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*Portal*

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Cover, "Tunnel Vision" and photography by Frank Cademartori

Editors – KC Kirkley & Marcella Prokop

## Editor's Forward

Good luck defining beauty.

On a shelf next to my laptop, I have a ragged, discarded library copy of *Philosophies of Art & Beauty*, a decidedly ugly edition of textbook size and weight, which includes selections from many of the big thinkers of western philosophy. It's an anthology of artless essays about art, compiled from the works of guys like Plato and Heidegger and Dewey. There is a dizzying number of Germans included (so much ink spilled in the names of phenomenology and dialectics!). They claim, variously, that beauty is a step toward truth (Hegel), that it is catharsis (Schopenhauer), technique (Aristotle), unity of being (Plotinus), the outpouring of genius to verbalize the moral good (Kant), and on and on.

I don't want to pretend, here, that I understand all of these aesthetic gymnastics as a true philosopher might, but I wonder about the attempts to define beauty in terms of other, similarly slippery, concepts: truth, emotion, skill, unity, morality, etc. Is beauty simply the perfection of these other principles? Can we really say anything about art with these definitions?

It seems to me, rather, that beauty is a first thing, irreducible by language or impression, ineffably personal and existential. Sure, that makes judgement of beauty impossible, which might make the old philosophers uneasy, but it seems to me a preferable state of aesthetics.

With this in mind, our June 2015 issue looks for beauty in unexpected places and movements. We see it in the defaced surfaces of billboards and shop windows, in betrayal and blacktop, in quicksilver and stripteases and escape. It all reminds me of T.S. Eliot's "Unreal city" of "The Wasteland." What makes the blight and despair all so beautiful to me? Perhaps it *is* cathartic and true and moral. Maybe it *is* the skill with which the artists show it to us. All I can say of it, in the end, is . . . I hope you find it as valuable as I do.

KC Kirkley

## Molly Weiland

has had work appear in *Revolution & Reclamation* (Art Night Books) and *Delta Epsilon Sigma Journal*. Molly recently earned degrees in English, Creative Writing, and Education from Cardinal Stritch University. She is an educator and youth worker who is about to make a post-graduation move from Milwaukee to Chicago. When she is not working on her own writing, Molly enjoys teaching at-risk youth to use creative writing as a positive outlet and a tool for social justice.



Photograph by Frank Cademartori

## In the Name of all that is Sanitary by Molly Weiland

One  
They tell me to clean the windows  
so I do.  
I pause and look at your handiwork for just  
a moment.  
One breath.  
Then I spray it once with the blue stuff  
and it crumbles into nothing.

Two  
I stop for a minute  
because it's back again, just the way it was yesterday.  
All intricate, geometric, perfect.  
I will admit  
I am impressed  
but not enough  
to let it be.

Three  
As I walk outside,  
I think  
there is no way.  
But, again, you prove me wrong.  
It's bigger and better than yesterday,  
or maybe that's just the guilt talking.  
How long did that take you?

You're watching me.  
I see you in the corner.

I'm sorry.

I wonder if you did it just to spite me  
or if you really have no idea.  
Each day is new.  
I admire your work ethic  
and perseverance,  
then move on to the next window  
thinking

we  
are so selfish.

- -

## Kendall Steinle

hails from Akron, Ohio. She is a legal writer, a freelance editor, and an X-Files aficionado.



Photograph by Frank Cademartori

## Three Poems by Kendall Steinle

### *Sitcom*

Featuring special guest stars Guilt and Denial. Port Washington, Guilt's ripping contracts left and right. In the dark, everyone looks the same, says Denial. Commercial break. I hate myself for the small nap I took on I-43, the time I didn't kill my best friend. Running gags, catchphrases. What's left of center mean, anyways? This isn't a reality show, says Denial. Ratings: skyrocket.

The other car, a deranged extra. This'll hold Monday's midnight slot for sure. She asked me what happened. I said, some asshole, almost hit us, probably drunk. Asshole, she repeated, quietly. Commercial break. Later, at home, she puts her pretty head on my shoulder and whispers, thanks for getting me home safe. Laugh track.

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*Chicago Lied*

A citywide blight,  
because this surely would have never  
happened back home between the bigger homes and the whiter neighbors.  
The fault has to be that of the skyline:

a soft gray on this vast black backdrop,  
stars stuck in perpendicular blocks of cement  
playing tricks on your eyes and misleading you  
to believe that you could maybe be somebody someday.  
Misleading you to believe you matter.

And five turns to eight,  
and eight turns to ten.  
Chicago has refused to lick my wounds  
like it promised it would. Chicago lied.

And twelve turns to twenty,  
and twenty turns to, I don't know, women?  
I'd move to New York,

but I can't take another lie.

