

poetry • flash fiction • long fiction • digital art • painting

ISSUE 1

SPRING 2023



MOLLUSK
LITERARY MAGAZINE



Issue 1
"Petrichor"

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Editors' Note

"When I was young, if my poems got rejected, I'd just throw them out. I thought that being rejected meant my poems failed."

- Rida Zulfikar, Founding Editor-in-Chief

The literary world is difficult for all authors. Rejection is inevitable, yet because writing is such a personal craft, it can feel like a personal attack.

By starting Mollusk Lit, we wanted to provide a launchpad for young writers into the literary world. Whether an author's work would ultimately be included in our issue or not, we wanted to give every writer that submitted insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their works to show them that no work is better than another. Each work has its unique strengths, and our role as editors is to encourage writers to explore their strengths as much as they can. Similarly, our website is there to help writers tread into more unknown waters; by providing resources such as personalized editing, an alternative markets list, cover letter writing templates, and clearly stated guidelines and FAQs, we hope that writers feel comfortable using us as their first foray into the bold world of publishing.

For this issue, we have divided the works into two categories: "Humanity & the Earth" and "Petrichor." We want to highlight works that focus in particular on the environment and the effect of humanity on the state of the natural world. With the threat of climate change becoming more and more tangible in our lives, writing serves as a way to raise awareness about our power over the environment—both to help and to hurt. It is our duty to change our ways.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge everyone that made our inaugural issue possible. First, a massive thank you to every single person that submitted to Mollusk Lit. Writers and artists are the foundation of every literary magazine. A special shoutout to S. Kavi for providing the stunning cover art for this issue. Second, thank you to Duotrope for offering a platform to publicize our litmag (Duotrope is a great resource for all writers and artists—we highly encourage you to check them out)! Lastly, thank YOU, the reader!

We are thrilled to share all of these outstanding works with you all! We sincerely hope you enjoy our publication. As always, email us at mollusk.lit@gmail.com if you have any questions!

With love,
Founding Editors-in-Chief, Sascha Chernesky & Rida Zulfikar



**editors'
choice**

In The Depths S. Kavi

Artist Statement

"In The Depths" reflects on a space for one to be with themselves as they are and on their own. Oftentimes, we need a space for ourselves to get away from the burdens and stresses that weigh over us in our lives. A mermaid has the entire sea to explore, but even the most adventurous need a space they can go back to and call their own. This is a digital art piece heavily inspired by the motifs of Mollusk Literary Magazine. I have a history of making art in a more "neon" style along with drawing bubbles and having mermaids in my work, and it was a joy to combine those concepts for this piece. The starfish in her hair also felt like a nice detail to include to expand on who she is.

S. Kavi (she/her) is a South Indian American poet, writer, and artist from Texas. Her work explores her cultural experiences, nostalgia, and healing. She was a finalist for Best of the Net 2023 and her work appears in *antonym*, *Culinary Origami*, and elsewhere. You can follow her on Instagram @soniathecreative.



John Hind

B. E. Nugent

Editors' Choice

John Hind lay stretched on his back with his head against a rock. The evening dew had settled onto his shirt, shoes and trousers. His face and body glistened under the full moon, its light captured and returned by the droplets of moisture that pooled on his ashen skin and dark beard. The dew on his black hair twinkled in concert with the heavens, as though a miniature cosmos had taken refuge in the dark material. The moonlight was captured, then returned, but altered, reduced and dulled. Around him, all was still. Hushed and bated, waiting for the morning sun to crest the peaks that rose high on the other side of the valley.

John Hind lay stretched on his back. His head rested against a rock, his thin body cushioned by tufts of short grass. He was perpendicular to a low stone wall that formed the border of the field. No road; a dirt track ran roughshod outside the wall, a track that had brought him here, from which he climbed the wall and rested awhile. The track was flanked on the other side by coarse grass that marked the entrance to a dense woodland. It was quiet now, silent only for the sighing branches, the secretive whispering of trees. A hush had fallen, like a breath held in anticipation in this moment when nocturnal creatures withdrew to nests and sets to make way for their diurnal brethren.

John Hind lay stretched on the grass, his arms rested on his chest, his legs extended and his feet crossed. His overcoat spread open, splayed beneath him, absorbing the moisture from the dewy grass and morning mist. Sodden and heavy, it caused him no discomfort. Like the cloak of a languid superhero, it reminded him that greatness can be found in the ordinary and that, for some, simply being alive was a

superpower. And John Hind was alive, never more than this moment looking upon the mountain peaks that had become his challenge. One day, he would reach that summit. This day.

John Hind lay upon the grass. His head rested on a rock and, behind the rock, there was a satchel that contained those essentials to meet his challenge, to master that climb, to reach that summit. His hands touched lightly on his midriff, in the right he clutched his phone. On the third finger of his left hand he wore a golden band, a reminder of promises made and promises broken, half-truths that hung about him like the chilled mist of early morning.

John Hind lay stretched on his back in a field of undulating hills that rolled gently under the gathering fog to the mountains that lurked a short distance ahead. His eyes opened, the sun shot a luminous glow through the low-hanging clouds, stirring the sharp twitter of early rising birds and the low flutter of small rodents and other grass-dwellers. A crow swept overhead, its croaking caw announcing the dawn. A wren, king of birds, perched on the low stone wall that defined the field. His chest puffed, he sang proud of his trickery on the day of his coronation.

John Hind lay stretched on short grass within a broad meadow of undulating hills, perpendicular to a stone wall that framed the field. The ground fell sharply from where he lay, raising his position from horizontal to almost vertical. Before him, the panoramic vista of grass, wall and hedgerow, grass, wall and hedgerow to the base of mountains that lifted the horizon. Beneath him, herds of livestock staked their preference for lowland grasses, more plentiful and less arduous.

John Hind lay still in a field a short distance from the lonely path that brought him there. Behind him was the wall. A small collapse marked his point of entry, a tiny avalanche of dirt and pebble and rock that traced his staggering intrusion to this place where he lay to rest against a rock in the ground. Follow that trail, meet John Hind where he sat for a breather as he considered his task, his forgotten cloth cap left behind to shelter a small scrap of stone. Go further, leave the trail onto the road and down to the town. There's a spot, an unremarkable place, where John Hind held lodgings and argued continuously with a landlord who viewed him entirely as a waster, a landlord who was little satisfied by the solitary obligation that John Hind owed and that was to pay his rent promptly, who labelled John Hind a transient, in error because John Hind lived in the town where he had always lived and yet, somehow, the town that managed to forget him. This same landlord who stood beside the locksmith as the locks were changed on this retreat from broken promises and dreadful half-truths, and considered what must be done with the few black refuse sacks that contained the earthly possessions of John Hind. The same landlord who had

snorted contempt when told that John Hind would stand one day at the highest point on the highest peak of that range of mountains.

John Hind lay silently on a hill, his head leaning to a rock that protruded from the earth. Beside the rock was a torn and ragged satchel that spilled its contents onto the hillside; four cans of cider, a sodden mush of what had been a pack of cigarettes, and a disposable lighter lay beside a length of rope, coiled loosely like a serpent in the grass. Strong rope, braided from three strands and long enough to throw over a branch of a tree when descending the mountain. John Hind had always wanted to climb that damn mountain before he died.

The snow fell on John Hind as he lay on the ground, lodging quickly in the absence of any warmth. It fell around him until John Hind lay on the grass on a steep incline in a field facing the mountains under a blanket of snow.

John Hind lay on the grass, where clumps of white held valiantly to the frozen ground, from which the early buds of spring flowers pushed through, having waited their turn. His eyes were open to the splendid vista of hills and mountains. His right eye was glazed and dull, the blue turned glassy grey. The left was open to an empty socket, its contents pilfered by the wren, the king of birds who was blessed with more than one trick. The left eye pilfered and wretched, picked and consumed until regurgitated for the nestlings to pick again, consume again, in wretched frenzy. This caused John Hind no discomfort.

