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“Sinner In The Hands of an Angry God” by Leah Davis

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Tennessee
TECH



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The Great Dumpster Dive

by Lane Mochow

Before I reopened the book,
the plan was to give it away.
While it would poetic to burn,
flames tonguing heretics is a nightmare
I'd like to forget.

I kept it for a decade:
nestled snug in a pew
crunched in the bottom rung
of a bookshelf.
Tastefully forgotten for a moment
of peace and quiet.

I no longer plead to Jesus or any other goddess
for forgiveness for loving, breathing, eating.
I am stronger than begging
to live.

Instead, I will bask in moonlight,
My lips finding my lover's,
And will throw at full strength
Arcing silently through midnight air
all my struggle, my longing for acceptance
into the dumpster outside my house.

Good riddance, fine feathered friend.
May you rot amongst the other vultures
who found their end on the interstate.

Absinthe

by Lauren Morgan

I look to see what greeting lies,
Where silver shadows be,
Beneath my anxious sleeping eyes,
And urge myself to dream.

In dreams, at least, you might be there,
It's easier, I know,
To let in pain – the loss of you,
A Summoning, and show.

But here your spirit's absinthe, see,
Your voice, and name, a drug,
While thoughts of you are nicotine,
And eyes alluring song.

In Loving Memory

by Lauren Morgan

Small feet along the floorboards go,
Small fingers towards me cling,
Sweet Comfort – loving arms provide
For bonnie souls to dream!

Yet, oh, the eyelids flutter fast,
And I, for this, exclaim,
“If she but tarry longer,
what ecstasies remain!”

But unsuspected Silence –
Soft shadows through the door,
Then upon her brow, Hands tender – lingering,
O’er an hour, two – or More.
If I but could have touched!
And forced the Hands away;
A scream – Its forced departure
Lest a bargain made, delay!

I might have stopped a tender grave
Which hollowed, anguished me,
Yet as I could not hinder Death,
Yields animosity.

But since I gained the time to love,
And cherished life was she,
To ease one soul the sickness – Its
Embrace – a Certainty!

Hot Nights in June

by Kelly Bell

I know I promised I would leave this town of sequoias,
but it's Tuesday and the café
is serving pancakes as dinner.
You're going to be there,
so I will be too,
any need for solitude forgotten
as we laugh about the syrup on the ceiling.

When we leave it's the fire
down by your best friend's house
that will bring in the light of tomorrow.
I'll ask for a beer,
you'll take a shot,
and I'll promise to leave again.
Say sure, never suspected I'd stay
with a wink.

Like every a.m., we end
dizzy in a daybed batting at mosquitos.
You only know to sigh,
but I'll brush your hair from your face.
An hour will see me back at the café.
They'll be serving coffee for breakfast,
and I'm going to be driving a long way.

Tarnished Gold

[IN CASTELLANO: EL ORO VIEJO, EL ORO
DESLUSTRE]

[IN CATALAN: L'OR
DESENLLUSTRAMENT]

XXVIII/VII/MMXX

by G. Lira Houle

At 2:30 am the poet's heart turns brittle and cold.
Absorbing all surrounding heat in order to quench its cravings.
Feeling devoid and soaking in the solitude of failed attempts to love.

The young poet wonders if trying to feel loved by some significant
other is worth it.
A year or more without feeling the love of another heart, of another
mind and soul.

Perhaps that once felt euphoria of another glowing soul

Shining so close was only a distant dream.
Perhaps it was never even real.

It was just the single spark of an over-active imagination.
The golden fleck of fantasy that somehow managed to stick to the
corner of a wanting soul.

Overprepared

by Leah Davis



Ferris

by Nicki Parish



Opportunity

by Angel Filyaw

Nothing speaks to me as softly as your lips,
Translates as seamlessly as your touch,
The calm juxtaposed against the chaos
Looking out the window and not seeing –
Not being able to – creates. Shut and locked,
The window is sealed against
Rain and wind, roses and weeds.
The A/C magnifies the room's chilliness,
The curtains the light's shyness.

Nothing holds me as strongly as your eyes,
Captivates as sweetly as your voice.
This feeling is neither hope nor happiness,
No matter how long it lasts. The window is
Shut, locked, and its moment – my moment – passed.
Summer fades into winter,
Tomorrow does not have the same fire as today,
Dust is my coat, and you, not even you,
Can sweep the ashes away.

Energy Around Me

by Linda M. Stegall

The cold stone in my hand pulses,
like frolicking starlight in my veins.
The howls of night creatures
sharing their songs of the hunt.
The wind shakes the walls of my home;
it taps at my window to wake me from my sleepless rest.
The smell of dust and detergent
thick with the lingering scent of you.
Above is a carpeted ceiling
where dust mites fall like rain into the sinuses.
And the taste, the sweet taste,
of bitter defeat.
Knowing that you're gone
and I'm finally free.

Medium Red

by Linda M. Stegall

When mad but not too much,
with love and without lust,
a rose unbloomed,
mid-afternoon,
and romance that is crushed.

Bitter Heart

by Lalomie McCarter

I feast upon my bitter heart –
my chest a gaping wound.
My mind insists I know this hurt –
An old, familiar tune.

Its melody keeps haunting me
as Betrayal softly hums the refrain –
a backing track playing unexpectedly
gleeful verses of disdain

that mock my attempts to disengage.
Taking comfort in being alone
I lock my heart safe inside its cage.
Forgotten in its resting place to beat at bars of bone.

Too soon, I am tempted by Love and Relationship
to relax my watchful guard.
Their siren song like catnip
to a heart so starved and scarred.

Once again, this foolish heart rests between my palms –
pulsing out crimson ballads of bitter agony.
Vainly do I endeavor to remain calm.
Failing, I descend into depravity.

What else should I do
but consume this faithless organ?
Each bitter bite a reminder to eschew
the allure of Trust's endorphins.

Bitter Heart

Hoping to disrupt the rhythm, I take another bite.
The note of sweetness a surprise
as I am filled with a frenzied delight.
The flavors of pain and joy fuse for my heart's demise.
As I swallow the final morsel –
a dizzying peace restores my wounded breast.
The relief is stunning and forceful.
Then I feel a thump inside my chest.

Softly in the Dark

by Zestaria

I feel like my chest is caving in.

“Katie?”, he mumbles brokenly, “Did you hear what I said?”

It feels like my heart is breaking. It’s been broken for months, but this. This feels fresher, more direct. It goes quiet on the other line and I can just imagine that he’s having the same thought that I am; I’m exhausted. It’s not just this conversation that is literally draining all the strength from my body, but our relationship has been having this effect for months now. It’s felt like a battleground every other day, both of us seem to have so much that we just can’t let go of even though it is slowly destroying us.

I remember the first time I realized that I just wasn’t happy anymore. James had been gone for 3 months. Three months of facetimeing every night. Three months of constant “I love you” and unending promises that this wouldn’t break us. That we were stronger than any distance, hell we were stronger than anything. We were **soul-mates**. But. I wasn’t happy. Or at least I wasn’t as all consumingly happy to see “James” pop up on my phone with some ridiculous selfie and an equally ridiculous message that invariably included some inside joke that was just *so* James and Katie. I didn’t feel like I needed to share every aspect of my life with James because honestly, it didn’t feel like he was really part of my life anymore.

I was still in college, had plans of graduate school on the horizon and big dreams of going, going, going out of this small town with even smaller minds. And he supported the getting away from small towns part, wholeheartedly wanted me to follow him wherever his

Softly in the Dark

future carried him. At the time, I was so blinded by this overwhelming rightness that just seemed to encapsulate our little bubble of domestic bliss that I agreed that I would go wherever he went, I would follow forever no matter what it took if it meant I ended up in his arms. But when that little bubble we had created started to quiver like it was going to pop but we were so blinded by our desire to just exist together that we wouldn't let it go, I realized that I in fact did not want to just follow him wherever he went. I had dreams, aspirations, a career that I was trying to build for myself that I didn't want to just throw away. This was the first tremor that I felt in that little world that I had developed in my mind just for us, just for James and Katie.

We met like most people in their early 20's, at college through friends of friends and everything just felt ... right. Like coming home. This overwhelming feeling of "*ahh this is it, this is my person*". I knew from the moment that I met him that he would have some lasting effect on my life. He was the sweetest person that 20-year-old me had ever met and he seemed to actually hear me. He listened and loved to hear me rave about my theories on ghosts and the latest book that I had read. It was the closest thing to adored I had ever felt and I wanted to bathe in it, I never ever wanted that sunny feeling to leave my skin. It felt like flowers were growing in between my ribs under the sun of his affection and our budding love. But like all things that are neglected, flowers wither when they aren't tended. The time, the distance, the realization that maybe James wasn't what I initially saw him to be... all of these things broke petals off my flowers and planted weeds in my lungs.

