be found in *Stirring*, *White Wall Review*, and *Vagabond City Lit*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (jamescroaljackson.com)

all my art

trying to keep you out of my mind in my room with the
locked door this too will wash away colors sacred I'd
dip my fingers in hiding holy underneath I promised
to take your cracked heart in mine I am not removed
from broken foundation the columns & wild dark
above all my art I just want you in my arms

Lance-Esque

My whole life has been a joke
just how I want it, laughing

whenever inappropriate
societally. Not to be a

monster, not to redefine
sadness, grief, frustration

already a kaleidoscope of
every temporary state

of water, how every
time the sky strikes

an unlucky roll of die
to fail I laugh instead.

Bro

Get out of my life with
your blue Trump signs. Don't
tell me what stakes
you stuck in your front lawn.
Come on. I know you're not
a boomer. You say we're at
a crossroads and I gaze
into the neighbor's yard—
used to be bushes concealing
every outside path. Now there's
someone on a lawnmower severing
the bonds of grass, in intervals,
each direction I look, each time
I visit home. And we comment
each new motor makes it harder
to reach each other. Mom's
neighbors want to beat the rain.
We just built this fire in the back
of my childhood home. These
bundles of sticks my mom gathers,
waiting for us to come home
some early October Saturday.
At my brother's first mention
of *herd immunity*, my sister
suggests we seek more kindling
in the tall grass. The air is
parched but we must keep
burning. Firewood left from Dad's
death we've already forgotten.
My brother says *we're gonna
lose all this country fought for—*

Dad survived World War II
only to shatter his ribs on a fire
hydrant sixty years later. Mom
would not let the coroner *dig*
into his carcass for an autopsy.
In his later years, Dad would keep
a hose beside our bonfires. Still,
we hunch over heat together,
burning hot dogs on forgotten
skewers. We dredge the past
again: a year after my father's death,
cooking hot dogs over walnut husks,
one of you said there could be
an industry for the timbered taste
coating the tenuous meat we've
shared over the years.

Joseph Lerner

's fiction and poetry have appeared in 100 WordStory, BlazeVOX, decomP, fictive dream, Gargoyle, matchbook, Mojave River Review, and elsewhere. In 1981 he founded, as editor/publisher, THE WASHINGTON (DC) BOOK REVIEW and, in 1992, FURIOUS FICTIONS, A MAGAZINE OF SHORT-SHORT STORIES, one of the first literary journals devoted exclusively to flash fiction. Joseph Lerner currently lives in Frostburg, MD.

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Black Egret

The trapper follows the creek, wet boots ringing with each step, the sky like an iridium clock. All traps are empty save one, the weir-net strung like jewelry across the creek's neck before it plunges toward the falls.

The trap glints, bulges, a large black egret entangled within. The trapper kneels, slowly extricates the creature, which nips at his hands, drawing blood. He carries it then drooping in his arms back home.

Night has fallen, his wife and children already in bed. Gruel for dinner, a bowl saved for him. Later, lying beside his wife, he hears the egret's cry from the shed where he's confined it, wing broken but on the mend.

His wife also hears and kisses her husband, and draws him nearer her breast. Toward dawn, careful not to wake her, he goes to the shed. The egret, quiet, stirs, lifts its long neck, catches his eye. It will live, he thinks, then shuts the door.

A black egret is a rare thing, saving it good luck. If today his traps are empty, he'll slaughter it, nonetheless. Again he follows the creek, the weir slick with exhalations, with a foul, ravenous light. The falls roar. He stands by the edge.

In the sky, a flock of egrets, hundreds, white and black, tumble, wings glinting, against the sun.

The Path to the River

Often I wake before dawn,
walk the path to the river,
passing others, also sleepless,
people I don't know but should,
neighbors, I think, or friends
lost for years. They wield
flashlights, hunker in small groups,
searching, or leaving tokens
for others to find. I feel like a guest
who's come giftless, hands pale
and smokey. At the river, I kneel,
wait for the waters to rise, reveal
their secret bounty. Instead, I see
my house reflected, small, distant.
From the bedroom window,
a shadow beckons.

Sameen Shakya

is a poet and writer based in Kathmandu, Nepal.

His poems have been published in the following
magazines: Havik, The Pittsburger, WINK: Writers In
The Know, Teach Writer, and W-Poesis.

Long Black Veil

Life is powerful, and it is a force.
I know, because the sage told me so,
And it whispers to us that live it. So why
Am I enchanted by death? Is it because
She visits wearing a long black veil,
Staring from a distance?

I first caught her when I was making love
In the dark. She was out the window
Staring in, as I later learnt was her habit.
I excused myself after my lover slept
And made my way outside, Death was further still
And though I beckoned, she kept her distance.

Since then we've become friends almost,
Though we speak in silences. I think
Death is jealous of life. Death is alive.
I think the veil hides curious eyes that glisten
At each wonderful sight, or hides tears cried
Because of that uncrossable distance

Between her and life. She is, after all, a tourist.
And I'm a local who has taken a liking to her.
I can show her the sights, teach her a slang or two,
But she'll never be comfortable. She has to leave
Eventually. Life whispers at her to. She told me.
It's why she's mindful of the distance.

Hey Joe

Would you be so kind to let me
Love you from behind? I don't
Dare look at your eyes. I fear
Your hate may leave me blind.