A car at the foot of the hill emptied its occupants onto the trail. Two women stretched their limbs, clad in running shoes and lycra, they were dressed to hurry. And hurry they did, back away from the place where John Hind lay restfully on the grass, away from the opened eye of glazed grey and, the other, black with a corona of faded red, away from the rock protruding from the earth with its star-shaped crown of dried blood. They hurried back to the car and on to the town where their newspapers would tell of misadventure on the mountains' foothills. On page seven, some days later, a paragraph mentioned that the identity of the remains discovered by two women during their morning run had yet to be established. The talk of the town, yet still he stirred no recollection, not even in the mind of the erstwhile landlord. And, had he remembered, it would have only confirmed his assessment of the unknown John Hind. Mary Wilson, 36, and June Lester, 34, made the gruesome discovery on a little-crossed path that led to the mountains. They would be treated for shock but would make good recovery. Authorities would remain baffled as to who the deceased man was but would conclude that he had stumbled when entering the field and incurred grievous injuries when his head struck a rock. Referenced as John Doe according to accepted practice, it would be noted that his remains were largely preserved by the seasonal snowfall, though some

wildlife did begin his degradation. Preliminary investigations would indicate that he may have survived for some days before passing. His phone would be recovered from the scene, but would not yield any useful information, as investigators would discover the contact list was empty and there was not a single missed call.

B.E. Nugent is Irish and relatively new to creative writing. This is his eighth short story to be published and previous credits include Kleksograph Magazine and Howl anthology of new Irish writing. He and his wife have two adult children and live in Co. Limerick.

Dogfall

Kevin Hutchinson

Editors' Choice

When Cumberland and Westmorland wrestlers
land together, side by side, nobody wins.
They call it a dogfall.

1. With Freddie. Westmorland, 1977

*Ya shoulda seen me, boy,
cheek to cheek with Clark himself!
Him too slow from the slack hold,
and me, slick as ya like,
feinting the cross click
to catch Clark full buttock,
sending him sack-heavy on the sod.*

Those were the lucid days,
when fairer skies bore bright blue
from the depth of his eyes
and tales of bouts and belts
fought from the allotment ring
to Grasmere and Keswick
*held me tight in his wrestler's grip.
Ten shillings, the prize, boy.
No barneying, mind ya,
no falling for the fix.*

But then,
when his grip fell loose
and the slack hold broke,
when the cross click caught
and he landed low,
the fighting talk fused, confused;
Grasmere felt the Ancre shells
and fighters fell together, side by side
without winners or prizes,
dogfallen.

He calls to Joe or John or Jack,
I think — names inked on the back
of a black and white photo;
cursive, joined up; shot
no more than a cursory glance
back then, but I see them now,
these bull-chested men, lungs
bellowing their furnace days
before the draft of 1916
blew them cold.

*I shoulda held fast,
kept ya tight in the butcher's grip,
stood firm in the field
 'sted of letting my heels slip.
Shoulda thrown ya high
over my shoulder
 'sted of leaving ya cold on the sod.*

*Is that you, sweet lad?
Did ya land soft?
Did ya stand after all?*

Hush now.

She lifts the spoon to his lips
and he sips the salt marsh lamb.
He tastes wild samphire
and drinks deep into him
the scent of sea lavender
sweetened with her jasmine
as she leans and whispers

of Lindale,
of Morecambe Bay.

2. With Lily. Remembering Lindale, 1913

*I dreamed we were flying, Freddie,
high above greens and browns and blues,
tracing Turner's brushstrokes free and wide
over Castle Head. You said we found our wings
and fell, only to be lifted;
fledglings courting the wind.*

*I see you, Freddie,
waistcoated, cap in hand,
sweating the Herdwick weave,
wiping each beaded minute
of a borrowed watch
waiting for Father;
and at the parlour door, Mother
hushing me to hold short breaths,
each syllable lengthening
that long summer of 1913.*

*I hear you, Freddie,
pledging the full frame of our lives;
not twenty-one but hand to fifty acres;
not Methodist but hand on heart as sober as
a song in church or heaven judge your soul
unworthy of a timber merchant's daughter.
Father heard your heart, Freddie,
and heeding for my part it beat in time,
shook your hand
and gave you mine.*

He turns the old ring,
slack on his finger.

Fifty acres. Free and wide.

*A field to furrow
by nightfall.*

*Pull away gentle, boy;
do ya feel the share bite shallow?
Do ya hear the sod split soft
against the knife?*

*Straight and true, now;
keep the traces tight
in the turn.*

*Hush now.
You should have seen him, child,
thin as a lat, but fat on milk porridge
and black pudding if there was a
sow
to slaughter. Driving the horse and
plough
for thirteen shillings a week,
but sixteen more when Sweet Thistle
won twenty pounds at Shap for stud;
plenty more besides for a chap with
a good eye for the flat clean bone
and muscular thigh, they said.*

*Tight in the turn
then dead straight, boy;*

*Dead
straight
thigh
and bone.*

3. With Freddie. Remembering Joe, 1914

He used to tell me something
 lived inside his camera;
I pitied it —
caught fast in the bellow,
caged between the criss-cross
struts of the VPK.

He said there was nothing
 it hadn't seen,
but painted its scenes
in black and white because
it didn't like the colour
of the world.

He said it saw everything
 but resolved
to filter out the meaning,
to bear only the briefest burden
and shift the focus with shallow
depth of field.

 He eyes every inch
 of JUNE '14;
 mapping the moment,
 thumbing every wrinkle
 from furrowless brows,
 looking for the laughter
 creases.

God bless ya, Jack

God rest ya, John

God save us, Joe

*I saw ya fight at the Flan;
said ya were tight in the hank,
swift in the outside stroke
like Knight or Goold.*

*Ya took me
high with the inside hipe
then thigh to thigh
on the turn and fall.
Ya landed me hard, Joe.
Sent me deep
but cast me shallow.*

*Why did ya throw me over, Joe?
Why did ya sweat turn cold?*

*Lost ya legs and ya life
on the sod at the Somme.
Straight and true, now;*

*Dead
straight
thigh
and bone.*

Hush now.

The picture slips from the tips
of his fingers; feather light
now as she takes the weight
from him; her softer skin
still feeling
the stab of sharp corners,
the fray of rough edges
time-worn smooth.

She slides it between the covers
of Robert Frost,
stiff-spined but stripped thin
of pages, clean-torn and shipped
five hundred miles
in fifty letters to the front.
She shelves it; hides it away
between Graves and Sassoon
where he's sure to find it.

4. With Lily. Remembering Midnight, 1914

*You should have seen them, child,
quick as hares but not so shy
come fair sky and furlough
at the two o'clock bell;*

*before the morning sweat was dry,
I'd find them, stripped to black socks
and grey pants bleached white;
each locked tight in the loose grip,
hip-thrown but landing soft
on smooth raked soil; slipping
free to find themselves
in fifteen feet of space
paced, marked out, earned
on account of the midnight foal...*

*I see him, child,
lamp-lit, sweating
the stable heat,
bare chested, arms deep
inside the heaving mare;
feet firm against the soaked
and shifting straw,
feeling for a jaw to pull
straight and true before
the legs are born.*

*I hear him whisper
through her weaker screaming breaths,
soothing searching,
finding grasping teeth and tongue,
wrenching the head between the knees
to slip the young colt free.*

*It lies unmoving, child,
but still I see him rise above the falling hope,
gathering low, staggering the limp weight
high in his arms, then sending it hard
and down to find its final rest
 or fighting gasp.*

She said they drank the birth of Midnight
deep through the soft light of the morning,
cheering the dawn, chasing its promise
with fear and faltered breath behind them.
Strong and sturdy, *see that fella go*,
the foal would surely show at Shap
or Kirkby Stephen — purse enough
to promise half a rood for beets
and beans, and room enough for
Freddie's fifteen feet of freedom.