"I heard you, James", I manage to say, barely more than a whisper.

"Then why didn't you say it back? Why won't you say you love me?", James croaks out, sounding so close to tears.

Softly in the Dark

Tears are pouring down my face as it hits me: *I don't love him anymore.*

I don't know why this hurt so bad when this truth has been staring me in the face for months.

Falling for James was like free-falling. It was exhilarating and different and everything I wanted in that span of time before I hit the ground. I've finally hit the ground. I've been feeling this change, this want to not be just James' Katie, and instead be just Katie for months now, but finally admitting it to myself feels like ripping a part of myself out of chest.

I don't know what to say. How do I articulate to someone that I was so certain I would spend the rest of my life with that I in fact don't what that anymore? That I've never felt so scared and lonely, but his comfort isn't what my body desires anymore?

"I..."

"Just say it Katie! Just fucking say you love me!" James is near screaming at this point, voice sounding hoarse with pain and tears.

But I can't say it. I may not love him like he wants me to love him, but I can't lie to him, I can't continue to lie to myself.

Where did this all go wrong? How could I go from loving this person as easy as breathing to feeling like I'm suffocating just thinking about our future?

"I'm so sorry, James", I whisper into the phone as I press end call.

I'm a coward, but I can't handle this right now. I can't face the idea of the one person that I thought was meant for me actually being meant for someone else.

Softly in the Dark

After that phone call, James and I separated. I felt numb for weeks, empty in a way that felt all consuming, like that emptiness was crawling through my bones and hollowing me out. I realized that I never really loved who I am and that was a lot of the reason that James and I were never meant to last. I relied on him to feel self-worth, I had relied on someone my entire life in order to feel deserving. I never thought that I could award myself any kind of title like “worthy” so I made sure that someone else was there to give me that honor.

I spent months learning what self-love was and how to find it. There was a lot of introspectiveness. A lot of “Is this even real?”

“What does love even *mean*?”

I cried a lot and actually went to counseling for the first time in my life just to talk to someone about why I’ve never felt like I deserved to be happy.

It has been 2 years since James and I separated. 2 years is both forever and the blink of an eye. I simultaneously feel like I’ve grown so much that if you measured my success in inches, I would be 10 feet tall, but I also some days feel like the same scared 22-year-old that walked away from what I thought at the time was my chance of happiness.

I’ve learned so much in the past 2 years. I learned that being kind to yourself is the biggest blessing you can give. And just because something doesn’t work out doesn’t mean it wasn’t a beautiful thing while it lasted. That self-acceptance is the only kind of acceptance that is worth relying on, and being honest with yourself brings the truest solace.

Nature, Its Wind. Its Belly.
And Its Beak.

[EN CASTELLANO: NATURALEZA, SU
VIENTO Y VIENTRE]

[EN CATALAN: CINC MINUTS MES]
XXIII/V/MMXX

by G. Lira Houle

All of the sudden,
She – asks me something

Without much warning

We- descend to touching
Feelings from years ago
Returning now in the evening glow.

She strokes my shoulder

Her hands still colder

I clench my jaw

Unsure if I know her.

Space Cadet

by Lane Mochow



50 Shades of Hayley

by Lane Mochow



The Midnight Blue

by Linda Stegall

Still.

A sheer surface,
like glass over ink.

Whispers of whale songs
under the waves,
unintelligible yet understood.

At the edge
there are shells of beautiful things
that once were living things.

Some things are stranded and forgotten,
gasping for breath that air can't fulfill.
I wade out further and see a sea of doom and magic.

Blackness, endless darkness,
where swarms of teeth come biting,
sticky limbs draw me towards a pointed maw,
and the pressure of my surroundings force out my last breath.

And then it is still.

I have traveled to the beyond.

I have grown gills.

I can see the waves crash like thunder overhead,
the swirling torrents that drag sailors to their death,
but I am fine.

This is my home.

Nowhere, Until

by Noah Lusk

I can smell the salt in the air,
and I can feel the heat stick to my skin.
I can feel the sand on the soles
of my feet, and I can hear the
water feedback and sing, all
by itself and in every direction.
I can look out and see an approaching
storm and the setting sun at the
same time, as if the two had made
plans to meet and perform together.
I can stand in the rain because
neither of us have anywhere to
be, or I can go inside and wait
for it to finish it's masterpiece.
I can go back out and just sit,
and those relatively few moments,
hours, days, will carry more weight
than they could possibly handle.
The right collection of sounds
and a perfectly misplaced breeze
can coalesce into a modicum
of that same happiness – even though
this place, nor any other place,
comes close to those arms.
Comfortable yet complex, unpredictable
yet entirely honest – they're not mine,
but I've never been held so tightly.
Nothing could ever match you,
so I will be nowhere until I am not.

Mother Nature

by Danny Lopez

Oh mother nature
how you seem to contradict yourself
tell me, who hurt you this time

Your battalion of trees
are left with their heads hung low
like men who have lost their pride
men who are prisoners of war

Tell me mother nature
why does the sky flash green
why does the thunder crack like
goliaths crushing trees under their heels

Tell me mother nature
who is waging war against you
who has brought this darkness
that sinks into our skin
as we cower and hunker down
pelted by rain from above
rain that stings and leaves scars

Tell me mother nature
who releases the chaos of the wind
since when did the fall breeze
become a spirited horsemen
who rides in from the clouds
leaving all in ruin

Mother nature
I do not understand

Mother Nature

who has waged war against you
who is the enemy at your gates

Tell me mother nature
what is the way back home
how can we heal your broken heart
we are helpless infants
longing to place our heads
on the bare breast of our mother

We have become quite proud
in ourselves, mother nature
since we have left our home with you
we have started our own wars
and brought chaos to innocent villages
we have slain our brother
without second thought
without remorse
just as the winter
scatters her leaves

But only you mother nature
can bring the spring
the spring where life flourishes
while the winter of humanity
marches forward aimlessly
with no end in sight
with no sign of spring
and the trees watch
with their heads hung low
the mountains watch
bare and ashamed

And we wonder mother nature
who hurt you

Mother Nature

who took a knife to your heart
who stole your first love from you
where is the child you have nourished
and raised in purity
who has torn off your skin
who has pulled out your hair
who left you alone
naked and beaten

The chaotic river of the cosmos
runs through every street corner
followed by the heavy smell of death
mother nature has become restless
and she wields a sword of wrath
mother nature is a warrior queen
protecting her land at all cost

Hawk and Owl

by Graham Kash

The hawk, my sunlight enemy.
How wise I am – or so thinks he.
I only know enough to tell
Which is my heaven, which my hell.
I rule the night, as he the day;
King in my limit – a warning ray!
Light in the east! I boast too long.
I night well prove his judgment wrong,
And fall prey to a wiser foe.
The dawn is breaking – I must go.

Footing the Bill

by Graham Kask

The millipede: “*My thousand feet!*”

The snail replied: “*And yet my one*

Will do the deeds I most need done.”

Bank Duck

by Douglas Buckner

Bank duck
There are no puddles here
Here for you

Bank duck
Go to the spring
Just down the road

Bank duck
Appease the great cranes
That protect the flock

Morning

by Kathryn Holeton

The morning glory
In their own loaned universe
Send signals to suns

Picnic Falls

Cumberland Trail, Possum Creek Gorge
Section, Hamilton County, Tennessee

by Annabelle Dempsey



Welch Point

Bridgestone Firestone Centennial
Wilderness WMA, White County,
Tennessee

by Annabelle Dempsey



Breaking Out of Orbit

by Graham Kask

A comet's path
Elliptical
Predictable
Reliable.

One day
This comet
Went its own way
Never to return.

I have not the courage
of a comet.