You say you're driven by desires
That disgust you. There's a demon
Deep inside you. Driving you. Yes.
Yes. That's why you come to me

Because I can tame them. Though
It's less taming, that's my aim. Still,
I dare not turn you away. The hate
Makes love much more addictive.

Though, I know this is not love. I am
Not so naive. You are confused. I am
Quite aware of my role, you see, I am
The first of a long list of mistakes.

The Singer (a.k.a The Folksinger)

Under my grandfather's bed I hid
For no reason other than youth's whimsy, while he,
The only man who looked at me without a brow raised,
Listened to folk songs in a language he barely used, nodding along.
And though I didn't care for it, I could feel
The songs move my body by the motion of my right foot
Swaying a bit in the air, hitting the back of the mattress.

Years later, at a farmer's market, against my will,
I heard a familiar tune coming from the speaker above
One of the vegetable stands, and I asked the vendor, who
Shrugged her shoulders, if she knew what the song was.
Nonetheless, I looked up some of the words I heard, and
I was shocked reading the lyrics, learning that the song
Was not only dark, but perverted, and my jaw dropped.

And that was that. I felt I knew my grandfather more,
But questioned whether I needed to. Until one day,
The weight of the world started straining my neck. I felt
Like Atlas except not even a fraction as strong. Suddenly,
I crawled under my bed, tossed my phone away,
Like a bad habit, and the song started to play, while
The ghost of my grandfather sat across from me and nodded along.

John Neal

lives and writes in Southern Spain.

Pedro and the Baby Jesus

Pedro got drunk the day before Christmas Eve. He didn't plan on drinking so much as he wasn't a drinking man. He also didn't plan on Maria leaving him.

She had left a note on the kitchen counter. It said she couldn't stay with him any longer. Goodbye. That was all.

Pedro suspected she wasn't happy and there was something amiss. He didn't realize how unhappy she was. He supposed it was his fault. And now she was gone. He figured she had gone to her mother's place. He wasn't sure he wanted to look for her. He didn't have anything else to do so he drank.

He started with the beer in the refrigerator and the little bit of wine at the bottom of a bottle he usually drank from with dinner. When that was gone, he thought about going to the store to pick up more beer or something stronger. He went to a bar a couple streets over instead.

It was past noon when he walked in the Bar Quixote. The place was busy with the early lunch and tapas crowd, and he found an unoccupied stool at the counter. José, the owner, poured him a beer from the tap.

"I heard about Maria," he said as he set the beer on the counter. "I'm sorry."

Pedro was surprised but not really. They lived in a small town with little white houses in the hills above the coast and one's business quickly became everyone's business. Everyone in town probably knew Maria was going to leave him well before he did.

Pedro nodded and sipped his beer in silence and alone with his thoughts. He replayed twelve years of marriage and tried to figure out where he went so wrong that Maria felt she had to leave him. He went to work and he came home. That was it.

After a couple of beers, he paid and stood to stretch his legs. His head felt light, and his stomach felt heavy from the beer.

"*Feliz navidad,*" said José.

Pedro waved and mumbled something in reply.

He walked down a shady cobblestone street that was cool and damp. The stone walls of the old houses crowded the narrow street and smelled of mildew. Pedro walked slowly with his

hands in his pockets down the middle of the street, watching the few paces in front of him so he wouldn't trip on the uneven stones that made up the road.

The street emptied out into a large square. The town hall, a red and white brick building with its clock tower was at one end. The church, yellow and white, at the other. A life size nativity scene was in the middle of the square, enclosed in a hip-high wooden fence.

Pedro walked past it and stopped. He looked at the figures of Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and the baby Jesus in a basket. The baby Jesus was larger than a real newborn would be. Its eyes were open and blue, and its head was covered with golden blond hair.

He and Maria took an evening walk through the plaza a few nights ago. It got dark early, and the plaza was filled with a glow from the wrought iron street lamps and the white Christmas lights strung overhead. The few cafés and restaurants in the plaza were bustling and children were running and playing in the square. The air smelled of roasting chestnuts and the sharp cold of winter.

"Look at the baby Jesus," said Maria. "He's beautiful."

Pedro looked. It was the same baby Jesus as every year and he didn't think it looked beautiful. It didn't look real to him.

Standing now in the light of day, Pedro looked at the baby Jesus. It still didn't look beautiful to him.

He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat, put his head down and continued walking. He stopped at a bar and ordered gin. It was cold and sweet and went down easy. He ordered another one. And then another.

By the time he was done drinking gin he felt hungry. He stopped at a *panaderia* and bought a chorizo sandwich and a can of beer. He walked to the park and sat on an iron bench. The bench was frigid and the cold seeped through his clothes and into his bottom and his legs. The gin was doing its job and he didn't notice the cold so much as he ate the sandwich and drank the beer.

The food felt good in his stomach and took some of the drunkenness out of his head. He got up, left the plastic wrapper and the empty beer can on the bench. A gust of wind knocked the can over and sent the wrapper spiraling into the air. He watched the plastic wrapper fly and land a few meters away and consid-

ered picking it up. He left it where it lay, shoved his hands in his pocket and walked to the next café.

It was the hour people came out for coffee and sweets. Waiters hustled about with trays of coffee and hot milk for cocoa. Pedro sat at the counter and drank whisky. The whisky was warm and stung his throat. He drank it slowly and tried to think about Maria and why she left him. His thoughts kept coming back to the baby Jesus in the plaza. That stupid looking baby Jesus.