As the shutter closed on JUNE '14
and the soft light failed
to find the August sky, they cried
for Mons, for Le Cateau and mourned
the fall of Midnight.

5. With Freddie. Remembering John, 1916

When a foal falls to colic,
its dam will pace close by,
nudging it to stand and fight
the melancholy.

It will not feed or drink.
In its gut it will feel
the end
but it will not die alone.

*God rest ya, John.
Are ya home, big lad?
Did the fighting douse ya fire?*

*Ya held too tight in the slack hold;
stepped too close, too soon
for the inside click;
left ya self open for the push
and the fall.*

*They said they'd cut ya balls
if ya showed ya face behind Tan Hill,
turning the hank, stealing the outside stroke.
Better a bull than a seg, big lad;
better the ring than a cell.*

*Skinny words
but they chased ya, caught ya
fast in the head with the hate,
bated ya fears,
called ya featherweight.*

*Shoulda broken off slack,
'sted of taking the grip.
Shoulda slipped from the hipe,
'sted of taking the fall.*

*Were ya man enough, big lad,
when ya sweat the khaki felt?
When ya cut the Ancre scar
though shit and snow, to throw down
where no man should have to land?
Had ya balls enough
when ya dredged through mud so deep
it drowned a horse? And slashed through
stirrup straps and thrashing hooves
to free the lad from under?*

*Or when ya pushed
and fell
and I held ya,
and though ya felt
the cold take grip,
ya told me not to stay,
did ya feel ya were enough?*

*God rest ya, John;
no need to wrestle
with it now.*

6. With Freddie. Remembering Jack, 1916

We used to count the copper coins
he stacked in a brass tin
he swore was made of gold.

Feel the weight, boy.

Imperium Britannicum.

A gift from the Princess herself!

He said they smelled of blood
and good tobacco;
unto the breach;
each penny polished so thin
he could barely see the faces
or the dates, now fading
out of sequence.

God bless ya, Jack.

*I cowed more coin than whin
from the soil when ya scrapped
in ya breeches with Little!
Eleven stone wet but he lifted ya
short with the shoulder,
high with the outside hipe,
scattered ya wages
like hand cast seed;
never saw ya laugh so hard,
never saw ya land so light
again.*

*I still feel the cold, sweet lad;
its slack grip at my back,
slipping low between the shoulders,
pulling close for the back heel
and throw;*

*tight at the chest when Hake fell
home from the Dardanelles,
scarred, discharged, missing
an eye that got septic from flies
and burst on a bayonet, they said;*

*weak in the leg when Pegg cut
free from Loos with a lung full
of pepper and pineapple,
coughing up bile at the side the ring,
eyeing the able bodied.*

*Could ya furrow straight and true, sweet lad,
when the sod was split too deep?
Could ya keep it tight in the turn
with ya traces loose and the draft horse
pulling fast away?*

*Rakes for rifles,
traces for trenches.
Sixty-six pounds of kit
on our backs, bearing it
lighter than a look or an eye,
but still that chill dead weight
of dread to lift and carry.*

*Do ya think they heard
the good news
at Chantilly?*

*About Billy,
stark mad in the mud
facing his brother;
stuck to their waists
one dead, the other
begging for the bullet?*

*I see him lift his head;
the lead, loving the air,
like Mad Jack said, stops
dead quiet in that split
second—no fear or fury
in its kiss.*

*He's gone, like Joe and John;
meat for the midnight rats
and the morning crows, fat
from scavenging
canned horse and bully beef;
cold carrion, now.*

*Ya bore the dead weight
straight and true,
but pulled too fast,
too far, too faint
through smoke and snow,
too slow
to reach the Frankfort trench.*

*Did ya feel that dread
lift light at ya back?*

*Did the slack hold
grip ya tight
or set ya free?*

*Did the bullet land ya soft
and swift?
When ya felt it kiss,
did ya think of me?*

7. With Lily. Remembering 1919

Hush now.

She closes the brass tin lid
and he drifts once more
to the scent of sweet jasmine.
Her whispers slow the fall
of each faltered breath,
settling unspoken
as the smoke clears
and her own kiss lingers.

*I see you, Freddie,
slipping back;
demob dapper
in pin stripes and felt hat;
ill-fitting,
ill-suited, lost
in loose pants and long sleeves,
ill at ease
with your own stride.*

*I would watch you pace
the empty ring;
fifteenfeetofspace
closing in, you said;
shouting at the silence;
scattering the morning crows;
throwing the sweat of midnight,
tight in its grip,
too firm in its hold.*

*But still I saw you rise above the falling hope,
standing from the hipes and strokes
of each new day; holding slack, bearing true
as fear and fury fought to send you low.*

*You cursed the men
that worked the road
at Wasdale Head;
 dead straight, thigh and bone.*

*You broke hard ground
to plough with lads
from Rowrah camp,
 furrow straight and true.*

*When Lloyd George signed
to send them home;
 did you feel the dread weight lift?*

*I see you, Freddie,
taking the slack hold;
easing your stride;
raking the rough ground
beside the cabbage seed
and sprouting kale;
clearing and sifting
fifteen feet of space
to slip free and fall soft
as the crows watch on.*

8. Remembering Lily and Freddie

Each spring, she would harvest
half her crop while the leaves
were loose and tender,
slicing every other stem
level with the soil, exposing
gaps, leaving room for
those that stayed behind
to swell and grow
to fill the space between.

He would pace the ring,
slipping full buttock
late in the summer sweat,
stripped-off, landing the farm hands
flat with the hank and the back heel;
breathing slow and deep,
expanding to fill his fifteen feet
as the crows fed fat
on newly planted seed.

He closed his eyes and couldn't see
the autumn; he knew there should be
reds and browns, but thought
his thoughts had bled them pale.
He couldn't place the names of men
that lay beneath the ring
or reason why their faces smelled
of smoke and blood, while
the sunrise lingered jasmine.

In the winter, when their fire
burned low in the grate,
she would lift the short rake
and riddle the embers free
from ash and slag, shaking
the last of life from spent coals;
patiently rekindling; calmly
willing each spark to catch
his eye and set the night ablaze.

*Can ya see the star shells,
tracing bright, sweet lad?
Flying through the smoke*

*thick sky to light ya way;
straight and true through
sleet and snow; too slow*

*on ya heels for Frankfort.
Four hundred and fifty tons
of bronze, they said. Tin
and copper melted down
to send ya ma the dead
man's penny. Imperium*

*Britannicum. Feel the weight,
boy. Lifting. Fledglings courting
the wind. Did we*

all land soft?

9. Remembrance. Westmorland, 2022

They say I have his eyes;
passed down like pennies
in a brass tin box
I swear is made of gold.

I see him see
the bright blue skies;
the reds and browns of autumn
bleeding pale;
the colours of the world
in black and white.

I see him fight
the bouts and belts; the tight
pull of traces in the turn;
the skinny words; the outside
stroke; the eye that sees the thigh
and flat clean bone;
the shallow cast; the splitting sod;
the share that bites too deep
and finds the frost;
the cost; the cold; the loss
of dates and laughter lines;
the lamp-lit sweat that sees the rise
and fall of Midnight;
the fear; the fury; the coming home;
the kiss of lead; the weight of gold;
the fifteen feet that closes in; the crows
that gather fat while seeds grow thin;
the breaking hold; the slipping free;
the man that sees the boy
that sees the man he used to be.

Hush now.

I see her take his hand
and fly once more
above the greens and browns
and blues of Castle Head;
a single spark
rising with the smoke
to blaze the night
then cool and lose itself
in the morning wind.