To: Universe
Subject: A Favor, Please

by Leah Davis

Send me a vision, send me a sign
One for a rhythm and two for a rhyme

pumpkin spice

by Rachel Wingo

fall is throwing up her flares
as she does
regardless of our human flames
the maple across the street ablaze
the ninebark in the yard wilting
in its charred purple cloak
and why shouldn't she?
autumn has long given up
on us understanding her
as we also often have to do
with those who say they love us
there is beauty in her cloak of colorful mortality

we're too busy sipping our plastic-lidded ciders
and thinking of twinkling lights to come
"see the season of the slow death"
i think i hear her saying
"see the artistry of the end
let it die let it all burn"
the sky a helpless shade of blue
the air crisp like the words we
should say could say
but we wait
putting off
the changes we need to make
our own turns in red and gold
"fall is too short"
we lament our plight
in our light scarves and flannels
and she laughs at us

heron

by Rachel Wingo

it is december
and the heron flies
even so even so
blue brilliance in the gray
water sky no difference
and i know i haven't written
[what would i write?]
i offer little prayers for you
even now even now
and the heron reminds me
us at sixteen
and the longing I had for you
hands reaching toward your fragile frame
in early morning light
never arriving
afraid to startle you in the thicket
of your warm quiet waking

rounding this lakeshore alone
seventeen years ahead
and almost the same
[almost can be such a long word]
the water still now
the desire different
than that that beat against
the rocks of the Flatt River
another shore

i love you
even still even still
you might have startled

La Flor Temprana

[EN CATALAN: LA FLOR PRIMERENCA]

[EN INGLES: THE EARLY FLOWER]

XXIV/III/MMXX

by G. Lira Houle

An early spring flower,
that springs
amongst the
cold grit wind.

Has died
the next year,
in the freezing
sleet of
February.

Frozen stiff
in its
still standing
bloom.

Placebo

by Kathryn Holeton

Ice hangs from the globe
Synthetic butterflies' glow
We are placebos

Parting February Sky

by M. Scott Stenson

I was surprised that two, trumpeting geese,
just beyond the reach of varied, geometric shapes
branched and scattered through fronting trees,
landed their upright chests side-by-side
as if garments on clothes line with black, outstretching necks and
heads.

They, in unison, slowed down, gathered their flight
by beating the shallow's bended, bank-grass
before settling and drifting. The ash-brown tips
of their spanning, cherubic wings disrupted with beauty on beauty
the otherwise unmoved stillness of sunrise,
reflected somewhere inside the newly-streaked,
liquid eye of morning's, rain-swamped pond,
our inner sanctum.

Written By Lantern

by M. Scott Stenson

Street is muted in dim shapes within mistiness.
Only an old Christmas tree can be seen
lit through a neighbor's half-draped window.
Never mind that it's well past Valentine's Day.
The same woman has large, colored ornaments
dangling from another naked plant
in her small, front yard. From my porch,
I can hear in the surrounding hills, coated trees,
each a chandelier, crack and pop like the knuckles
of the hand, split and peel, gradually crashing
and shattering, one-by-one, into shards of bark-ice.
The intermittent thud of trunk due to heavy head of branches
nicely lined with little cycles comforts me,
brings from a familiar distance a dangerous beauty
to the covering of this lingering celebration
without the usual string of communal lights.

Wise

by Kathryn Holeyton

Worn hands hold faces high
Weathered faces look to the sky
The wise never lie

Fulfillment

by Graham Kash

An empty page –
An empty cup –
An empty stage –
Who fills them up?

You newborn child,
You humankind –
Be careful who
Will fill your mind.

Known

by Kelly Bell

Today I saw the rudest subtweet,
I hope it was about me.

Wall Street

by Graham Kash

Before the street, it was a wall:
A barricade against the Indians
(The threatening original inhabitants).
And so began combativeness.
The bull means buy; the bear is sell –
Unless the bull has bought the bear,
Or else the bear has sold the bull.

I put my trust in other stock,
Whose worth may rise and cannot drop.

Fabri Fibra

oil on concrete concreteo 20 cm x 30 cm

by Mario Loprete



J-ax

oil on concrete conereo 20 cm x 30 cm

by Mario Loprete



Buzz Goes the Fly

by Danny Lopez

Buzz goes the fly
that likes to follow me
sometimes out of sight
but never out of reach

buzz goes the fly
I can't help but react
buzz goes the fly
Now where was my focus at?

buzz goes the fly
and I can't go to sleep
buzz goes the fly
what's the harm, just one peep

buzz goes the fly
now I think it's my friend
buzz goes the fly
the fly sure likes to pretend

buzz goes the fly
and it lands on my food
buzz goes the fly
47th buzz and it's only noon

buzz goes the fly
just as I sit down to write
buzz goes the fly
here's my attention, alright

buzz goes the fly
buzz
 buzz
 buzz

buzz went the fly
but I hear it no more
a buzz that has been replaced
with a connection restored

Hospital

by Noah Lusk

Hospitals hold too many expectations
just as hearts hold too much red.
The dullness of the tiles and the brightness
of the lights can flush the color out
of any flower or ivy that chooses,
or has no choice, to climb the castle walls.
Bloody roses, firm and fearless, bruise
as they crash through the halls
with shame and anger and confusion.
What am I doing here?
These eyes are strange and these
hands are foreign, and every part
of me hurts, but I suppose that's
why I learned to paint in the first place.
There is not much else to do with
pale leaves that have been drained
of all their hurt and their healing.
The heart is expected to provide,
and it does so with loud, constant pride.
The harm is expected to punish,
behind heavy doors and clasped hands.
The hospital is one and the same,
but it's clear that story has already been told.

Time Zones

by Graham Kash

I have a friend
In Newfoundland
Where Maritime
Is seaward-beckoning.

And one in Greenwich
The line of which
Is Prime Meridian
For world-wide reckoning.

And I know others
(Sisters, brothers)
Whose chime of time
Transcends all scheduling.

Heaven's Bell

by Sarah Compton

The dawn of man was fraught with fear and barren earth's decline,
The blighted land could bear no fruit and grant no peace of mind,
When anguished cries to empty air did turn His eyes divine,
The Dreaming God despised their pain and swore a new design.

The dirt gave life to nourishment; the rivers now ran pure,
The fate of men would pleasant be, this Woken God assured,
He gave to them a city-home where growing ranks could throng –
A tower housing Heaven's bell, the name of which was Dong.

From Aboria's throne, the old kings ruled this paradise of yore,
And shunned the squalid suffering of all who came before,
As when the plight of man beheld a struggle far too great,
They knelled upon High-Heaven's Dong and set the problem
straight.

Yet Adrian the Scholar-King, upon The Mist did look;
On reality, each toll of Dong, a toll indeed it took,
Though the Dreaming God, from all he knew, did mean the hu-
mans well,
The world grew more ghostly with each toll of Heaven's bell.

“Man must ask no god for help,” the Scholar-King decreed,
Yet rang the bell one final time, to ask that man be freed,
To ask for all the wisdom of the minds that came before,
That he might shield his kingdom from the painful age of yore.

Now challenge ye, Aborians, at risk of life and limb,
All threats to man and man's good health must answer now to him,

Heaven's Bell

Who rules with boundless wisdom over Heaven's sculpted throne,
And wears the crown that bears the gem – our god's Ancestors'
Stone.

And when a threat arises that the Scholar-King detests,
He knells not upon the Dong of Man, but knows to face the pest,
He mounts the mighty dragon, Kong, and guards all humans' bliss;
The battleground for all mankind assumes a guise as this:

A whipping gale consumes the land as skyborn terrors fly,
On dragon's wing arrives the man of ancient thunderous stride,
Etched upon his godly spear, one sentence old and strong,
“Fear all ye who challenge me, the fabled Dongless Kong.”

Gangster Gold

by Kathryn Holeton

There's a hotel in New York City
A place filled with loneliness on the run
Lips keep secret stories never told
Beautiful dresses have butter to curdle
This town has little with finger guns
Cockroaches and vermin play in the underworld
Police and alcoholics are eager for a casualty
Treasure hides in locations full of signs
I want some of that gangster gold

Once A Day

by Lane Mochow

when I was little,
we left the house once a day:
the gas station on the corner for diet coke,

the mall for making up stories
about what the teenagers
meant by their foreign lingo.

the grocery store for bagels, black beans, burritos.
the restaurant for filling long-gurgling stomachs
egg rolls, dollar burgers, ice water with lemon.

the greenway to name edible plants
in case the economy collapsed and I
a lone child without moccasins, turquoise, teepees

(as i imagined my ancestors had)

were left to collect watercress,
pick the leaves from dandelions,
dig up sassafras root with my nimble fingers.

the bank to wear my nicest ankle length skirt
to stand behind her in silence
as mommy cashed her check

stuffing the cash in her billfold
as though her life depended on it
(it did).

i never noticed the knowing look in the cashier's eye,
the wag of his buzz cut at our arrival,
the wipe of her minimum wage saltwater,

when mommy's beaded braids
the ever-present rustling of a brooding hurricane
came upon the horizon.