He drank his whisky and ordered another. And another. Eventually he lost count and wasn't aware of the time until he noticed the café was empty and the staff were cleaning up.

"Are you all right, Pedro?" asked the girl who worked behind the bar. He thought her name was Manoli or Marta. She was maybe six or seven years younger, with dirty blonde hair pulled into a tight ponytail. He admired how the buttons of her white shirt strained at her breasts when she wiped the bar counter with a yellow cloth.

"Yes, fine, thank you. Can I get another one?" His voice felt heavy coming out of his mouth.

"We're going to close."

"Oh. What time is it?"

He pulled his coat sleeve back to look at his watch. He wasn't wearing one.

"It's past eleven."

"Oh. I should be going then."

He slowly got to his feet. He held on to the bar counter until he felt steady.

"I'm sorry about Maria," said the girl. She looked at Pedro with sorrowful brown eyes. He thought about asking her to have a drink with him. Instead, he nodded and tapped his knuckles against the counter.

"Good night, -." He was going to say the girl's name but he couldn't remember it so it let the phrase hang.

Pedro stood in the street a moment on wobbly legs and let the cold night air cut through his clothes and shock his system. He stood with his eyes closed and his face upturned to the cold light from a streetlamp, and felt the frigid air and damp seep into his body. After a moment he started to walk home.

The way home took him to the plaza. He stopped in front of the nativity and stared at the baby Jesus in the manger. That stupid baby Jesus that Maria thought was so beautiful.

Pedro swung one leg over the low wooden fence and swung the other leg over. He tripped on an electrical cable under the hay-covered floor and fell on his face.

“Me cago en to’,” he swore. He got to his hands and knees and looked directly into the smiling face of the baby Jesus. *“Me cago en to’.”*

Pedro stood up on shaky legs and looked around him. The cafés and restaurants were closed. The plaza was empty. He leaned over the baby Jesus and smacked the wooden figure on the head. There was a hollow thump and it rattled in its wooden cradle.

He laughed. The baby Jesus stared up at him with its unblinking blue eyes and cherubic smile.

“You like that, eh?” he said and smacked it again, and laughed even harder.

It was late when Pedro woke the next morning. Winter sunlight, cold and damp, came in through the window. He hadn’t rolled down the shutter blinds and he squinted at the light. He was on top of the blankets on his side of the bed, still dressed in yesterday’s clothes. He felt sick.

Pedro looked at the side of the bed where Maria slept. It was empty and for the first time he felt sad that she was gone. The last time he came home drunk, which was a long time ago, she made him strong coffee and silently watched him while he sipped it from the kitchen table. She wasn’t mad at him. Maybe she was disappointed. He wasn’t sure.

He got up and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. He stopped in the doorway and stared at the baby Jesus lying on top of the kitchen table.

There was a commotion in the street outside the kitchen window. Pedro stood next to the window and just out of view.

“Can you believe it? Some scoundrel stole the baby Jesus from the manger. Who could do such a thing? Who could do such a thing?”

“Did the police look at the surveillance cameras?”

“They don’t work. They haven’t worked ever since they were put in years ago. It cost too much money to make them work, so the mayor keeps them there to scare off the kids.”

“That didn’t work.”

“Who could such a thing? And on Christmas Eve?”

Pedro stepped away from the window. He felt sick in his stomach and it wasn't because of the alcohol. He tried to remember how he came home with the baby Jesus. He couldn't.

But it didn't matter because there it was on his kitchen table smiling up at him.

He found a blanket in the hall closet and tossed it over the figure. He stared at the bundle and tried to think of what to do next.

He wanted to return the figure to the manger but the plaza would certainly be crowded. He considered leaving it in a trash bin far from his house. Someone could still spot him.

He went back to the hall closet and rummaged through the stacks of shoe boxes on the floor. There were so many shoe boxes. Most were empty and some had shoes no one had worn in years. Maria never threw them away. The one he was looking for was heavy and located on the bottom and far in the back. It contained his few tools to do small repairs around the house. He returned to the kitchen with a hammer.

He stood in front of the shape of the baby Jesus covered under the blanket and raised the hammer high over his head, ready to bring it down with all his force and smash the figure to small pieces he could then put into a bag and throw away. It was a stupid wooden figure nobody would miss, and the town could buy another one.

He held the hammer high a moment and slowly lowered it to his side. He let the hammer drop to the tiled floor with a sharp thud. The tile cracked and he didn't care.

Pedro pulled the blanket off from the baby Jesus and let it, too, fall to the floor in a soft heap. Tears welled up in his eyes and he crumpled to his knees. His hands reached above his head and found the feet of the baby Jesus at the edge of the table. He held on to the tiny cold wooden feet and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Maria."

The End

Janis Butler Holm

served as Associate Editor for Wide Angle, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.



Alternative Aliens

S.F. Wright

lives and teaches in New Jersey. His work has appeared in Hobart, X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine, and Elm Leaves Journal, among other places. His short story collection, *The English Teacher*, is forthcoming from Cerasus Poetry, and his website is sfwrightwriter.com.

My London Hotel

My London hotel
Stays in my mind to this day:
Cigarettes and rain.

Madisen Bellon

is a poetry and fiction writer based in Pittsburgh.