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*Portal*

There is only one way that demons can get to Earth and that is through the Post Office at Fullerton and California. I know this because they are always there when I'm trying to buy stamps. Some are really mean and impatient, eager to hop on the 74 and seek out some young virgin and spin her head and snap her spine, but the worst is that they cut in line. I stand there with my letters, hoping that these short stories will be the ones that make it, so I can finally prove to my dad that I'm not wasting my time and he will finally be proud of me, and Belial bumps into me and doesn't apologize but instead says something snotty in tongues. Another demon says, don't mind him. I nod. The demon continues, man, this line, huh? Yeah, sucks, I say.

I'm not here for much, he says, just came to grab some limelight in a movie, maybe *Insidious 3* or something, I don't know. I really just wanna prove to my dad that I'm not wasting my time. I just want him to be proud of me, you know?

I nod again and say, I'm just here to buy stamps.

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## Alison Ruth

was a feature writer for the popular music magazines *Creem*, *Rock*, *Rock Fever*, and *Wavelength*. Her short stories have been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and are published or forthcoming in *Confrontation*, *J Journal*, *Kestrel*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *G.W. Review*, *Pamplemousse*, and *Tulane Literary Magazine*. Her first novel, *Near-Mint Cinderella*, published by Aqueous Books in 2014, was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her second novel, *Starlight Black and the Misfortune Society*, was published by Prizm Books in 2015.



Photograph by Frank Cademartori

## Skywritten by Alison Ruth

“What flavor is that?”

“Butter pecan.”

“What does that taste like?”

“Cold cream and sugar.”

Jimmy tried not to smile as he inked.

“Are you considered good?” Kristy paged through his laminates, his scale of art measured in pricks of a needle.

The bicep seeped blood mixed green. Jimmy watched the gauze soak and wondered what hepatitis C looked like under a microscope.

“This stuff is so small you can barely see it.” Careful not to tip the melting cone.

“It’s called detail. Can’t get it from a can of Krylon.” Jimmy pinned the torso to be operated. He looked up to follow Kristy’s bikini around the glass cases. She was too pale for Miami.

“Like an illuminated manuscript.” Kristy drew a drip with her finger like it was a gold letter.

“But that can make you blind.”

“Ain’t you got a train to tag?” Cans clanked in her backpack during the catch-your-breaths on Ace of Spades.

The mouth mangled something about a museum. Another fan of hers.

Kristy jumped atop the glass case. It had never been so hard to hold a needle steady. Was this body bleeding more than they usually did?

“I need a charm.” Kristy crunched a sugarcoated pecan he could taste in his own mouth.

"You know where the Santeria is."

Her curls bounced sideways. "They can't help me."

The arm snaked underneath his hand, trying to stop the needle. "Don't tell me you're scared of pain." The lungs hacked some kind of denial. Jimmy jacked up Motorhead with the remote control.

"I'm going high." Kristy crossed her legs. Her skin was rice-paper fine; he imagined tracing it first. But then she left his frame, like a movie half-projected.

"You scared of heights?"

She started pulling cans out of her backpack. A metallic ring as each one hit the counter, like a bell tolling his desire. "No one makes the color I need."

"Color is that?"

"Falling."

"That why you're going up?"

The mouth gagged, wanting to confide its own misery. Jimmy had no idea what he was tattooing anymore. Just following the coloring book.

"I already fell." Kristy jumped off the counter.

The air jiggled in front of him. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes. Why must this creature slump in his chair? He stabbed at it. "What about a Celtic cross?"

"I'll look like a Bible."

Jimmy could assure her she wouldn't, but he didn't bother. She was standing in front of the mirror, empty of color, empty of design, while his walls scrawled with scrimshaw. Where would he start on her? The carcass beneath him roiled in its own memory of last night's beer-drafted loneliness. "Where you going?"

Kristy inspected the tubes of Skin Candy, still seeking the color of falling. "There's an empty billboard next to the Airport Expressway."

Jimmy laid down the needle.

“I need colors I can see in the dark.”

He smiled again. “That’s what all you bombers need.”

“And a ladder.”

“What about airport traffic?”

“I’ll wear dark clothes.”

But her skin would glow at night.

“You need a ride?”

The throat below him gargled something about hustling. Should have taken better care of its tracheotomy.

“You’re probably busy drinking tonight.”

“Stay until closing. You’ll keep me out of trouble.”

Kristy snapped her ponytail. “That I can’t do.”

“What about your charm?”

She brushed a bare arm over the Botero heaving beneath his needle. “I’m leaving at sunset.”

“I want to see you in action.”

“I need to finish by sunrise.”

“So that’s how artists tell time.”

Kristy smiled. Better, she sat down in the chair closest and waited.