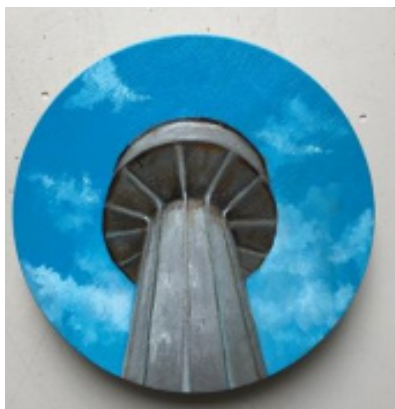
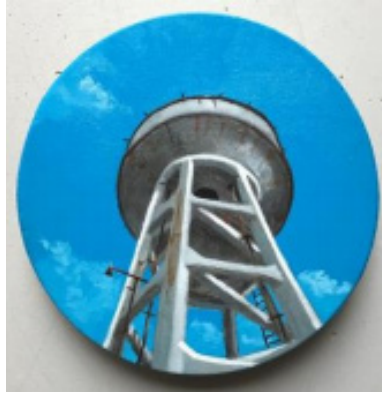
mommy's rage would white knuckle grip
their great black oaks at the trunk,
plead into Jesus' dime per minute payphone

they drown in a clawfoot of their own blood.
"Say amen! Say amen! Say amen!"
"Amen."

Untitled

oil on wood 20 cm diameter each

by Mario Loprete



Company of the Demon Toad

by Alison Meadows



Braxton's March

by Jacob Strickler

On the eve of blood, every tale is told,
Of the night that fell o'er their halls of stone,
Ebon fates befell the Mountain Kings so tall,
As the ravens feasted, one and all...

Did they hear Black Brax, galloping near?
The souls of three-thousand men, guiding his spear,
Knights of the night, they delight in the sight,
Of traitors lining the walls,
Pyres of liars, lighting their halls,
Vengeance, herald of pain,
Hail to Hraldir, King-for-a-Day.

Hail him, Last-of-His-Name,
Hail to Hraldir, King-in-the-Grave.

On the night of blood, every tale is told,
Of the morn that fell o'er the soot and stone,
And the Mountain Kings, bearing their iron crowns,
As they turned to embers, and their works fell down...

Did they hear the Matsen's echoing cheers?
The coals of ebony wings, blackened and seared,
Sire of the fire, an empire higher,
Than all our crumbling halls,
Wings of our triumph fly over all,
Vengeance, daughter of hate,
Hail to Hraldir, King-for-a-Day,

Hail him, Last-of-His-Name,
With silver or blood, we purge the profane.

Half-King, your soul we'll not save,
Hail to Hraldir, King-in-the-Grave.

The Phoenix and the Raven

by Jacob Strickler

Come, you weary ones, and take a seat by the sea,
The paths of life are long, and in the end, lead to me,
So close your eyes, it's done,
Forgo your worries and your strife,
Beneath my Raven wings, the Phoenix finds eternal life.

The mountains here are high, and looking down, all you'll see,
Are the cinders still behind, whence you shed a burning seed,
So quench the embers, drench the coals, and let your soul be free,
To soar above the shores beneath the shadow of my wings.

Without one there is no other; our wings and fates entwined,
Gilded sister, ebon brother; here I rest and here you fly,
My mists will hide your anguish; your flames will stay my cold,
And together we will languish in this heaven that we stole.

Come, forsaken ones, have you forgotten what it means?
To blaze across the trail of life; to sail across the seas?
Just open up your eyes,
Still greater mountains loom in sight,
Beneath my Embered wings, the Raven finds eternal light.

The mountains here are high, and looking down, all you'll see,
Are the years you left behind amidst this vale of waking dreams,
So tend the embers, mend the coals, and let your soul be free,
To fly beyond the skies beneath the shadow of your wings.

Without one there is no other; our wings and fates entwined,

Your mists will hide my anguish; my flames will stay your cold,
And together we will languish in this heaven that we stole.

Now come, eternal ones, with feathers black and feathers bright,
Beneath the earth, beyond the shade, the embers cast their light,
Our wings and fates entwined,
If either falls, so does the world,
And ash will coat the shores beneath their smoldering wings unfurled.

The mountains here will fall, and looking down, all we'll see,
Is the ground beneath our halls become a black and burning sea,
Our place in heaven's gone, for now the Phoenix is in flight,
And when her flame is gone, the world shall know the Raven's night.

Without one, there is no other; their wings and fates entwined,
Gilded sister, ebon brother, may we pray for peace and life?
Your mists will hide our anguish; your flames will stay our cold,
We pray we'll never languish in this heaven you call home.

May our Father, grim and silent, let our Mother's kiln be cold,
We pray we'll never languish in this heaven you call home.

A Sasquatch Seminar

by Graham Kash

Dusk was becoming night, and the woodland setting was dark and mysterious, even in daytime. The participants wanted it that way. It was in keeping with their Sasquatch tradition. Several dozen, of both sexes and all ages, had gathered.

They had few meetings – but when they did, the beginning included a certain ritual. Their largest member, stretching himself up to appear even taller, impersonated their believed ancestor Gigantopithecus, giant and ape-like. He growled and stomped – and the others pretended to be groveling, conquered enemies. But then he relaxed into benevolence and guardianship. All were now at ease and ready to proceed.

Widely scattered, they had no organized government – only a general respect for custom.

There was a tendency to pay particular attention to the greater knowledge of those who were more experienced, but the situation varied according to the personality and behavior of individuals.

The first to arrive was the oldest, walking slowly but still in good health and noted for promptness. He was more of a consultant than an initiator.

His great-nephew, having convened this assembly, began to speak.

“We thank everybody for coming. Some had to travel a long distance.”

The Uncle smiled. “We like to have leadership from the youth.”

The Nephew continued. “We need to consider a problem,

issue. A story says that some people want to help us by a horrible method. They wish to kill one of us – just one. That way, they could prove our existence and protect us. Or they would prefer capturing, but we have always eluded them.”

“How often have you heard this story?” a Cousin asked.

“Several times.”

“Where does it come from? As far as we know, no Human speaks Sasquatch – or the reverse.”

“Another story says that a few do. In any case, some claim that they saw people gathering the big weapons.”

The Uncle said, “Here is a joke, but we should not laugh too hard. Will anyone volunteer to be the sacrifice – shot or imprisoned? I thought not. Besides, what would happen next? Some crazy trophy-hunting People might come after us if they know we exist.”

“Yes,” the Nephew responded. “The solution is for us to stay secret. For that reason, I asked you to come here tonight. There are two practices which we need to stop.

“The first is wood-knocking. Most of it comes from unthinking and smart aleck People (and from raccoons and squirrels – they can do it – they have grasping hands). But some of this noise is ours. Leave it off. Let People go where they think we are. Then we can keep hidden. In an emergency, we know the code of special rapping. But try not to use it. When do we really need it? We live slow. We take our time, not as on the big roads that some of us have seen. We went too close to Humans.

“The second problem is the night-howling. Much like the wood-knocking: mostly strange People – plus cougars, wolves, coyotes, and several more creatures. But some does come from us. What for? Keep quiet and be let alone. Make no calls (except the confidential ones as a last resort).”

A middle-aged Sasquatch said, “There may be another approach. Humans are a bit primitive, but much like us in some ways – such as moods, facial expressions, and their two-footed way of moving around. Could we make friends with them and reduce the hazard?”

The Nephew answered, “Can they even make friends among themselves? They have fights, killings, and wars. They seem calm most of the time, but the slightest trouble can run them wild. Could we ever trust them ?

“We may need to take some chances. They have us outnumbered.”

“But not necessarily outsmarted.”

The young, old, and middle-aged all glanced back and forth at each other.

The Nephew resumed. “One time somebody told me about a picture that moved, to be shown at sunset at Bluff Creek, I think the place was called. I tried to question him. Now did he hear about this event? Could he understand Human language? But he was in a rush, and I never saw him again.

“When I arrived and watched carefully from a distance, the picture showed a Sasquatch crossing a clearing and going into the woods. The Human who made it – his friends kept calling him Rob Pat, or something like that. He did appreciate us – but he may, by accident, have made trouble by encouraging searchers to look for us. What happened to native pigeons and parrots? All gone! Are we next? We hope not.”

This Sasquatch group adjourned, dispersed, followed the suggested ideas, spread these thoughts to other bands, prospered in peace, and occasionally reconvened – except that there was no re-appearance of those who had advocated increased contact with Humans. There were several theories of explanation.

The Silent Sea

by Jacob Strickler

There is a ship that's all but left me,
On the edge of the silent sea,
On the sky, the silhouette of a hope,
That's sailing away from me.
It's crew, those skeleton memories,
Of laughter and friendship galore,
Do leave their footprints lightly,
In the sands of the silent shore.