She enjoys writing about nature, especially birds, and religious poetry. She is currently the Editor-in-chief for Cosmic Daffodil Journal.

Lucifer Dances Down

Lucifer is cast out from heaven,
and he dances his way down
from pristine meringue clouds
arms outstretched, reaching
outwards to the blue songbird sky
the wind sings back to him, humming
and hugging him, enveloping
her airy kiss around him as they
waltz down from heaven.

And when Lucifer opens his mouth
to breathe—no scream or cry lurks within
his throat and chest that threatens to bubble up,
that threatened to be expunged—

no.

he exhales.

his worries and insurmountable heartache
are cast out from heaven, too
so the light bringer creates a new world
blossoming, erupting, booming
pulsing beneath his feet
as he finishes his dance, stepping down
to this virgin world where temptation and desires
can freely roam.

Day to Night

A blue jay caws among pines and poplars,
cumulonimbus clouds stroll over the sun,
ferns and goldenrods sway alongside the breeze,
a strawberry moon lingers on the horizon.

Cumulonimbus clouds mask the sun's rays,
a log cabin's porchlight flickers like static.
The strawberry moon lingers from the horizon,
two red foxes prowl an old hiking path.

The log cabin's porchlight flickers like static,
blue jays no longer caw among pines and poplars.
Two red foxes prowl an old hiking path,
ferns and goldenrods sway against night's breeze.

The American Goldfinch

wind surfing lemon
beaks full of thistles and weeds
sing *per-chick-o-ree*

meticulous nests
of spiderwebs and plant down
wind shakes the tree branch

a storm approaches
mother finch shelters her chicks
father flees the nest

thick rain-sheets cascade
droplets bounce off tree leaves
lightning then thunder

midnight to sunlight
peonies are plump with dew
finch chicks *chirp, chirp, chirp*

grass beds sopping wet
father finch returns with seeds
robins sing below

Tom Ball

has published novels, novellas, short stories and
flash in 29 publications.

tomballbooks.com

Life on Moon Io

I, Ralph, said to Betty Jo, "Our World (Moon Io) is in crisis. Earth has cut us off from trade and communications and we can't survive without them. She replied, "It will be difficult, but we will manage." I asked her, "Why don't we just give into them and pay the 40% head tax?" She said, "One of the main reasons we came to Io, was to get away from Earth and its dirty politics. We need to call their bluff!" I said, "But we are only 70,000 in number. Earth doesn't need our money. They are just being difficult." She replied, "We are an independent nation, and these are just growing pains. We'll be better off without Earth in the long run." I told her, "Many of our citizens are addicted to Earth drugs and entertainment and will probably rebel against our government. We can't risk losing everything." She said, "In the past many people fought in wars in order to be free. And we don't need to die, we just need to strike out on our own." I replied, "Your words are inspirational and of course you are the President (and I was VP); it's your decision. But I fear Earth might even attack us, for which we have no defenses." She said, "For what it's worth the President of the UW (United Worlds) has assured me there'd be no such attack." So, I went along with her, and we declared Io to be totally independent from Earth.

The immediate result was 50,000 new freedom-seeking immigrants came to Io, in the first year of the "rebellion." We were hard pressed to accommodate them, but they boosted our economy, and many brought useful skills which we had relied on Earth for, like producing drugs and being sex workers and being able to manufacture spare parts for our computers to run our electrical grid and personal computers. And Earth couldn't agree amongst the UW members what to do with us, so they did nothing except cut us off from aid and other materials. But I had to admit, we were stronger for it, in the end, and were truly independent, now, one year later. And many of our new immigrants were artists of one kind or another. The bards sang new songs of freedom and writers wrote about the new milieu here on Io. They portrayed Io, as being the first truly free colony in the Solar System and said it was freer than any Earth city.

Betty Jo and I had few laws and left the people to be as free as possible.

One of the writers had written, “Free Io.” It was about how people here were respectful of one another and seldom interfered with another’s freedom. It was a true Utopia, she wrote. And she encouraged great thinkers to come and join us. Above all we needed scientists, she wrote. Of course, some on Earth worried about a brain drain, but there were still plenty of intellectuals on Earth, with its pleasures. But we found ourselves in a position to renew trade and commerce with Earth, and it became reality.

Another writer wrote a fictional account about a starving writer on Earth who gets accepted by our university on Io on a scholarship. And finds a whole new World, here. Here was a place where her writing would not go unnoticed. Unlike Old Earth, our colony looked for and celebrated talent in all its forms. And this caused Earth to search hard for beauty and talent and so rectified the situation, universally. And Earth now actively tried to breed for intellectual brilliance, as we did on Io. Our best intellects had now hundreds of children, each. That included Betty Jo and me.

And another writer wrote, “Life Without AI,” which was about how we managed to run our World of Io, without AI. And how people here all felt useful whereas on Earth machines were now running things. But most Earthlings were overjoyed that they didn’t need to work and claimed to be totally free. But those on Io, had a good pioneering work ethic and figured Earth was decadent and the people were all self-indulgent. Anyway, the book hypothesized other colonies in Space all would follow Earth and its AI, so Io became the only nation to ban AI and millions would want to come here as refugees. However, people elsewhere would realize they were all superfluous and useless and would be full of ennui.