When the body finally leaked past the bassist-wanted flyers, Kristy had wrapped up in a flannel shirt and climbed behind Jimmy. He was the one trying not to fall. He had washed off the gore in the shop sink, soaked his needles in formaldehyde after that biology project. Bumper-stickered

mirror—hardcore bands whose logos he'd blackened—but Jimmy could still see himself, his eyes sort of good, his smile better. It was fine he had no girl now; he hadn't thought so til Kristy had shown up, ice cream and all.

Did she rest her face on his jacket? He could tell later, if any phosphorescence remained. Palm-tree twilight, his own short-lived Triumph measured in highway markers. If there were only time for a beachfront bar: Alabama slammers, paper lanterns, Lana Del Rey records.

Kristy knew how not to break the quiet; with a point of her finger just past his helmet, she aimed at a billboard that projected emptiness like a drive-in movie. Did she think of the billboard the same way he thought of virgin skin? They were both artists, after all; nothing more seductive than an empty page.

With a jostle of spray-paint cans that nearly threw her balance, she stumbled against him before he stashed the bike through an acid cloud of no-see-ums. She eyed the ladder from a distance. "Wish you had time for the charm."

"You're afraid?"

"It goes into the sky."

"I'll catch you." He didn't laugh.

Kristy seemed to scale the height in her mind. He caught her looking at her Keds, good for getaways, not great for traction. "You're staying with the bike?"

"That ain't what a man does."

The billboard loomed over them, casting a trapezoidal shadow across the sand. The silhouette of its ladder like an Escher illusion. Kristy seemed to be counting its rungs.

"You've been on rooftops." He jammed his hands in his pockets, to keep from touching her updo.

"I like subways best."

They anchored themselves below the three-dimensional ladder, as if the elevator was broken.

"Remember the guy who crossed the Twin Towers on a tightrope?"

Kristy gripped the ladder, pulled herself up a step. A cross was scratched on the back of her hand; if she fell, she wanted a Christian burial. The billboard towered over her, as if bidding her to star in its movie. Jimmy swung himself up like an extra doomed to be left hanging. If she wasn't quite so beautiful, he wouldn't be quite so suicidal. Draped close enough to smell her spray-paint and perfume; better than the ink and viral-load blood that he breathed all day. They were high enough now that headlights couldn't catch them.

"If a cop comes—he started.

"We lay still. On the ledge."

"Dead like a possum."

She never looked back at the ground, nor even at him, which was worse. Far beneath them the Bahia grass turned to mattress, and the palm fronds beckoned them back. Somewhere beyond, a runway launched an Avianca plane to an ancient city in Central America. The reverberations seemed enough to rattle her imagination. Jimmy hung on.

Kristy hoisted herself up the ledge, no harness but her own trembling hands. She unzipped her backpack, knocking cans of Krylon into their own spectrum.

"Where are your friends?" Some of them still had skateboards.

"Not in the sky with us."

A seagull shrieked at this double apparition. Kristy gleamed with perspiration. She examined a can of Crush-like orange. It tumbled over the edge, falling like a spaceship to Earth. Could she turn any paler?

"You need anything?" As if he stood next to a bar.

"Just a lookout." But her voice shook.

A TAM Brazilian ascended. The illusion he could catch a 747 in his hand, easier than catching her, and she wasn't miles away. "You apprentice graffiti. Like tattooing."

"You just need to find someone to take you around." She centered herself inside a spotlight of early moon.

“Was he from New York?”

The ball bearing shivered inside the can. And then her skill unfolded across a canvas 20 feet wide. This was a scale for a mural, not his kind of art that bruised blue. She slashed color after color bright enough, big enough, for eyes used to painting in the dark. Fumes felt like they were inflating him.

“Can you breathe?” The painted vista before her, as if the sky had paused to let her fill it in.

Letters puzzled inside a flaming yellow heart. “Can anyone else but you read this?”

“Anyone who’s not blind.” Empty cans scattered and rolled over the edge.

Trainset headlights came and went. He swung his legs over the ledge, like he was a giant. He almost reached for her mouth, forgetting how high up he was. She was surveying what of Miami was left beneath them.

Kristy wiped her cheek with a smear of yellow. Her flannel shirt was unbuttoned to the charm around her neck, a shark’s tooth. She must know her masterpiece would be papered over. But at sunrise cars would squeal and brake in awe. She leaned against him. She must still be afraid of falling.

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## Kathleen Fernandez-Vander Kaay

is an author, screenwriter, and poet. Her nonfiction book *The Anatomy of Fear: Conversations with Cult Horror and Science-Fiction Film Creators*, was released in 2014, and her script *Freund* (about the life of German filmmaker Karl Freund) was turned into an award-winning short film. She is currently attending graduate school at Sierra Nevada College. She and her husband split their time between Florida and Nevada, but no matter where she is, her heart is always in Las Vegas.