The waves have yet to claim them,
Though I fear they should vanish quite soon,
Till then, their marks are stretching,
To the light of the silent moon,
And I ponder – shall I wander,
This man whom they've marooned,
Upon the sands of tideless time,
Till heals this hateful wound?

Before me, and beside me,
These footprints on the beach,
I cannot help but wonder,
What destinies they'd reach,
Some racing, some trudging,
And veering here and there,
But all are marching onward,
To leave this lonesome lair.

And a curious qualm becomes me,
Do I follow the lines they pave?
And take the chance to be washed along,

There is a ship that's all but left me,
On the edge of the silent sea,
On the sky, the silhouette of a hope,
That's sailing away from me.
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Some racing, some trudging,
And veering here and there,
But all are marching onward,
To leave this lonesome lair.

And a curious qualm becomes me,
Do I follow the lines they pave?
And take the chance to be washed along,
By the force of a silent wave?
Stranded here, abandoned near,
The choice to judge my soul,
To forgive the crew that left me,
Or reclaim the life they stole?

O vengeance, bitter passion,
That tempts my tempered mind,
To see those traitors water-logged,
And swollen in the brine,
For these footprints cannot tell me,
I'd feel a pint of remorse,
To be toasting rum in the sunset,
On the grave of a silent corpse.

But remorse – 'tis not the issue,
Of we vengeful, sea-hardened men,
'Tis that I know, to face this crew,
I'd meet my silent end,
Their weak, deceitful cowardice,
Shall bring them only strife,
Yet the world! It so protects them,
From this karmic, carving knife.

That the footsteps, in their leading,
Do seem the better choice,
Though I cannot seem to silence,
The hate of my memories' voice,
As I turn in half-strung hammocks,
On the hundredth laughterless night,
And remember the days we'd bonded,
Before that dreadful fight.

And the ship that's all but left me,
On the edge of the silent sea,
Is no longer the silhouette of a hope,
That's sailing away from me,
For the shadow's long since vanished,
And hope died with it, too,
Yet still, I fancy nightly,
The return of my silent crew.

sergio
oil on canvas 120 x 150 cm
by Mario Loprete



b-boy

oil on concrete 80cm x 100 cm

by Mario Loprete



All The Same

by Angel Filyaw

Which is a stimulant, and which is a depressant:

Stuck in love or falling out of love?

Making promises or breaking promises?

Holding on or letting go?

Which charges a battery, and which drains it?

It does not matter; a battery dies

Whether you use it or not.

Author NPC

by Sarah Compton

Hello, I'm Author NPC.
I fill my work with jokes and memes.
I hope nobody else can see,
My crippling insecurity.

I put my pen to paper,
My fingers on the keys,
But what if I make mistakes and,
What if someone sees?

I know there's skill in here,
But I don't want to prove it.
I'm just so filled with fear,
I wish I could remove it.

But veins of fear run thorough,
The whispers all agree,
As in my ears they burrow,
That everybody hates me.

'Cause no one wants to chat,
And no one wants to date me.
Perhaps I'll make them laugh,
Then that will validate me.

A reference to that movie,
I know we both have seen,
So that if you all hate it,
It didn't come from me.

Hello, I'm Author NPC.
I fill my work with jokes and memes.
I hope nobody else can see,
I have no creativity.

*

Now, I must figure out, something to write about,
I'm just so full of doubt.
Ideas churning in my head and yearning to break out.
And my frustration's growing; I think my faults are showing,
My mind is racing and it doesn't show a sign of slowing.

In this vision – oh, man I see, the elision of sanity,
Collision with omissions of decisions that are killing me.

Hello, I'm Author NPC.
I guess it's best to start easy.

*

Perhaps a fairy tale?
A simple hero's journey?
To find the holy grail,
To best a knight in tourney.

Oh, yes, that will be grand,
A tale of love and glory,
My own fantastic land,
My own beloved story.

Hello, I'm Author NPC.
I think that this is really me.

*

Oh, what would I do that for? A big medieval bore?
I'm treading ground that so many've already tread before,
I'll think of something better: something that's all my own,
Something to make them listen, not elicit snores and groans.

I put my pen to paper, now for a second time,
And search the grey matter that's burning up inside my mind,
I'll find a new idea, this time I'm making plans,
For steampunk western, gothic and apocalyptic romance.

My name is Author NPC.
I'll be the Gen-Z Stephen King.

*

Oh god, this isn't working; this makes no fucking sense,
I never realized that the demons in my mind were really this
immense,
This story is a peacock; they'll think I'm arrogant,
That I think highly of myself and that's a negative.

I must do something simpler – no wait, I tried that, too,
Options are growing slimmer and I truly don't know what to do.
I'll write an easy poem; it's hard to mess that up.
A simple AB-AB, maybe that'll save me; will it be enough?

Oh, no wait, I don't like that. I can do so much more,
A miracle of lyrical vocabularic melody.
That's the gift that God has given me,
And that is what I'm for!
But they might think that's pretentious,
So let's throw it out the door.
Can't look like I crave attention,
Back to the drawing board.

Hello, I'm Author NPC.
I fill my work with jokes and memes.
I hope nobody else can see,
I have no creativity.

*

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I'm just so full of doubt.
Ideas churning in my head and yearning to break out.
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*

Vitamins

by Ian Ilgner

Dear reader, do you know
that feeling of elation—
or maybe it's closer to the sensation
of a heart beating and beating
slowly stretching and shedding
a weighty mucus coat?

A cramp in your lungs, unspun
like a wurst that burst through it's skin—
the crackle as air floods back in.
Finally swallowing back a bit of spittle
strangling you. Such an awful
relief to have to earn.

I don't feel relieved—just that the cramp
has passed for a moment, and I'm still missing
the vitamins my body is attacking me for.

Home Improvement

by Ian Ilgner

Flip or Flop. Fixer Upper. Property Brothers. Income Property. Rehab Addict. Our living room TV's default channel is HGTV, so these home-improvement reality shows are always on in my house. Contractors and home owners are always tearing out walls, most of which are load-bearing. They're always opening up spaces, making architectural details pop, bringing in natural light. At some point in the middle of an episode, the contractor always has bad news—Asbestos abatement! Termite damage! Black mold! Roof replacement!—always costing thousands of dollars, a delay, and a dramatic cliffhanger before cutting to a commercial for Home Depot or Febreze. But the reveals in the closing minutes allow the homeowners to live happily ever after in their gorgeous, unrecognizable living spaces or, instead, to sell their newly renovated homes at tremendous profits.

HGTV contractors, house flippers, and homeowners are all beautiful people—handsome, rugged men and beautiful, strong women who aren't afraid of getting dirty or making decisions about paint colors or tiles for the foyer. They all know their way around a router or a tile-cutter or a concrete countertop. They make home renovation and repair look easy, accessible, and quick, always finishing the job in a single episode. When I watch an episode of one of these shows, I finish with a feeling of completion. Look at the dramatic before-and-after differences in this converted mudroom! See how this stain raises the wood grain on this salvaged door! Calculate how the spa-quality en suite bathroom has added thousands of dollars of equity in the home! All these contractors and designers can speak without a script; they're masters of home improvement improv and ad lib and sometimes flirtations. What should we call these charming HGTV

television personalities? Show hosts? Celebrity contractors?
Reality actors?

Meanwhile, I watch their shows from the comfort of my living room La-Z-Boy, remote in hand, suspecting that I've seen this episode before, thinking about starting some laundry, noticing the latest issue of *House Beautiful* or *Southern Living* on our coffee table. As I watch, I am purposefully sluggish, inert, passive—the polar opposite of the HGTV personalities performing their peppy productivity on my flat screen. I try not to think about my ongoing list of our own home improvement projects: renovating our master bathroom, installing new windows, painting our shutters, installing a new HVAC unit, cleaning out the garage. The list goes on and on, and we're always adding to it. I think of it as a twenty-year list, which relieves me from any sense of immediate ambition.

These home improvement shows should spark my own productivity. I should be motivated by this guy who in less than sixty minutes upgraded a grungy basement into a two-bedroom apartment rentable for \$800/month. I should be inspired by the contractor/designer couple who work without ever arguing to renovate a client's ramshackle ranch while playing with their four adorable young children. But I'm neither motivated nor inspired. Instead, I'm exhausted. All that work in such a short amount of time—I'm weary from watching. The representation of all that work nearly overwhelms me; I can hardly get up to make a ham sandwich.