Still another writer, wrote, “Angry Io,” how the people of Io were angry at the state of Space and Earth. And felt that non-Io people were sell outs to debauched pleasures. The protagonist of the story recruits other angry people on Earth and he gets elected President of the UW (United Worlds) and tries to roll back AI, but the AI fights back and kill him and his band of angry people.

Another writer authored, “A Compendium of Io Writing.” This work included summaries of 200 books written by Io

writers. Most of the books were about old-fashioned romance and romantic comedies and also about the tragedy that is modern society.

All in all, we put a brave face under difficult circumstances. But life went on.

Dave Larsen

graduated from the University of Washington with degrees in English Literature and Business Administration. After serving two years in the Marine Corps, he began a 28 year career in the Finance Department of The Boeing Company. David continues to run the winery that he founded 31 years ago and is married with three children.

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Jarhead Memoir

When we were off duty in the Marine Corps drinking was our favorite pastime. During the week, we mostly stayed on base and went to the NCO club that was within walking distance of our barracks. On Friday nights and weekends, we would often go to LA or to a fellow Marine's bungalow in Oceanside, Ca.

A friend and fellow Marine, Wayne, lived off base in the bungalow with his wife Becky. It was a popular gathering place for us because it was very close to our barracks at Camp Pendleton and right across the street from the Pacific Ocean. From the bungalow we could walk to the beach, zip down to the night clubs in Tijuana for a few hours or buy some booze and stay there to party.

I would crave alcohol, if I hadn't had anything to drink for several days. So, one Saturday afternoon, I went to the bungalow by myself to see Wayne and drink some beer. It was the first time I had gone there without my other friends. Becky answered the door and told me that Wayne was staying on base for the next week while on guard duty. My memory is vague on how Becky and I then decided to go bowling. It's not something I would have proposed, so it must have been Becky's idea. We drove to the bowling alley in my old VW Beetle to find that all the lanes were full. After we returned to the bungalow, we realized it was late enough in the day to go watch a drive-in movie.

Because I did not have a romantic interest in Becky and was inexperienced in relating to girls, any thought of us being together as improper did not even occur to me. She was nothing fancy, and no great beauty but did have an attractive sweetness to her personality. During the movie, I thought I sensed an increasingly intimate tone to Becky's comments but, if she was sending me any cues, I was not picking up on them.

After the movie, I drove Becky back to her bungalow where she invited me inside. We sat down on her little couch and began discussing the movie. Becky told me that I looked like the lead actor in the movie. Rather than taking that as a compliment or as flirting, I wondered out loud what it was about the star that we had in common? Becky explained it was our build and how we carried ourselves. I considered that and was flattered that I looked like a movie star.

Becky then offered to give me a backrub. I decided it would be ok because Becky had given several of us backrubs during the last party in her bungalow and right in front of Wayne. I melted under the feeling of a woman's fingers kneading into the muscles of my neck, shoulders, and back. Seeing this, Becky suggested we move over to the bed. I realized that was a big step but just wanted her to keep up with the massage. After we got on the bed, Becky went into the bathroom briefly, returned in her negligee, and guided me under the sheets beside her. Everything happened so seamlessly that I just kept following her lead. Becky knew just what to do and I spent the night.

The next morning, we were awakened by a knock on the door. Becky said, "Oh my God. I am supposed to watch our neighbor's kid today!" The bungalow was only one room with the bed located just inside the door. I quickly told Becky in a whisper to not answer the door. More knocking but louder this time. I remembered my car was parked right outside the door. So, when the neighbor knocked even louder, I suspected she was letting us know that she was also objecting to my presence. The knocking became pounding and continued for so long that I thought the neighbor would not stop until we answered the door. But she finally went away.

Before I could make my getaway, Becky's friend, Rachael, came over to visit. Rachael was in her bikini and was a knockout. At that time, we Jarheads would rate girls from one to ten, as in the movie "Ten" starring Bo Derek. Rachael was a "Ten" and had the added appeal of lacking the snooty air of girls who know they are hot. Becky told me Rachael was married and had hooked up with another Marine while her husband was also away on guard duty. I thought that was quite a coincidence. Now, I think Becky was following Rachael's lead by wooing me and had designs on us becoming a party of three.

Rachael added another layer of intrigue to the situation that kept me ensnared. I was like a character in a soap opera trapped in the role of the protagonist in this drama. The girls decided we should all go to the beach, and I followed them like a puppy. Rachael had a free-spirited air that made being with her easy and she seemed to be making herself available to me. In a moment of twisted morals and reasoning though, I decided to hold back because she had already hooked up with another Jarhead and I was with Becky. But if they were both cheating on their husbands and I was in the middle of it all, why hold back?

After we tired of sunning on the beach, we went back to the bungalow, ate some ice cream, and I asked Becky if she had any beer. The beer did not mix well with the ice cream and the whole concoction decided it wanted out of my stomach. I made it to the bathroom in time and that broke the spell the girls had on me to the point that I could better size up the situation. I decided to leave and returned to the base.

I decided not to mention the incident to any of my Marine friends because it could get back to Wayne. But they all loved to brag about any encounter they had with girls and that same urge for me to share what happened was too strong. It was one of those moments when I knew I should have kept my mouth shut and immediately regretted it when I did not. While four of us were in my car, I blurted out of the blue that Becky had seduced me last weekend.