She finds him, lost again,
half-dressed in long johns,
and loose vest, barefoot;
pacing the old ring,
circling the rough patch
where cabbage and purple kale
have gone to seed
and pennies from the pockets of
old wrestlers are buried
deep.

Kevin Hutchinson has lived in several places, but was raised in rural Cumbria, which he still calls home. He loves the characters and the character of the place, each finding their way into his work through a lyrical voice and narration in which the boy is ever present. He holds an MA in Creative Writing and an MA in Literature and History of Ideas.

humanity & the earth



Arboreal Fantasy

Janis Butler Holm

Artist Statement

Given global warming, will forestland eventually become just a colorful fantasy in colorless post-nature surroundings?

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



Pluto Line

Leah D. Mueller

Two miles west
on Highway 80,
buried in the epicenter
of concrete and tar.

I cross the line twice
each day: steep ascent,
followed by gradual

lowering of body
into pit. Copper stairs
lead down and down,

like Inca paths.
I crane my neck,
but still can't see the bottom.

Tourists snap photos
of themselves, long teeth
bared for the lens.

Parked minivans perch
watchful beside the abyss,
like greedy raptors.

Even the bushes
want my flesh,
and they will get it,
sooner or later.

Some part will always
be exposed, no matter
how many layers I wear.

Leah Mueller lives in Bisbee, Arizona. She is the author of ten prose and poetry books. Her new book, "The Destruction of Angels" (Anxiety Press) was published in October 2022. Leah's work appears in Rattle, NonBinary Review, Citron Review, The Spectacle, Miracle Monocle, New Flash Fiction Review, Atticus Review, Your Impossible Voice, etc. She is a 2022 nominee for both Pushcart and Best of the Net. Her flash piece, "Land of Eternal Thirst" appears in the 2022 edition of Best Small Fictions. Website: www.leahmueller.org.

J.W. James Funeral for Clark Glacier

we journeyed over fields with ghosts where
they held a funeral for Clark Glacier on South Sister
we all thought a glacier was a broken record now we are broken-hearted
in my dreams glaciers are weeping then gone
we pared our nails shaved our heads in mourning
glaciers clawing gold veins in the earth like masterpieces
abstract expressionist ancient powers
we handed round boxes of kleenex an ocean of tears would not bring back Clark
the news was stunning the day was dusty I had a hangnail I always have hangnails
a sign of nervousness a sign of frustration
eclipse and sinew beeswax doublemint gum the ghost
of Clark Glacier a force field of loss we pass out ribbon candy
from a glass candy dish on my grandmother's coffee table the ribbon candy is eternal
and tastes like my birthplace Auburn before I was an Oregonian
living near volcanic fields and waterfalls
the demise of glaciers
all the manifestations of Cascadia

I am a 65 year old Irish Jewish lesbian poet whose life was waylaid and bowled over but not under from chronic disabling illness. However, the way I became a poet was through learning how to live an underground life as a poet. My bio is not full of places I've been or schools I've graduated from. I have had a rich life in Santa Cruz reading my work in cafes and co-creating a women's writing collective, Tribe Through Time. Currently, I live in Eugene, Oregon.

I've had work published in Lingo, American Writing, Many Mountains Moving, Common Lives/Lesbian Lives, and more. My book-length visionary poem won the Mellen Press contest for Literature as Ecstatic Vision. They published my book, Fish Dreams in 2004. My favorite poetry right now is being published by Milkweed Editions in their Multiverse Series. I'm telling everybody! These are non-speaking, autistic, mad, neuroqueer poets. Another way to be and create poetry. Another way of knowing.

The Red Velvet Crab

Salwa Benaissa

I was seven years old, visiting the Portuguese shore with my family, when my ear caught a family of fiddler crabs arguing. I remember pointing them out and my sister being so unsettled by their snapping orange claws that she scuttled away, squealing. I wasn't interested in sticking around for the crabs' discussion about a banal domestic matter, so I followed my sister to a game of beach tennis. And that was that: I wouldn't give that moment much of a thought over the next twelve years.

See, to a child at the seaside for the first time, a spat among crustaceans is about as startling as tasting salt water. Different, but I didn't question it. I didn't have many opportunities for exposure, after all, living in a landlocked country. I never went to lakes or rivers, I never was the outdoorsy type, and I don't like getting my hair wet. So, following that first seaside trip, seafood menus would be the only place I'd encounter another crab.

I only became enlightened about my "condition" thanks to a fated conversation with my sister at our father's funeral. We were exchanging memories as mourners do, and came to recall that easygoing beach day on the rocky shore of the Atlantic. I said something to the effect of, "Remember how those crabs were arguing?" Well, my sister's stupefied reaction was enough for me to question my own memory and soon change the topic.

When I got home and looked up crabs online, it finally began to sink in that the human ability to understand crustaceans on a discourse level was undocumented. Over the next few days, I reached out to friends and family to recount my memory of the squabbling crabs.

Sure enough, everyone I spoke to reacted to my report with equal puzzlement and concern. You were only a kid, they pointed out. Might'n't you have just imagined it?

I understood that there was only one way to prove whether or not my memory was mere fantasy: I would have to come into contact with another living crab.

I knew it would be hard to track down a fiddler crab in my hometown, but my aunt suggested I take a train to the covered market in the suburbs, where a fishmonger keeps a catch of imported live crabs in a glass tank. In retrospect, I'm glad she suggested it, but let's just say that would be the first and last time I'd lay foot into a fish market. My first glimpse of those poor creatures cramped in that small space was distressing enough. They were much bigger than the ones I had seen on the beach as a child, with beautiful reddish-brown shells, all squeezed into a despondent silence. But when the fishmonger plunged his arm in there, locking a gloved hand around a carapace, the crabs' submerged screaming and communal cries for mercy damn near deafened me. Before his hand reached the surface I was already weeping myself and, now certain that I could understand this large variety of crab, I ran out of the market clutching my hair.

In between the breakdowns that I suffered over the following months, I wrote to marine research centers around the globe describing my experiences. I would have surely been labeled a madwoman or a witch were it not for Dr. Folling, the highly respected marine biologist from Boston University, who responded to my pleas without cynicism. Fortunately, mine and Dr. Folling's research is already capturing the attention of dozens of other institutions. Just four months ago, the Australian Marine Conservation Society flew us to Sydney to introduce us to a distinguished red velvet crab. This crab was unusually well-spoken and revealed to me that he and his ilk are not only prone to impatience, envy, and violence, but equally to boredom. He, too, was surprised to hear that we had that in common—as species, I mean. We enjoyed a riveting discussion about the nuances of boredom, all of which might soon become the basis of a new study with Dr. Folling, fingers crossed.

Just today, as I was finishing breakfast, that charming crab's words returned to me. I had said, "Boredom is a disconnection from the self," to which he replied, "Boredom is the numbest kind of loneliness." That's quite astute, don't you think? Looking out of my kitchen window at the bare branches of a linden tree, it struck me that I was bored, and that I was, in fact, experiencing a numb sort of loneliness. I felt a sudden urge to call the

Australian crab or write him a letter, to express how true his words rang. But of course, crabs can't read, and they certainly can't use telephones. I entertained the idea that I might write a letter anyway and read it aloud to him the next time we met. But let's face it, the crab is already almost three years old, and who knows when Dr. Folling and I will get the funding to return to Sydney.

Given it was a Sunday morning and I had no plans, I ran a hot bath instead. Lying in the tub, I observed my untrimmed toenails and, as the moisture from the humidity collected on my face, I thought about my friend and imagined what it would be like to be boiled alive.

Salwa Benaissa (she/her) is a writer based in Prague.