These shows present a fantasy of home renovation, compressing all the decisions and all the sweaty tasks and all the setbacks of several months of work into a single sixty-minute episode. The menial labor of bricklaying or installing a wood floor is condensed and excerpted into a highlight reel, sped up impossibly, magically, deceitfully. Witnessing work in such heavily edited shows is perhaps even more work than an hour

of actual renovation work. Just watching is exhausting. But I'm enchanted by those French doors and the shiplap on that accent wall. Both would be perfect for our bedroom. Our twenty-year list just got longer. Curse you, HGTV!

Which Way Western Man?

[IN CASTELLANO:
¿DONDE VAS VAQUERO?]
[IN CATALAN: ¿ON VAS VAQUER?]
[IN ESKURA: NORA ZOAZ, COWBOY?]
X/VIII/MMXX

by G. Lira Houle

I saw an advertisement that promised me fulfillment
First it said “buy a best friend at a twenty percent discount.”
Then it said buy a son for the same amount.
I finally gave in when it suggested to buy a wife and get three
children for free.

It was so nice for the first month, my wife supported me and we
talked through everything.
My children smiled and were always pleased to be near to me.

Five months in and I began to notice, my wife’s eyes were
digitized and lit the ceiling at night.
My son, who was between the ages of nine and ten, began to leak
oil on the carpet in the den.

My two little girls who loved me so much, their wired hair had
begun to fray and they never felt ashamed when I told them to go
away.

I called the place and said, “what the hell! You never told me that they wouldn’t age well!”

The voice on the phone, dull as a garden knife told me, “what are you surprised?”

I offered double the price for newer units.

The voice said that would work but they would only return three units.

The next year was perfect for my small family of three.

The boy started playing futbol and the girl joined the choir.

The wife and I took up tennis, I know her arm was better but she knew to let me win.

In the evening we would cuddle on the couch. My kids would ask me questions and for advice about their lives. I always said, “try anything! But not any vice.”

My wife would laugh and shake her head.

Late at night I would hear her tell her own advice as she tucked them into their charging ports.

“Follow your programming and you will not be misled.”

While cute it did upset me and we would argue in bed.

I would say things like

“You can’t tell them that! They are only kids!”

And she would not respond, glaring me in the face.

Get in the Robot

by J. Gardner

Monsters roam the streets!
Screams fill the air!
Who will save our city?!

You will!
Like the movies taught you!
Get in the robot!

1.
On the outside shines the shell of the protectorate.
Strong and painted.
Aching to rescue.
Longing to save.
He will give all he can for those he loves, simply to hear that he is
needed.
He hates the monsters.
They terrorize the weak.
They colonize the different.
They cauterize the armor,
Making stronger the hero.
Ensuring that he never breaks open.
For breaking open is defeat.
Breaking open is defeat.

Like Dad taught you
Get in the robot

2.
I fight with strength for the weak.
The fight is arduous, painful,

But I feel like a power ranger, so how could I ever lose?
I stand strong, unabashed. Unwavering.
Unaware of the chips in my armor.
My amour.
Love leaves me exposed. Maskless.
Suddenly, I see the terror, severe and uncovered.
A creature culture, hegemonic and ancient.
I strike the first blow.
The blood that covers my hands is red like wine.
Red like mine.
Not green like he told me it would be.
The monsters,
They look like I do.
Through shrunken pupils and toward a suddenly-ugly face, I ask
the question:
“Have you always looked this way?”
The inquiry enters like a rusty knife, blunt and broad.
In stark contrast, the answer almost reveals itself.
No, you haven’t.
There was a time before the pilot.
But can there be an after?

Like you thought she taught you
You are in the robot

3.

This tube scares me.
But change can come faster than I want it to. Faster than not at
all.
This prison from which I pilot protects,
so maybe just leave me be.
If you break the egg, something will spill out that I don’t want
you to see.
A child, cold and scared, will emerge from the shell.
Unable to communicate.
Aching to be cared for.

Longing to be saved.

No one else taught you
You got in the robot

I hate what I have accepted.
What I have learned, whether actively or passively, by force or in
ignorance.
Compliance and complacency are treason in the face of evil.
I got in the robot.
I am to blame.
And now I must get out.

Like you taught you
Get out of the robot

Unlock the cockpit
Unblock a shocked kid
Rewire the mainframe
Retire the maimed brain

It will take time
But sun comes after rain
And tracks go before the train
And healing, believe it or not, can come after pain

Cascade

by Linda Stegall



Praise the Sun

by Linda Stegall



The Sounds of Henderson Hall

by Nicki Parish

College timelines are unstable
some days, they speed, others, they feel like a crawl.
But as I sit at the work-study table,
I hear the melodies that float through Henderson Hall.

Dr. Kash's typewriter clacking,
Mrs. Linda's cheery laughter,
Dr. Burduck sending a late student packing,
an air conditioner creaking in the rafter.

Dr. Laird's rich, jolly voice,
students walking down the stairs after class,
an English advisee who cannot make a choice,
acquaintances saying a brief hello as they pass.

These are the melodies of Henderson Hall,
my home away from home, my most favorite building of all.

Cicadas

by Ann Jared Lewald

They emerge from the earth cradle
Half formed,
Then lift and spin and turn
In the white hot summer light
As if worshiping a tree.
Rare as a white buffalo
But lazy and homely
Leaving us wondering how to marvel
At creatures with big red eyes.
Women brush them out of their hair
As they fall to the ground
Unwanted like dandelions,
Delicate and easily crushed.
My neighbor thinks they're "puny"
And you would be too, he says,
"if you laid around for seventeen years."
He hears them as piano chords,
First pianissimo, then forte,
Sometimes treble and bass.
I think they like Tchaikovsky,
For in their shrill cries
Rests the heart of the world
The panic at the edge of high noon,
All the weeping of desire and death.
Their voices pierce our sleep
And alone, under the moonlight,
My mother's friend dreams she's held
In the arms of her husband
Who left her seventeen years ago.

Moving Me

by Lane Mochow

Plate tectonics shifted when I got out of bed.
I started going to coffee shops;
I started painting beyond what I could see,
beyond what I could not.
Moving me.

The 9.8% of all Americans were inside me,
squirming, squealing, these children,
a swath of emotions crawling across the spleen
when I drove my car again.
Moving American.
Moving me.

Since the move, the shift,
the crawl with spittle hanging from lip,
to a pant at the weight of my past.
I trudge through the mud, dragging my lost year
by the scruff of the neck as he yelps.
Self-loathing, self-spiting, self-loving.
Moving me.

Seven Wonders of the World

by Graham Kash

The ancients had such marvels as the Pyramids, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Here are some from our own time, as observed in my travels and experiences.

One Wonder is a professor who is always present during his office hours. He confers with his students, gives brief lectures, answers questions, and stimulates impromptu discussions. I learned much from him. And yet, because of his small number of publications, his school refused to grant him tenure. He continues there, in a manner, as an adjunct. His current office is a refurbished broom closet, with no opening to admit light.

A Second Wonder is a preacher who never mentions money. Instead he talks about what the money is for projects in devotion, education, and philanthropy. When the collection plate does come around, I sometimes give what is, for me, a substantial amount.

A Third Wonder is a politician who does not sling mud. He says he would rather lose than get dirty. Perhaps he saw a cartoon picturing a mud-slinger encased in muck.

A Fourth Wonder is one who criticizes his hometown. He says it contains ignoramuses, money-grubbers, blind conformists, and mindless do-nothings. (He asked me not to mention names.) In fairness, he says it also has people who are informed, intelligent, progressive, and constructive.

A Fifth Wonder is a thinker who questions the value of “common sense.” He shares Thoreau’s view that common sense

is often on the same level as snoring – and that what we need is more uncommon sense.

A Sixth Wonder is a driver who always uses his turn signals. Some may call him too cautious or legalistic, but he sticks to his principles. I was so surprised that I had a rare lapse and forgot to use my own indicator.

A Seventh Wonder is the most amazing of all: an author who believes that his works are unworthy of publication. He writes them for fun and recreation, and he goes through the rituals of submissions, but until recently he had received no positive response. Upon this astounding acceptance, he considered declining, but he decided to show respect for the opinion of the eminent editor.

These Seven Wonders may not be the only ones. Feel free to add your Eighth and beyond.

i wish you had hurt me.