I thought making Becky the aggressor relieved me of some responsibility. I expected the usual whoops, hollers, and questions for more details. But there was no response, only silence. Maybe they were waiting for me to say more, to explain myself. My mind raced to interpret their reaction. Disapproval? That must be it. The fact that Becky initiated our night together did not seem to matter to them. I did not know what to say, so I said nothing more. Moments later we arrived at our barracks and piled out of the car in silence. The incident was never mentioned again.

Their reaction shocked me into realizing the magnitude of my situation and the possible consequences. I was not concerned about my friends betraying me by telling Wayne because I felt they were closer to me. But I felt bad about characterizing the incident as a conquest that I needed to share with them when I should not have allowed it to happen. This was something that could haunt me, could label me as a kind of traitor to a fellow Marine. I was feeling more like a selfish participant than an innocent actor in the affair. The stupidity of being so oblivious to the potential consequences and the shame of cheating on a friend kept me from ever again telling anybody else about my misdeeds until I found a sympathetic ear in a philandering friend a couple years ago.

My attention then turned to Becky. She and Wayne had a volatile relationship. They were Texas rednecks and would get into ugly arguments during our parties in their bungalow and say hurtful things to each other. I worried that Becky would

mention her night with me to hurt Wayne. I did not want our fling to add to the troubles in their marriage, but a bigger concern was Wayne getting his revenge. He was built like a strapping farm boy and, like the rest of us Jarheads, knew how to fight. I could see from how he related to Becky that he had a bad temper and a short fuse. He would not bother thinking through his reaction, which would be to either shoot me or kick my ass all over Oceanside. And Rachael or Becky's neighbor, who both knew I spent the night, could spread the word. The odds were stacked against me. I felt doomed.

I did not have to worry long though. Immediately after Wayne finished guard duty, he was transferred to Viet Nam. None of us ever saw Wayne or Becky again.

George Freek

's poem "Enigmatic Variations" is currently nominated for Best of the Net. His poem "Night Thoughts" is also nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His collection " Melancholia" is published by Red Wolf Editions.

A New Season

The days grow shorter.
I look at distant clouds.
They'll soon be overhead,
bringing seasonal snow.
The trees have lost
their leaves, as if
time was a fatal disease.
Squirrels madly
gather food for winter.
Their life becomes precarious.
Do they look at the sky
and think about time?
When I watch them,
if they look at me,
are their thoughts
as meaningless as mine?

Message to My Friend

A breeze rustles the leaves
at the edge of the bay.
The moon and stars make night
almost as clear as day.
On the lake a loon calls.
The lake is as calm as a desert.
But tonight strong winds
will blow. Waves will beat
like enraged fists against
the rocks. This anger
is as real than the calm.
My friend, you say
we should look for the good.
I watch a fat worm,
struggle through wet grass,
as thoughtless as the tree
where a robin awaits his
coming meal. Which
of them could be you,
and which could be me?

Near the Black River

A goose floats on the river,
so near I can almost touch him.
In an ugly mood, he honks at me.
On this wind-blown day,
Leaves fall,
denuding the trees.
I can't see that wind,
but I can feel its breeze.
Can we only know
what we see?
Death makes life a mystery.
Clouds float past,
and disappear, as if
they were never here.
The river drifts erratically,
until it is swallowed
by an unheeding sea.
I gaze into the river,
and I see
a distorted reflection of me.

Peter J. Dellolio

Born 1956 New York City. Went to Nazareth High School and New York University. Graduated 1978: BA Cinema Studies; BFA Film Production. Wrote and directed various short films, including James Joyce's short story Counterparts which he adapted into a screenplay. Counterparts was screened at national and international film festivals. A freelance writer, Peter has published many 250-1000 word articles on the arts, film, dance, sculpture, architecture, and culture, as well as fiction, poetry, one-act plays, and critical essays on art, film, and photography. Poetry collections "A Box Of Crazy Toys" published 2018 by Xenos Books/Chelsea Editions and "Bloodstream Is An Illusion Of Rubies Counting Fireplaces" published February 2023 by Cyberwit/Rochak Publishing. He is working on a critical study of Alfred Hitchcock, Hitchcock's Cinematic World: Shocks of Perception and the Collapse of the Rational. Chapter excerpts have appeared in The Midwest Quarterly, Literature/Film Quarterly, Kinema, Flickhead, and North Dakota Quarterly since 2006.

His poetry and fiction have appeared in various literary magazines, including Antenna, Aero-Sun Times, Bogus Review, Pen-Dec Press, Both Sides Now, Cross Cultural Communications/Bridging The Waters Volume II, and The Mascara Literary Review. Dramatika Press published a volume of his one-act plays in 1983. One of these, The Seeker, appeared in an issue of Collages & Bricolages. Peter was a contributing editor for NYArts Magazine, writing art and film reviews. He authored monographs on several new artists as well. He was co-publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Artscape2000, a prestigious, award-winning art review e-zine. He has also taught poetry and art for LEAP. He is an artist himself.

<https://www.saatchiart.com/peterdellolio.com>.

His paintings and 3D works offer abstract images of famous people in all walks of life who have died tragically at a young age. He lives in Brooklyn.