Paul Ilichko **The Enemy of Nature**

We had caught the snake
that infiltrated the wetlands
and cut it into four pieces

each chunk still larger
than a man's arm
and then we burned it

the skin glowing orange in the heat
there was a stink of meat
of carnage overlaying

rotten fruit and leather
till only a skeleton remained
we had been afraid of the snake

but it became clear that we
were the ferocious ones
our teeth able to rip flesh

black death
and mucous membrane
and a hatred that surpassed

the rights conferred by terror
we were the worst thing
and we knew it.

Paul Ilichko is British American poet and occasional songwriter who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work has appeared in many journals, including The Night Heron Barks, Tampa Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, Stirring, and The Inflectionist Review. He has also published several chapbooks.



petrichor



Angels

Irina Tall Novikova

Materials: watercolor, paper

Size: 21x30 cm

Year: 2022

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories", and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The wonders of winter".



Mass

David McVey

I do not think a week has gone by when I have not thought about the man, not prayed for him, not speculated on what happened to him, not wondered how long he lived after our strange, short relationship ended. And today it is 25 years since what the British call 'D-Day'. I wonder still.

Before the Great War I had worked in one of the bigger hotels in Glasgow, Scotland. Being French was enough back then, you didn't have to be a good chef—although I was. I came back to France in 1914 and served in the army throughout the war. When war came again, as an old soldier and someone with enough English to communicate with British agents, I was drawn into the resistance early on.

Of course, by then I was too old for active service. However, as well as my English I was known to be a careful observer, a good listener, someone with a grasp of detail. Chefs tend to have these qualities. I saw many things in the early years of the war, things that haunt me still, but by the spring of 1944 I was being called into service less often. And then one day as I strolled in the park I recognised a heavy-set man in an overcoat making the barely-perceptible sign. I joined him, a metre distant, as he looked over the railings of the duck pond. Of course, there were no ducks any more. We'd all been hungry.

"You go to church?" he asked, gruffly. The man was, I knew, a Communist and he struggled to hide his distaste at the question, and his greater distaste at my answer.

"I do."

"The Church of St. George? The 9:30 mass on Sundays?"

"Every week," I said. My wife had died in an air raid, my two sons were either prisoners of war or in England and my café was in the efficient hands of my staff. What was to keep me from worship?

"Keep doing so." He slipped me a piece of paper. "Memorise the details of the information requested and then burn this. Go to the 9:30 mass every week. Always go to the same pew. A man will sit next to you, on your right. Leave your notes in your prayer-book. He will swap prayer-books with you and extract the notes. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

We could not say, but we both knew that this was in connection with the expected landings by the British, Canadians and Americans. We knew it was coming. So did the occupiers.

The instructions had told me to go past certain locations—railway yards, German army posts and the like—and to record the activity I saw. We had a simple code for this kind of information, which would conceal our meaning yet not look immediately suspicious if found. I was well-known in the locality as someone who owned a café, who attended the church and who was a veteran of The Great War. No one questioned the right of a middle-aged man to walk around his home town.

That first Sunday, I wrote my notes just before going to church. I had my ways of remembering what I'd seen, a chef's ways. After all, we have to remember what meals we are preparing, how many want the beef, how many the pork, which sauces they want, who does not wish to have a certain vegetable. I had a restaurant-trained memory. And for security reasons I transferred my observations to paper at the last possible moment.

Even that first bright March Sunday morning there were nervous moments. I passed two sullen German soldiers in the main street. I didn't recognise them—they all looked the same in those sinister helmets—but they probably recognised me if they'd been here at any time. Some of them made a point of staring menacingly at worshippers on their way to St. Georges, or to the Église Évangélique a couple of streets away. You needed to remember that you did not stand out, they did not know your secrets, there was nothing about you to attract their attention. It was natural to feel vulnerable and conspicuous, but you were not. But you must continue to behave in an unobtrusive manner.

I sat in the centre pews near the back and the service began. At one point there was a short prayer and we knelt and at the amen we slipped back into our seats and I realised then that there was a man seated on my right.

I did not make the mistake of turning and looking at him. I closed my prayer-book and put it close to his. At the next prayer, he would take up mine and remove the tiny slip of paper on which I had recorded the information.

I do not mean this unkindly, but he did not smell British, but rather of strong French cigarettes, of herbs and of pomade. I had lived in Scotland long

enough to know of their weak cigarettes, the smell of grease that hung about them after eating, the faint memory of hot tea. He was French, or he was British but had adopted French ways.

We stood up to sing a hymn and I focused on the words in my hymnal. When the hymn was over, the organ ceased groaning, and I sat down, putting my hymn-book next to my prayer-book. Both prayer-books were still there but the stranger's place was empty. At the next prayer I used the book he had picked up. The slip of paper was gone.

We repeated this procedure over a number of weeks. The man was never in church when I arrived; sometimes he came in just a minute or two after me, sometimes as much as half an hour into the service. Perhaps he waited across the street out of sight until I arrived and only then entered the church, and not always right away in order to further allay suspicions. Often, I noticed, there was a strong smell of fresh cigarette smoke from him. From French cigarettes.

I never saw him but I felt myself drawn to know what he looked like. I wondered who he was, where he was from and how he had been drawn into this strange world of conceal and pretend. I had a vague impression, as you perhaps get from peripheral vision, of a man in early middle age wearing a suit and tie. Not unlike me.

At one 9:30 mass, however, my curiosity overpowered me. We had been exchanging information for a few weeks by then. This Sunday coincided with the feast day of St. George, and Father Augustine mentioned the saint once or twice in his sermon. By then, I had passed the information and my companion had retrieved it.

There is a rather crude stained glass portrayal of St George and his dragon in one of the windows in the south wall of our church. Father Augustine again mentioned the saint, but this time drew our attention, by way of illustration, to the St George window.

In the instant before I turned to view the window I remembered that I would be turning towards my unknown comrade. I should not have done, but I decided to risk looking at him rather than the window. He, of course, would also have turned towards the window but I would perhaps see his profile and certainly gain an impression of his height and build, of the clothes he wore. And he would not be aware that I was looking at him.

And so I followed the priest's pointing finger, glanced at the window, and then flicked my eyes a little further to the right to examine the mysterious agent.

Of course he had gone already. He was good, someone who could move noiselessly and unseen, like a ghost or a pillar of mist. But, as I was to learn, he could not make himself invisible to all.

Pettet was the village chemist, a talkative man, a dangerous quality in an occupied area. One of my staff had gone on holiday to greet a new grandchild, so I was in the café working behind the counter. During a quiet spell Pettet was my only customer. He finished his coffee and approached the counter with his uneven, sailor-like walk, a squat, unpleasant looking man in his early forties.

“That bloke who always sits next to you in church, chief...”

I had been involved in subversive warfare for four years by then, and had served throughout the killing years of The Great War, but the words chilled me more than anything else I had experienced.

“What?” I finally replied. “I go to church alone.”

“Well, yeah, I know that, ‘course you do. But there’s always this bloke sits in the same pew, on your right. Haven’t you noticed him?”

“No, I haven’t,” I lied. “I have certainly never spoken to any such person.” This part, of course, was true.

“Yeah, anyway, he’s a funny bloke. I wasn’t in church last Sunday but I saw him coming out of the church when I was passing. Always leaves before the end, haven’t you noticed that? Guess where he went? Right into the Église Évangélique. Now tell me that isn’t a funny thing.”

I smiled, uneasily. “Perhaps he is a wavering believer who does not quite know his spiritual home, yet. I do not know the man.”

“Well, something funny about it, if you ask me...”

Was I being warned, or threatened? Could miserable little Pettet really be a collaborator with the Nazis? Or was he really just nosy, interfering and annoying? There was this intriguing thought, too; perhaps my contact had another source of information who attended the Église Évangélique? It seemed a risky arrangement.

I continued as normal with my weekly round, watching, noting and remembering. Then, just before mass on the Sunday, I committed my information to paper and secreted the notes in my prayer-book.