Winner of the
Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

by Riley Davis

you don't want a relationship, not now.
everyone tells me this is good,
no bad blood drips from the tether between us.
i can pretend it's good too,
know it's just an excuse for my heart to hold on,
to hopelessly but furiously hold on to nothing,
to wait for what will always be nothing,
in hopes that it could be something even though it's nothing.
i know all the future he's will never be you's
you with your fingernails outlined in a hard day's work
you with your captivating stories and crooked smiles
if other he's could make my worries melt like ice
you make them burn to ashes
erupt in a volcano that leaves me ablaze
my heart beating with a fire it can't comprehend
nerves and euphoria colliding
a tension woven delicately with an ease
a burning, thrashing peace only you can create in me.
i wish you had hurt me.
i wish you had shattered me so meticulously that i'd hate you,
until i forgot why, forgot you.
the hurt would be gone by now
but instead

a wounded piece of me holds onto a beautiful piece of you
and if you showed up at my doorstep one day,
if you took me on a drive in that piece of junk you love so much,
if over your strange songs and under the bright stars,
you told me you're ready now,
i'd still be ready for you too.
i want to forget and forget and forget
until you're the past and i don't hurt and can't hurt the future
he's
but as much as i write of growth, of forgetting
i see you, think of you and suddenly i can't
i can't forget the person for whom i still wait.
i wish you had hurt me.

switch.

Winner of the
Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize

by Riley Davis

i'm relieved that my body doesn't come with a switch that turns
feelings off
i would use it too much
it would become a drug
a far worse addiction than drinking caffeine or buying books.
something i would crave so deeply in my darkest moments
i might even reach for it in the light.
feelings are meant to stay on.

Death's Obituary

Winner of the
English Endowment Cox Epperson
Short Story Prize

by Olivia Hudson

As Death walked to the wooden podium, he realized three things. The first being that it was ironic that he, Death, should be giving someone's obituary. Second, that people were not exactly happy about him being here in the first place. They thought it strange that he was here to pay his respects for the pain he had inflicted. Unfortunately, he realized this through the glares, dark looks, and murmurs that roamed throughout the crowd. Third, he forgot the scythe he was carrying did not match the black suit and tie he wore. He had accidentally grabbed the deep gray that appeared black, but wasn't. He felt so embarrassed by this that he did not make eye-contact with anyone. They already criticized him for being here and he didn't want to give them any other reasons to ostracize him.

It wasn't as though there was nothing else to look at. The whole church was decorated extensively. Stunning gold ribbons lined the rows and sparkled in the light. There were fresh marigold flowers on every pew. Soft cream candles filled the church with a warm glow. People crowded the church. It was so full, in fact, that some people were turned away and some people had to stand.

The thing that stood out the most was the tiny coffin that rested in front of the podium. It was a shiny, solid black coffin with a silver family crest on top. The lid was shut and everyone seemed afraid to get too close to it. Lush, red roses sat in front of

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the coffin. It was such a stark contrast to the rest of the scenery. All the other parts had a warm and welcoming glow about them. Yet, the coffin display was cold and formal. It was certainly a strange choice.

Death tried to smile at an elderly woman, but she scowled at him before turning to her husband to weep. He assumed these people were related to the deceased. The scythe in his hand was warm and he gripped it tight as he withstood the woman's harsh gaze while she cried.

Being here in this place made him feel so out of sorts. Usually, Death did not have to face the families of the ones who passed or their friends who decided to show up at the funeral to mourn them. This was a very new experience and one he wasn't enjoying.

His hands were trembling as he walked up the last steps that remained. This would severely damage his reputation. He was Death. He did not give obituaries for every soul he took from this world. Maybe he should leave. This was a mistake.

As he turned to go, he felt a tiny hand tug on his sleeve. When he looked down, he saw a little girl with two loose braids in her hair, sapphire blue eyes, pale skin, and beautiful blonde hair that was so white it looked like snow. If someone didn't know any better, and if they could see her, they would assume she was a happy little girl. Sadly, they would be mistaken. This was the girl Death had taken and for whom he wrote this obituary.

"Death, "the little girl said with wide eyes, "where are you going?"

"I am going back to where I belong. This was a mistake." As he turned to go, the little girl ran in front of him.

"Why? Is it because people don't like you?" For an eight-year-old, she was very empathetic.

"They don't want me here, Clara. They are angry at me for taking someone they loved. They want you back, but I can't

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give you to them. Look, your mother and father are over there weeping because they lost you. I did that, Clara, I caused all of this." Clara's big eyes were filled with tears.

"I know that you are a monster. You take and destroy everything you touch, but some people need to be destroyed. People are both good and bad, but there are some that are too young to know any better. You saved me. If I had stayed on this Earth, I would have been sick for the rest of my life and trapped by my own mind. You prevented that. I understand that you have no choice about who you take and why, but they don't. You need to tell them. Tell them the truth. I don't want them in pain." She was begging him now. She was crying and just wanted the pain for her family to stop. She wanted them to know that she was okay.

When Death appeared behind the podium there was a mixture of emotions in the crowd. Some people were yelling, shouting, pleading, asking why, and overall begging Death to undo what could not be undone. No power, law, science, or magic could change this terrible truth. Death himself was powerless to stop it. He did not choose who lived or died. He was only the messenger. The message he carried was that life here was over, but a new life waited beyond.

He glanced down at Clara. She was a tiny thing with a kind heart. When he was bringing her to the afterlife she had been calm. Most people had questions, were distraught, or pleaded to return to the living. Clara was different. She had been silent and wasn't surprised to be greeted by Death.

Death had watched her before she died. He had a lot of sympathy for her and truly wanted to help her. She reminded him of someone he knew in another life.

As much as Death wanted to flee, he couldn't do that to Clara. All she wanted was for him to deliver a message for her and tell her family that she was in a better place. She wanted them to

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know she was happy and healthy for the first time in her life.

So, Death sighed as he made his way to the podium. When he leaned his scythe against the podium the whole room went silent. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get the words out, a loud thud caught his attention. His scythe had fallen to the ground. With embarrassment, he picked it up and placed it back against the podium.

The crowd gaped at Death, and that made him pause. They feared him so deeply that it haunted him. Couldn't they see that there was no choice for Death? He was only the guide to the afterlife.

Clara's mother was weeping as her husband held her tightly. He greeted Death with a sneer. He didn't want him here. Death couldn't blame him. So, Death decided that if no one wanted him here he would say exactly what he wanted to say. He would tell them the horrible price of existence.

"Most of you know me as Death. Something dark, merciless, and overall, the root of all evil in this world." He paused to gaze at the speechless group.

"You are right to think this. I am sorry for the pain I caused, but I am not sorry that I did it. People are not made to live forever. People are not gods or immortal. They all have bad sides and good sides. They each have their own goals in life and have special people that they love. I watch all of you grow up, I see your hopes and dreams, and I know where you end up. The choices you make determine your future, but only to an extent. All of you will die someday. You and I will walk together to the afterlife." The anger the crowd felt seemed to dissolve into sadness. People started whispering to each other and Death was suddenly angry. Did they lack understanding of what he was saying?

"I am a monster, but there is a reason that people don't

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live forever. Some people are born healthy and others are not. Clara was one of the few who was born unhealthy. I am sure all of you know that she was sick. She had a disease that could never be cured. If she lived, she would have been trapped by her body and mind. She would have existed in complete and utter misery.” Death frowned at the crowd. He needed them to understand the life that Clara would have been forced to endure.

“The only life she would get to live would be one in her bed. She would never go to school, get married, have kids, or spend a day in the sun. For all of you to have the audacity to criticize me for taking away her pain is selfish. She was hurting, and the pain was only increasing. She became so fragile; she could barely walk. She was eight years old. An eight-year-old should be running and jumping, not gasping for breath with every step.” Clara’s parents winced at Death’s harsh words.

“If any of you wish for her back, I want you to realize what you are asking. You are asking an eight-year-old to come back to this world and accept all the pain she is now set free from. She is happy and in a better place.”

Death paused for a moment. He turned to his left to see Clara smiling as she stared at her parents. She nodded gratefully at Death. Something flickered in his heart for a moment. He felt...happiness. It was something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

“She was the one who got me to come up here and give this obituary. She wanted her family, friends, and loved ones to know that she was safe and happy. She showed me how people view death as a whole. They view me as a curse or weakness. I assure you that I am no curse, and if you don’t believe me, then it really doesn’t matter. Death itself is hard and you are expected to cry and mourn, but not to wish more pain on that person by wanting them to come back. Even I can’t bring them back. I am sorry for your loss and you have my sincerest condolences. Clara was a very sweet girl with a bright mind and pure heart. She will

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live on through the memories she has shared with each and every one of you. Thank you for your time.”

The crowd was stunned, even Clara's parents had stopped weeping. They all stood there looking at Death and Death looking at them.

He waited for a moment and pondered saying more. Then he realized that there was nothing more to say. He nodded to Clara's family one last time, grabbed his scythe, and exited the church with a sinister grin. He still had a reputation to maintain after all, and the only person who deserved his sympathy was Clara.

Death felt another quiet tug on his sleeve as he finished walking down the stairs that led to outside.