Famine and Fame



Childhood



6 to 3 Decision

William Ogden Haynes

is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published nine collections of poetry (Points of Interest, Uncommon Pursuits, Remnants, Stories in Stained Glass, Carvings, Going South, Contemplations, Time on My Hands and The Works) and one book of short stories (Youthful Indiscretions) all available on Amazon.com. Over 200 of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and his work is frequently anthologized.
<http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>

Field Trip

The oceanfront park is just beginning to awaken,
between the sun rising over the low-domed hills,
and the lapping waves of the Pacific Ocean. Bees

hover near the white throats of daffodils and somewhere
a boat creaks against a dock. There is an arbor with
vines waterfalling down its lattice and the ghost of

spray from underground sprinklers is almost unseen,
as it blends with the air like breath. A lanyard holding
an American flag produces a rhythmic metallic clink

as it hits the aluminum flagpole in the breeze. A bus
from the VA hospital pulls into the parking lot carrying
volunteers from the local VFW in their monogrammed

ball caps and shirts. Five disabled-veterans in wheelchairs
exit the bus on a lift that whirrs them to the ground. The
VFW volunteers raise the veterans from their chairs,

slow-dancing them to park benches, where they can escape
the stigma of the wheelchairs and feel like men again. The
volunteers open coolers of ice-cold beer to share with all.

Most of the time, the veterans are ignored as people pass by
with their children and dogs, not noticing that an entire life
is sitting there on a bench. The passersby are not aware, nor

do they care, that these men led a life of sacrifice. A life that
culminates with anonymity, and the pleasure of sitting on a
park
bench drinking beer on a sunny day, legs dangling, frail as
twigs.

Fetish

He awakens to the trembling snap of curtains
by the open window. He turns sleepily to watch
the noisy flipping of metal numbers on an old
clock radio with an unset alarm. A Japanese fan

on the table by the window, flirts with the flame
of the candle he forgot to blow out before he went
to bed; A candle that used to taper, but now is mostly
a pile of wax drippings. There is a court jester in the

corner, a five-foot doll he bought from a flea market
in San Antonio because it wore fancy red shoes that
curled up at the toes. He says he will get rid of the
doll because he thinks it laughs at him. He has to be

at the shoe store at eight o'clock, but he'll never make
it. The boss told him one more late day and he is fired.
Now he thinks of all the things he will miss. The sweet
smell of unworn leather shoes, sitting on a low stool

in front of a beautiful woman looking up her dress.
He'll miss holding her ankle, gently slipping her foot
into the upper, like a couple having intercourse. Some,
like the court jester doll and his psychiatrist, would

say he has a fetish for women's feet, but what do they
know? He will need another job and it must be in a
shoe store. Technology will never replace the shoe
clerk. After all, we will soon travel to Mars, while

women on Earth will still be putting on their shoes one
foot at a time. The clock radio shows nine o'clock, the
candle flame goes out, the Japanese fan is lightly singed,
and the jester's cap and bells softly jingle in the corner.

Velvet Curtain

I shared the subway with a pretty young girl who said she was headed for the nightclubs to have some fun on a Saturday evening.

She had cherry-painted lips, tattoos, piercings and a short leather skirt. For some reason, even though I was a stranger,

she said this was her first night out since her boyfriend had dumped her. She told how she had been depressed for months

after losing him. And then she said the strangest thing. She said, “*Tonight I’m going to get back to normal. You know,*

like those beautiful women savn in half by a magician, only to emerge whole again, from behind a thick velvet curtain.”

Kate Dargan

is from Long Island, New York. She graduated from Miami University in 2022, and her fiction has been published by Cathartic Literary Magazine, Happy Captive Magazine, and White Wall Review. She is attending Hofstra Law School in Fall 2023.

Small House

I don't remember cars. Unless I really like the person driving them. I remember faces but forget names if their faces are forgettable. I notice houses. Each one has a different feeling when you first walk in.

Elliot's was a little white house on Brewster Street. He lived there for two years but I had only lived on Brewster Street for one; I was two stop signs away. I never liked Elliot but I didn't really hate him either. We would go to his place after frat parties, play drinking games in a fluorescent living room, on a sad wooden table. His roommate, Antonio, had to drink beer from my belly button once. I lifted my shirt and laid down on the cold floor tile. It was a dare and everyone watched.

Four people lived in that house: Elliot, Antonio, Stan, and some other guy I had never met. They never went out but always hosted the afterparty for those who did. Their house reeked of cheap weed and dirty water. Sometimes I would walk home from the library late, around 1am, and they'd all be in that living room, on the same gray couch. They were unmotivated and sketchy, and I heard they did a lot of shrooms and worse, but something about them felt very pretentious to me.

My friend Olivia was in lust with Elliot for a long time. She never said it, but you could tell. I told her that his head was shaped like a turtle's. He posted long life updates on his snapchat story and when I read them, I thought, "as if anyone cares". He took her virginity and apparently the sex was really good. Good sex means something different to everyone. I assumed that their's was very rough.

They hooked up on and off for about a year and I knew why it stung so badly for Olivia. She was the type of girl that made you feel very special when you talked to her. And you

knew she made everyone else feel special too, but still, you hoped that you were somehow different. She had dark black hair and porcelain white skin, with drawn on eyebrows. She was an emo girl from Croatia and that made you think of a Russian prostitute. Elliot never fell for it. Olivia brought her roommate to one of their parties and he got hooked on the roommate instead. Later that night, Olivia went for a walk in the park, and put Antonio, Elliot's best friend, inside her small pink mouth.