When I arrived in church, I made my way to my usual pew. On the way, near the back, I saw Pettet sitting with his arms folded. He smiled to me.

I put my prayer-book down as usual and awaited the arrival of my secret comrade. Through song and hymn, prayer and scripture, sermon and Eucharist, I waited, but he never appeared. Had something gone wrong? If the Allies now had enough information about this remote corner of Normandy and my contact had been stood down they would not necessarily inform me. But the possibility remained that he had been captured. Was Pettet the informer?

I had to leave the church carrying a prayer-book that still held the secret information. As I walked to the vestibule I avoided Pettet’s eye, but I could not help imagining him staring at me as I passed. I shook hands with Father Augustine holding the prayer-book tightly in my left hand, so tightly that I could feel the slickness of sweat between book and skin. It felt like wet soap. I walked home hurriedly, at one point almost walking into two German soldiers. I offered my apologies and in return they swore at me. At home, I lit the fire using my secret notes.

I could not eat that lunchtime. If the man had been captured, he would be interrogated. No ordinary mortal could withstand Gestapo viciousness for long and he would eventually gasp with his last breath about the middle-aged Frenchman and his regular place in church. Or perhaps Pettet had identified

both of us and they were playing with me and observing me, seeing who else I could implicate. Every second I feared the door being broken through and jackboots hammering on the floor. At even the slightest sound, I started like a frightened child.

Yet I went about my daily business. I worked in the café when necessary, I took my walks but did not observe Nazi activity. I played chess with old friends outside the café and went to church. Sunday morning mass was a tense business, now, and I could not help wondering whether this would be the day I would be dragged from worship by unyielding German soldiers and delivered to the local Gestapo.

My contact never appeared again. The Germans never came for me. Just weeks later the Allies landed and by the end of August the local occupying forces were packing up and clearing out. Some youths managed to isolate odd German soldiers, and they were brutally beaten up and left for dead. On a hot Sunday in early September I came out of mass to find the village square full of Scottish soldiers, their accents just like the ones I remembered from long before. They were being feted by various villagers and I welcomed them myself and told them of my days in Glasgow. They were good lads, but weary and with good reason.

Resistance was no longer necessary but recrimination between the Communists and the different factions continued, reprisals were carried out against collaborators on the flimsiest of evidence. Pettet was never identified as such, but I suspect that the more effective Nazi agents were never even suspected.

I never heard from anyone in the resistance again. Many afterwards claimed to have been involved but had not, while those of us who risked our lives were often pushed aside and received no recognition. This did not worry me. I was happy with my life, in my faith, and in the company of my sons who both returned from the war, one from a prison camp and one from the Free French forces.

Again this Sunday, I will go to church and pray for the soul of my wartime comrade.

David McVey lectures at New College Lanarkshire in Scotland. He has published over 120 short stories and a great deal of non-fiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking (ie, hiking), visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly (ie, TV), and supporting his home-town football (ie, soccer) team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

the second worst coldplay song on low volume as my grandmother drives away in a hearse

Liam Strong

i would pour
blackberry syrup

on the one street
in republic michigan

rudiments of blood
slashed open with steam

breathless throat
burning the cudighi

again
who would swerve

who would pull over
just to give you a few

more seconds

Liam Strong (they/them) is a queer neurodivergent straight-edge punk writer who earned their B.A. in writing from University of Wisconsin-Superior. They're the author of the chapbook everyone's left the hometown show (Bottlecap Press, 2023). They are most likely gardening somewhere in Northern Michigan.

Beneath the Shadow Smitha Sehgal

The house is a bramble without you. Did you know?
Each corner holds out elongated shadows
I stumble upon even as daylight pours under
the cinnamon tree. On the curtain of silence, eight-
legged words crawl, and their eyes burn with submerged
impudence.

I admit that I am not faultless. That all those pandemic years
I spent redrafting force majeure clauses I dodged your questions
with the practiced ease of handling a bewildered child.
You would not believe that the world had come beneath
a shroud and there were no flamingos from my island
to yours. That the only thing we could count on
was each other's voices. Birdcall. The receiver
on your right ear. Deep within I knew enough
not to play with you, but I was not prepared
for the bewildered child you would become.

The night I arrived you looked away with a smile,
and every night thereon I have been constantly
trying to knot the ends of past and future
without the isthmus of the present. This house
of sour mangoes and pickled peppers where I wanted
to grow old once, it is a bramble without you
and I swallow each hour like a forced prescription.
The wooden planks have cracked from their core.

Smitha Sehgal

Tremors

7.7 on the Richter scale but honey
I do not have time for this or anything else for I am
the circus manager and the clown and the dancing bear. Funny
that, once the tea sours I have no choice but to dilute
the joys and gulp down the epiphanies. When the crowd walks in
I am separating bones from soft cooked rice for the lion.
Do you know how it is to feed a lion that crouches in the dark
of its own mind, cold floors smelling of phenol? Disarray
of empty cartons, biscuit tins, and old green-tinged beer bottles.
For now we water down the morning, pale light, mother says it is
about to rain, among the unwashed utensils from the earthquake
night
and the headache that stalked me back home yesterday evening,
across the scraggly hair and voice breaking through the thick
curtains
of pretension, it's show night, we have to hurry, hurry
on these days when doors and windows swing to the music of
Gods making love
and the entire world spirals down the stairway
and I do not have time for this or anything else. Pale light.

Smitha Sehgal (she/ her) is a legal professional and poet who writes in two languages—English and Malayalam. Her poems have been featured in contemporary literary publications such as Usawa Literary Review, Panoply, Shot Glass Journal, Marrow Magazine, Ink Sweat & Tears, Gone Lawn Journal and elsewhere.

Thick Rules

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith

I have a friend who likes rules
The story must have a plot
One beer is not enough
You can never leave a game early
Even if it's a savage blow out
The cebolla is sprinkled on the menudo
After the cilantro and chiltepin
If you begin a dance
You finish the dance
Never make the tortillas too thick
Something about not finishing what is
started
Summons el diablo
His hooves marking the floor
His tail terrorizing los perros
No one may cut into the piñata line
Even if they are tiny and may not get a
Chance to take a devastating swing

My friend crosses himself when he passes a church
Claims Jim Morrison is still alive like Rimbaud who
fooled everyone good
And lived his life on a shore where no one looked for him
(Let's practice the invisible)

This friend says many do not choose
Their favorite song or that one kiss
That still flames up their nostalgic longings
While sitting, drinking a beer in an empty cantina,
Reading a novel found deep in a drawer.

One late night he will call. Buckled by an anxious
Dream full of swamps and remind you that days are
For taking chances. Sometimes all it takes is less sugar,
Replacing the one broken shoelace
In your favorite pairs of kicks, or arriving early
At the parade before the crowds and rain.

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith was born in Merida, Yucatan, grew up in Tucson, Arizona and taught English at Tucson High School for 27 years. Much of his work explores growing up near the border, being raised biracial/bilingual and teaching in a large urban school where 70% of the students are American/Mexican. A Pushcart nominee, his writings will appear in Drunk Monkeys, Sky Island Journal and have been published in Allium Journal, Book Of Matches and other places too. His wife, Kelly, sometimes edits his work, and the two cats seem happy.

Symbolism

Paul Ilichko

Esoteric symbols etched on walls a mysterious
formula of cracked acrylic magenta on lime
saffron on periwinkle tangerine on cyan
spattering a color wheel of hieroglyphics
where you will find a naked woman hands
clasped her face serene there is a man who
sees nothing beyond her nudity in his mind she
has no face just polished breasts and the twist
of a labile pelvis the both of them assembled
from gears and bones and bicycle parts uniting
to form a brazen giant that in its majesty must
overpower mere humanity creating a triptych
of beings real or imaginary each wired
in place each visible through its own aperture.