Photograph by Frank Cademartori

## Battle Born-Again by Kathleen Fernandez-Vander Kaay

I watch heat rise from the tarmac.  
The plane touches down east of a skyline  
made of mountains—initials dug in scorching sand—  
where bomb blasts sixty years ago  
left craters in hardened earth  
next to grindhouses—  
not the movie theater kind.  
The wasteland. The heartland.  
The turquoise capital of the world.  
A short drive to a neon wonderland,  
my new Eden,

where lights are bright enough  
my father can't hide in the shadow of my doorway,  
the sharp sting of his hands  
around my throat throbbing the rhythm  
of my heartbeat.

The girls in the city  
spin like roulette wheels.  
They are sweet to me:  
the Mormon cliché  
who's never seen stockings with seams,  
let alone a striptease.  
I worship their caramel colored eyes.

We are comfortable  
in our lit-up runaway oasis,  
hiding from darkness. Every evening at dusk,  
I trace the laser light of a pyramid  
through the sky with my unsteady finger.

If any living Prophet should reveal  
this as my Millennial Kingdom,  
I would easily believe him.

The carnival Ferris wheel,  
splashed with every color,  
sears a chasm into the mountainside.

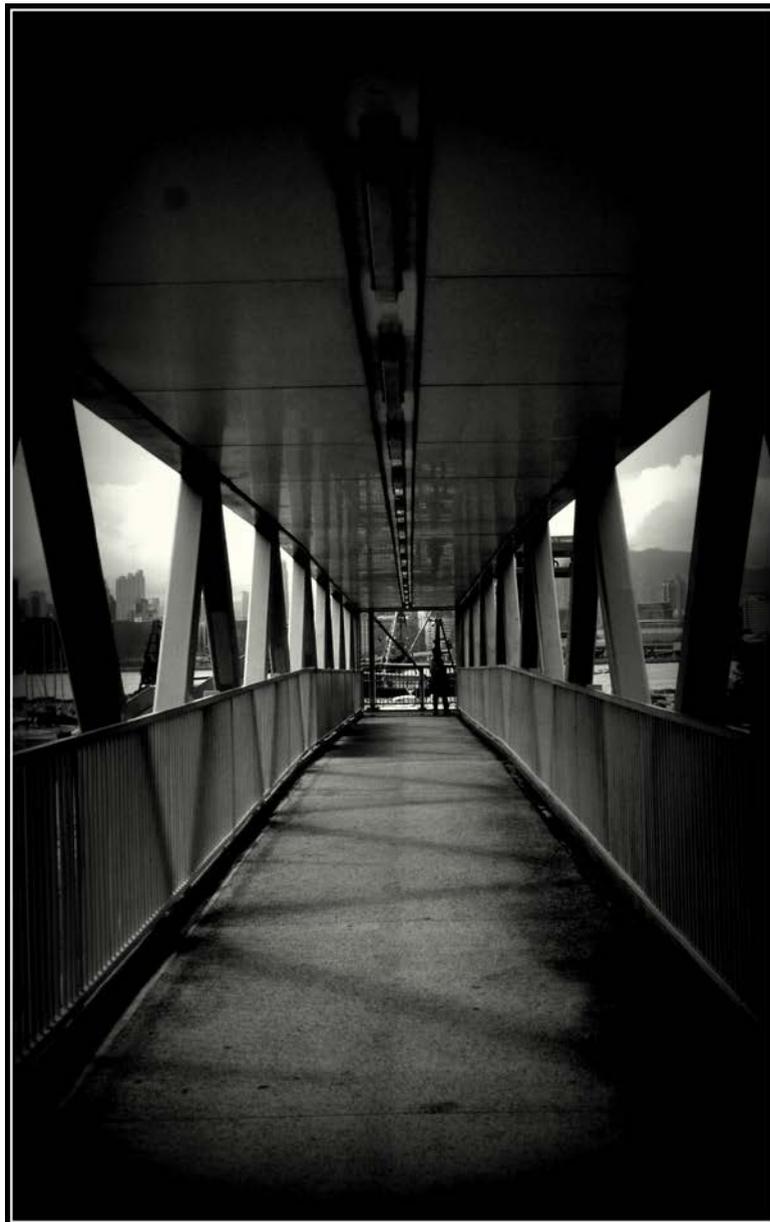
My father is 1800 miles away.

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## About the Artist Frank Cademartori

### *Tunnel Vision*

Frank Cademartori has spent much of his twenties traveling East Asia, but now resides in Chicago, Illinois. He spends his time achieving amateur status at various activities and has chosen to daily relive the horrors of Middle School from the other side of the teacher's desk. More of his photography can be found here (<http://endlessframe.wordpress.com/>).



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