The house was an enlarged ice cube; an interrogation room in Law and Order. I went over there on a Thursday, after Figi's Fire and Ice night. I was wearing a red tube top and tight red skirt. I was a burning flame. Olivia's dare card said she had to makeout with someone, and Elliot said, "why don't you just make out with me." They aggressively shoved their tongues down each other's throats, and we all watched. I got the feeling that I was the only one there who ever slept.

Every time the music stopped, I felt the room shrink. I saw the whites of their eyes when the lighting went dark. My clothing started to feel invisible, so I took my denim jacket and I left. The next morning, I saw blue and red flashing lights by their house. I'm not sure who the cops were there for or why. I hoped that Olivia was at least okay. We weren't close but she made me feel like we were. She once told me that she felt like Frankenstein, starved from human affection and love. I don't know what became of her. I avoid small houses and people who taste like warnings.

Januário Esteves

Caelum

We had predicted the memory revisited through
of a visualization that brought us to this world now
in new biological tissues that allow us to
live on the arid surface that welcomes us in Caeli
in a long summer of ten years and so many of winter
we traveled the great craters that exhale acids
spongy dunes next to lakes of liquid metal
that boils in multicolored spurts of lit odor
and we planned to terraform the vast surrounding area
in a heliotropic garden of sunflowers in circadian rhythm
drawing energy from the white mother star that gushes its
wind over the cocoons we brought to life as it happens
on the biological clock parallel to the heyday of the two moons
we recreated the first materialized impulse in vitro
in the critical reasoning of our education, we unveil
the sparkling object that falls in love with our desire.

Libra

The pure young woman was like a blooming rose, hot and silky
vehement and sad, sweet and bitter seeking the sun in a metaphase
of emotions in a series of scales next to the pillar of memory, at the root
of tenderness, of loving justice of lucid temperance that exudes
his sighs for the chaos that rose in exasperated existence
floating in a personal orbit that only she executes, only she witnesses
disgusted with the evil and brutality of humanity, she is alone
watching the twilight that slowly fades in your memory
in an approach halo holding its rays like a torch
she looks for the symbol of just perfection at the limit of temperance
in the precession of the equinoxes she exhales her sweet breath in the dirty
mantle of the night that covers the inhabited areas illuminating
the agency, holding the world's offspring with invisible rays
in succession continues the mornings that unfold in the spell.

Mitchell G. Roshannon

graduated in 2019 from Susquehanna University where he studied English Literature and Creative Writing. Since then, he has happily spent his time working in the amusements industry and writing whenever time and passion allows. He lives in Minersville, Pennsylvania.

How do I say...

I love you so violently
coffee dates are experienced
through cosmic awe;
horrifying yet beautiful

my loyalty so strong I would
not only move mountains but
turn myself to ash in
sacrificial immolation if
all you did was ask...

I would skydive
without a parachute
I would watch saints fry
if it meant a single touch...
a single word
a momentary glance.

I would experience all
the world's nuclear bombs
detonating at once
if only you would notice me...

preferably without sounding insane,
or worse...
needy.

Please advise.

Sean O'Leary



Neon Signs Morning Saigon

Juanita Rey

is a Dominican poet who has been in this country
five years. Her work has been published in Mixed Mag,
The Mantle and The Art Of Everyone.

A Strange Initiation

We gathered outside the grimy door
to the boy's bathroom,
My friend and a guy had snuck in together.
His posse pressed against the side wall,
listening and giggling.
She was only half-willing.
The other half was the three of us,
wondering if we should go get a teacher.

It was quieter in there than I imagined.
None of the grunting and groaning
of the love scenes in the movies
we sometimes snuck into.
No pleading. No cries of "rape."
Just some laughter after ten minutes or so,
hers as well as his.

They emerged soon after,
holding hands,
a little disheveled,
but no tear to her blouse,
no shame in either of their faces,
just relief in hers.

"I've never seen a boy's room before,"
was all she said.
The news from home is that
these days she cleans them.

Happening

It's happening.
The love that has a hard time
with what it sees in the mirror
encompasses a guy
I didn't know a month ago.

In his presence,
I'm a fizzed-up bottle of soda
that's lid is popped.
I'm all over his shirt and mine.
I'm a puddle on the floor.

And he has my breath doing stuff
that's not breathing,
while my heart's into handstands
when it should be pumping blood.

Typical of my life.
Nothing lasts.
It merely happens.

My Introduction to Fairyland

I wanted the book to be true,
for my father to be king
and not the weary man
home from a day in the cane fields
dragging himself through the door,
flopping on the couch.

And why shouldn't we live in a castle
rather than the tiny house we occupied,
a bedroom shared with two sisters
and a closet full of hand-me-downs,
not silk dresses and gold tiaras.

And if my father was to die,
why did it have to be cancer,
when he could have been killed
bravely leading his knights into battle,
high on a horse,
adorned in gleaming silver armor
with his sword held high.

Why life?
Why not fairyland?
Why the bullying girls in fourth grade,
the indifferent teachers,
daily chores, solemn face of my mother,
my would-be queen.
None of this would happen to a princess.

But we could never be royalty.
The illustrations did not look like us at all.
Their skin was white.
Snow fell in the winter.

Deer roamed the green hills.
Sometimes even unicorns and dragons.
For me to be a part of it,
I would need to be someone else entirely.
That was a fairy tale in itself.
I planned to someday write it.