Art referenced in "Symbolism" :



Three German Paintings by Paul Ilchko

Paul Ilchko is British American poet and occasional songwriter who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work has appeared in many journals, including The Night Heron Barks, Tampa Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, Stirring, and The Inflectionist Review. He has also published several chapbooks.

Hyperbole

Belle

I am weak. I've known this for a very long time.

My parents love me, I'm sure of it. My childhood was filled with vacation days and shopping trips and laughter. It was lovely in the moment, but not anymore. The bells ring to empty cathedral pews. The structured memories are there, but not the soul.

My parents are strong. They crawled to this country with mud-smeared hands (from playing in the dirt, not on those computers) and loose change jangling in their pockets. They've overcome more than I have ever gained, built an empire with wits and ambition and intelligence alone.

I am soft in comparison, wincing at too-loud schoolyard chatter and grades alike. Poking distastefully at the chub of my stomach, cringing at the feeling of my thighs brushing together when I lie on my side. I lie and cheat and weep for no good reason, infallible in my desire to be the best. No matter the consequences. I embody attraction and repulsion simultaneously, chasing and fleeing from others, whirling around my friends with affection and hatred alike.

How do I work with this? The shadow of my parents is long, yet. In the early morning of my lifespan, their affluence and talent and passion cover me from the warm, warm sun. A respite from the heat, a curse in the cold. I am stunted, ignorant of the outside world, and when others come into my grasp, they leave soon enough,

sweltering in the heat of the sun with hateful glares leaking from their frostbitten cheeks.

I dream of grotesque things. Of hurting so badly that the world flinches back from my mangled hands. It does not help me at all, and yet I find myself wanting to tear a hole through my torso. To have my face atomized by some terrible monster. To have my friends and family look at me with pained eyes and offer me their love. An actor, standing upon a stage, tears himself apart and stitches himself back together. It is in that same way that I wish to act.

Life isn't bad. I'm just dramatic. Teenagers and poetry-adjacent writing lead to far more melodrama than one will ever need. Rationally, I'm a normal person. I'm doing well in school, at the very least, but that doesn't stop me from imagining my funeral when I feel alone. I imagine myself as a thing lost at sea, a tightrope walker about to plummet over the edge. At my funeral, the sky opens its mouth to pour. At my funeral, my grave floods and drags me to the cutting waves.

I have straight As. I cry over them anyway.

An actor, standing upon a stage, tears himself apart and stitches himself back together. The house lights turn on, and suddenly the actor is reminded of his folly. Absorbed in the pitiful, cowardly character, snapping back into his normal self when the stage is illuminated and exposes the set. Half-drilled plywood stairs. Sloppy paint drippings on the floor. His costume is nothing but foam and felt. A jester, almost. It is in this same way that I act.

But what's it to you?

I'm just dramatic, after all.

Belle is a writer. Probably. They like doing it sometimes.

Burger Shops. Empires D.S. Maolalai

6am sunday. men power-
wash stains from off cobble.
some are hungover, some just
very tired. one arrives late
with four coffees in a wilting
card tray. last night this town
was all rags and good stories.
women getting fucked up
on ladies night drinks.
men fighting outside
of burger shops. empires
burning. things happened
to be talked about
forever. and this morning
the other kind of man walks
about with a spray gun and daffodil-
bright yellow jacket,
a subcontractors logo
printed in plasticky ink.

DS Maolalai has been nominated eleven times for Best of the Net, eight for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Forward Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections, most recently "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022).

Leland Seese

after a dream

— a response to Gabriel Faure's "après un rêve"

eyes
closed

held
beyond

the reach
of grief

behold
the open

gates
of heaven

Leland Seese (he/him) is a writer living in Seattle, Washington. His poems have been published in RHINO, Juked, Rust & Moth, and many other journals. His poem "PTSD" was awarded honorable mention in the North Carolina Poetry Society's "Poems of Courage" Award. While he never tires of lyric poetry, he loves poems that delight in musical language and highly-associative metaphors. In his free time, he reads crime novels and solves crossword puzzles. You can find more of his writing at lelandseesepoetry.com.

Rag Doll Symposium Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

A sensation.

Somewhere in the darkness.

Soft.

Warm.

Spreading.

Familiar.

Sweetly familiar.

I don't wanna wake up, Andie thought to herself. To *her*.

Ultrasound-resolution snapshots of *her*—the owner of the sweetly familiar:

An awning of wispy bangs poorly concealing the remnants of acne.

Endearing moles forever at risk of falling into severe dimples.

Crooked smile full of crooked teeth.

Eyes a squirrel's winter-long regret about the prized acorns that got away.

And the *sweetly familiar* itself: lightly freckled, naturally fragrant flesh stretching over perfectly moulded cartilage to produce the finely pointed nose unique to Heather.

The sensation—a feathery tickle against Andie's own bumpy nose—beckoned her to wake up.

Let me sleep.

But the tickling intensified. Heather's persistent nose rubbed against Andie's, achieving searing friction.

This better be good.

Bracing for light—even if only the dim shaded bulb on the nightstand—Andie opened her eyes, and was rewarded with the darkness of Heather's close countenance.

I'm awake, I'm awake.

But Heather seemed neither to notice, nor care.

Andie swiveled her head in a spasmodic arc, trying to untether herself from Heather's abrasive nose, but a keen Heather mirrored every evasive direction. She tried pushing the nuisance away, but the nuisance had prepared for this counterattack, pinning her arms.

What're you doing?

Heather continued the assault at her leisure.

Prophesying the personal pain of such a tactic, Andie shot her head forward, but the headbutt failed to make contact with the anticipating Heather. Once more, she projected her forehead; once more, Heather mirrored the motion in reverse.

The agonizing tickling and impenetrable darkness persisted.

What the fuck're you doing?

Andie blinked vigorously, unable to grip the opaque nothingness of Heather's face.

A spike of anxiety pierced but did not defeat the overwhelming tickling.

It's happened!

Sharper spikes of anxiety, whetted by an ambient lifelong fear.

I'm mute and blind!

Exaggerated blinking tested her new disability.

Tears failed to wash away the darkness. Failed to soothe the tickling ravaging her nose.

Can't you see I'm fucking blind, Heather?

A gust of wind banished the darkness, but not the awful tickling, allowing terrible light to stab Andie's unprepared eyes. Behind sealed lids, she waited for the jolting pain to subside, relishing the jagged throbbing, for it promised a chance of sight. A chance of seeing Heather.

Like a newborn's natural foray into optics, Andie studied the world between adjusting blinks:

Hands stretched out on either side of her, free of Heather's shackles.

Blink.

The left a tight fist.

Blink.

The right upturned, open, reaching for something.

Blink.

Or someone.

Heather?

Andie stared at the motionless hands shrouded in night's gloom, willing them to form the motions that would "speak" Heather's name.

They remained still.

She attempted “speech” again and again, each time forging a spike of anxiety with a message not of blindness this time, but of something else.

Sleep paralysis. Recalling the frequent occurrence blunted the spikes.

Sleeping on my stomach again.

But I'm not allowed to sleep on my stomach anymore.

Why?

I don't know.

Another breath of cold air inspired movement. Vexed that Heather would leave the oscillator on at what felt like maximum power during a bitter winter night, Andie tracked the stirring to her right. Things poked out from the wrist of the unfulfilled right hand. Tiny. Gossamer. White. Dancing in the breeze, seemingly matching the tickling on her nose without contact.

I know what you are.

Andie crossed her eyes, directed blurred sight upon the tip of her nose, and barely made out the tail-end of one of the tiny white things clinging there.

You're not Heather's nose!

Fire raged beneath her face, stoked by the fraud that was the tiny white thing she struggled to identify. She tried to wipe the obstruction away, but sleep paralysis forced her to try another way. Attempts to move her head reported the same incapacity. Her tongue fared too short to reach the anomaly, while funneling breath upward only contributed to the tiny white thing's dance. And its fraudulent tickling.