“Death,” Clara asked with tears in her eyes.

“Yes, what is it Clara?” His scythe was becoming heavy in his hand.

“Thank you, for everything. I just wanted them to know I'm okay.” As she spoke, she silently wrapped her small hand around Death's free hand.

“You're welcome, Clara.”

“Death, are we going home now?” Her big sapphire blue eyes looked up at him.

“Yes Clara, we are going home.” A small smile danced on her lips.

“Alright, race you there then.” At that, Clara ran full speed ahead, without falling or needing to stop for breath.

When the two of them reached the end of the road, they slowly disappeared into the light and Death felt that for once he had done something right, but he would never forget the weeping of Clara's parents or the anger in their eyes.

Contributors

Tony Baker Tony Baker has been teaching and learning from students at Tennessee Tech University for this entire century. He overthinks and writes about writing pedagogy, graphic novels, autism, middle age, and other bright and shiny things that catch his fancy.

Kelly Bell Graduating economics and finance student. She once won a middle school essay contest and has been chasing that high ever since.

Douglas Buckner is 21 years old and is a Secondary Education major for Speech Communication and Theater. His work is often nonsensical and lighthearted.

Sarah Compton is an undergraduate Tennessee Tech student with a major in Sociology, a minor in Social Sciences, and a concentration in Criminal Justice. She loves reptiles, especially her two pet owls, which she must constantly remind people are indeed reptiles. Her favorite pastime is swimming, and her favorite poem is Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley. She invites you to consider the following (certainly random) string of numbers: (2,2,1) (1,1,1) (1,4,6) (1,2,2) (1,6,2) (1,2,3) (2,2,1) (1,2,2) (1,3,1).

Whitney Cunningham is from Spencer, Tennessee. She is a two-time Tech graduate with a Bachelor's and Master's in Professional and Technical Communications.

Leah Davis is a junior English Literature major at Tennessee Tech. This is her second time submitting to The Iris Review. It really is difficult trying to come up with a personable biography sentence, I don't see how the others did it.

Rikey Davis Riley Davis is a freshman at TTU from Lenoir City, TN, majoring in Chemical Engineering and minoring in English. She loves poetry, literature, music, dogs, chemistry, making people smile, and cereal.

Annabelle Dempsey is a photographer and senior Environmental Science student, graduating May 2021. Photography for her is an act of meditation, a way of understanding the world, and documenting change. She specializes in landscape photography, her favorite subjects being waterfalls and caves. Annabelle is the current vice-chair of the Southeastern Regional Association of the National Speleological Society. Her photographic works have won 2nd and 3rd place at their winter business meeting of 2020. In addition to conducting her own spatial research, she is currently assisting several others in conducting karst research and documentation projects.

Angel Filyaw studies English Literature at Tennessee Tech. When she is not doing homework, she is probably reading, writing, or watching an alarming amount of television. She has been published in *Coffin Bell* and *The Iris Review*.

J. Gardner is a junior in the Psychology program here at Tennessee Tech. He is an active member of both the Psi Chi Honor Society and Honors Creative Writing Committee. Gardner has proudly been a lifelong resident of Cookeville. His piece, “Get in the Robot” explores toxic masculinity and its surrounding culture through the lens of monster movies and television shows. He looks forward to seeing the work of all the talented people being published in the 2021 edition of *The Iris Review*.

Kathryn Holeton is a prolific writer. She is an English major with a concentration in Professional and Technical Communication. She writes poetry, song lyrics, and music.

Gabriel Lira Houle (G.Lira Houle) is an American-Mexican writer, and an alumni of TTU, graduating with an English major in 2019. Immediately afterwards he traveled to Madrid, Spain to earn his Master's degree in Bilingual Education and Culture in 2020. Trapped in the hard hit country of Spain in the early summer, he made the most of the self-imposed lock-downs and began studying and doing research as a source of entertainment while working as an English teacher for the students of Colegio Artica, a private charter school in Carabanchel. While the age of Coronavirus may continue to pin Europe to new rules and travel prevention, he is continuing to take advantage of living in Spain, by learning as much as possible of the myriads of regions, cultures, and languages within Spain and earning his Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification.

Ian Ilgner is an alumni of TTU. He wears flip-flops and sweat-pants regardless of weather, and he has rediscovered the joys of rock climbing.

Graham Kash is a Professor of Communication at Tennessee Tech. He writes stories and poems about such subjects as monkeys, musicians, and non-conformist travelers. He is a member of two of these categories.

Ann Jared Lewald is on the faculty of Tennessee Tech. She helps edit *UNDER THE SUN*, an online journal of creative nonfiction, and has published poems in various journals.

Danny Lopez Danny Lopez is a senior Interdisciplinary Studies major with a concentration in Religion and Business. He is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in westside of Jacksonville Florida in a tight knit religious community of boisterous saints, who played the tambourine and shouted during religious service.

Mario Loprete, Catanzaro 1968. Graduate at Accademia of Belle Arti, Catanzaro (ITALY). Painting is his first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which he wants to transmit the message this is the foundation of his painting. The sculpture is his lover, the artistic betrayal to the painting, that voluptuous and sensual lover that inspires different emotions which strike prohibited chords.

Valerie LunaNix is a writer, artist, and game developer. She has published poetry and fiction and plans to pursue a career in publishing while working on her novels and video games. You can see her recent creations on Facebook and Twitter @ValerieLunaNix

Noah Lusk is an English major with a Creative Writing concentration. This is his first time submitting to The Iris Review. He has accomplished little else in his sad life. He is at least half of his band, Loved by Animals, and he is all of musical alias, Clear Tape.

Lalonie McCarter is a Tennessee Tech Graduate Student pursuing her Master's in English with a concentration in Literature. She currently teaches Composition IOIO as a graduate teaching assistant and is working on her thesis. When she isn't lesson planning or researching trauma and feminist theory, she enjoys bingeing on Netflix documentaries and thriller/horror shows, reading non-required books, and writing poetry and short fiction while her black cat, Lucius, languishes disdainfully nearby.

Alison Meadows lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. She is primarily self-taught and dabbles in multiple different art forms, but has practiced digital art since 2009, with a focus on fantasy character design and illustration.

Lane Mochow is a junior majoring in News Journalism and Teaching English grades 6-12. In his 22 years he has appeared in 13 publications as editor, journalist, poet, or painter. His chapbook, *Ink*, was published in 2019.

Lauren Morgan is an instructor of English Composition at Tennessee Tech with a Master's in English Literature. She enjoys reading, telling stories to her godchildren, and dancing in circles with her puppy Jace.

Nicki Parish is a senior English major at Tennessee Tech. She spends most of her time worrying about things entirely out of her control and holding her cat, Sixx, named after Nikki Sixx of Motley Crue.

Linda M. Stegall is a senior at Tennessee Tech majoring in English Creative Writing and Literature with minors in Spanish and Honors. She is the Co-Managing Editor of *The Iris Review*, Chair of the Honors Creative Writing Committee, and Founder/Monarch of the L.A.R.P. Club. She has written much in many genres (though she cannot proudly claim all of her work) and is still crafting her sixth novel. She thanks all of the contributors for their beautiful pieces, the staff for their hard work, and the readers for their interest in the magazine. Linda hopes the apocalypse ends soon and wishes everyone safety, peace, and happiness.

M. Scott Stenson is a Lecturer at TTU with a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Before earning his doctoral degree, Scott completed a creative master's thesis while completing his MS degree at Utah State University. The two poets that he studied under when in graduate school were Ken Brewer and Ted Kooser.

Jacob Strickler is a senior in the Computer Science: Cybersecurity program at Tennessee Tech. He is a CyberCorps SFS Scholar, a member of the Honors ASG Creative Writing Committee, and the co-founder and Regent (Vice President) of the Tennessee Tech L.A.R.P. Club. He enjoys reading, writing, puzzles, and tabletop game design. His favorite pastime is writing brief informational paragraphs about himself to put in the backs of the literary magazines. If you are reading this, he hopes you have a wonderful day.

Rachel Wingo is an instructor of Religious Studies at Tennessee Tech and a resident of Cookeville. She is the proud mother of one and bonus-mom of another, both of them delightful wildlings, and is fortunate enough to be married to the smartest person she knows. She is also an interdisciplinary visual artist and is the worse half of the artist partnership Whimsical Wreckage.

Zestaria (just Z for short), loves long mornings with ever-full cups of coffee, musty bookshops, and dusty old homes. She thinks puppies are the cure to all the world's problems and her biggest aspiration in life is to be your resident Crazy Dog Lady who lives in that creepy old house on the corner with 10,000 books.