You'll never be Heather's nose!

Andie glared at the other tiny white things spilling from her wrist.

None of you will ever be Heather's nose!

One of the flimsy objects quivered in the swift breeze.

You rhyme with her...

Faster quivering.

But you're just...

Loosening itself from her wrist.

You're just a... a stupid feather!

The tiny white thing—indeed a feather—flung itself toward her. The oncoming feather grazed her nose, instigating a fresh tingling sensation, then flitted away, leaving the original feather stuck to her nose to continue the annoying assault.

Andie eyed the feathers' cousins, pouring from her wrist, threatening additional attacks.

I gotta get Heather to sew that up.

The fire beneath Andie's face simmered to a temperature of reminiscence. A heat calibrated to emulate Heather's delicate embrace. For a moment, she quieted the tickling on her nose, and she and Heather became Celsius and Fahrenheit, their trivial differences set aside to form a mutual climate. A love affair between disagreeing degrees, matched only by the winter jacket Heather had gifted her.

Why am I wearing a jacket in bed?

Andie's desperate eyes searched the farthest reaches of their sockets. She stared at her open right hand, then adjusted her vision to include her closed left fist in the narrow frame of vision. The immovable things were her means of communication with a world that barely listened to the speaking. These bony, fragile tools possessed the history of Andie and Heather in their joints, their lines, their movements; possessed their arguments, their flirtations, their declarations of love, their wordless explorations of flawed bodies. They articulated every syllable, every inflection, every nuance their shared body language spoke.

But Heather was nowhere to read Andie now.

Dread filled Andie, then a painful swig of frigid air. Countless icy teeth and claws gnashed and slashed at her hot innards, melting to a refined tickle in her dry throat—as if Heather rubbed her there with her sweetly familiar nose. Increasing pressure and vibration created an alien discomfort, and when she achieved that sense of unpleasant fullness, she braced herself, wishing for dreaded deafness as she expelled a pitiful timbre of inarticulate wind.

Andie winced at the pathetic sound of her wretched voice, immediately cutting off the gauzy second syllable of Heather's name before it could further pollute the silence.

The unpleasant fullness dissipated.

The pressure released.

The vibration returned to stillness.

The tickling buried itself in her unpracticed vocal cords.

Tears, not Heather, heeded her call.

Where the fuck are you, Heather?

A scream tore through the silence, a noise Andie could never aspire to create.

Heather?

The scream rose in volume, in agony.

She's having another nightmare.

Andie struggled to push her head to the right, but sleep paralysis had other plans. Still, memory showed her what she had seen many a night: a “sleeping” Heather, bathed in perspiration, a corner of the pillow cover or end of the blanket crammed into her gagging mouth, the poor thing trapped in the recurring nightmare, where she was reduced to a vulnerable child, forever choking on the

sock her ashamed mother forced her to keep in her mouth for countless hours, her mother's incessant credo—"A girl who can't speak has no use for a mouth"—singing against Heather's screaming.

It's okay, doll, Andie helplessly cooed. I'm here.

Andie glared at her stricken arms to awaken from the damned sleep paralysis.

I'm awake! she yelled at her left arm. To the right: *I'm fucking awake!*

As the excruciating concert wore on, Andie fixed her eyes on the open seam of her jacket sleeve, its gaping mouth seemingly producing the agonizing screams. One of the feathers flitted toward the screaming as if sucked by the noise. Another followed, seemingly beckoning her to follow its trajectory. Even the fraudulent feather tacked to her nose had had enough of imitating Heather's rubbing nose, and flew in the direction of the screaming—flew not adjacent to her, where Heather suffered through her nightmare, but ahead of her, where the bed's headboard and the wall beyond were just out of sight.

Screaming can't come from there.

An epiphany both relieving and perplexing: *Heather can't scream.*

Indeed, the perpetual soundtrack of distress was much too distinct, soaked in the clarity of the regularly-speaking.

Andie forced her head up and forward for a better view of the source of discordance, barely managing to rest her chin upon a hard, cold surface.

Where's our bed? My pillow?

She tried to extend her range of motion, but the cursed sleep paralysis established its barrier.

The screaming dropped into an octave of frustration for a quick bar, guttural notes Andie begrudgingly adopted as the anthem to her own frustration.

The strained vocals abandoned this reprieve, resuming its song of pain. So, too, did Andie's eyes rise with the notes, straining to see something—*anything!*—just under their top lids. Twin images of blurry eyelashes filled her field of vision, through which she could see a dark, sleek surface that ended in a massive spiderweb.

No wonder Heather's screaming.

She's not, she reminded herself. She can't!

But the spiders!

Andie's limited sight followed the strands of web, their simultaneous diverging and converging paths crooked, muddled with helter-skelter clots, knots, and lazy asymmetrical patterns. The work was devoid of famed arachnid artistry.

I gotta find and kill the spider for her.

Her eyes hunted, seeing eight legs where none existed.

Where the fuck are my legs?

Her brain sent messages to them, but received reminders of sleep paralysis.

Exasperated, Andie concentrated on locating the spider. Sight settled upon a glob of web material sitting to one side, pressing against the web from behind without snapping the strands. Glistening red stained the off-white mass.

Do spiders bleed like we do?

She couldn't recall any colours from her previous Heather rescue missions. Blood and guts had always been carefully collected and concealed by exaggerated clumps of tissue or smooth-soled dollar store slippers, thrown away with neither smear nor stray piece.

If only they were made of tiny white feathers, then Heather might kill them herself.

But then I couldn't rescue her.

A scream from somewhere beyond the ugly web and uglier clump of red-splotched ball of material.

Do spiders scream?

She didn't know. Didn't want to know, what with the numerous murders by her hand.

Another scream. Human, garnished with animality. An abrupt choke reduced the screaming to an intermittent rhythm of panting and crying.

The hunk of web throbbed in sync with the breathy melody. A painful bark announced the arrival of twin spiders crawling over the bulbous horizon. Large, spindly things. In Andie's mind, doubtless plump with tiny white feathers.

The binary arachnids halted in unison, staring at Andie with a multitude of hidden eyes that asked the same question: "How are you going to protect Heather?"

The panting/crying intensified, neglecting its metronome.

The spiders clenched the glob of web, impressing their spindly legs into the mass, giving Andie the impression of something hollow and soft. Intoxicated with heavy *deja vu*, she felt the spiders and their imprint as a single hand upon her stomach. Felt the tiny protest against the disembodied palm. Felt the barely perceptible rise and fall underneath the palm.

Andie diverted her eyes from the spiders, but she still felt the ethereal palm against her stomach, the rise and fall of burgeoning life within, communicating its own rendition of her and Heather's soundless language.

Rise and fall.

Rise and fall.

Rise Andie had, mere hours ago, sliding out from under Heather's anchoring hand.

Andie felt the life within still communicating, unaware contact had been broken during the quick escape from a cozy bed, oblivious to Andie's hasty

change from toasted pajamas to untoasted winter wear. She turned to an inquisitive Heather, answering those acorn eyes with a flourish of hands, communicating her need for fresh air. And before Heather's hands could espouse clichéd warnings of the perils of the late hour, the harsh weather, and remind Andie she had two people to think about—made all the more ominous by her official use of “Andrea”—Andie left.

Traffic was sparse, the last of the illuminated businesses camouflaged with the night. No matter the pace or direction travelled, Andie still felt Heather's strangling umbilical cord reeling her back to their womb-like apartment. Still felt Heather's hand upon her bulbous stomach, transmitting love, admiration, and awe to the life within. Underneath the positive trifecta, however, there lived the lingering inverted trinity of anger, resentment, and jealousy, for genetics, in all of its indiscriminate wisdom, had long ago deemed Heather unfit for childbearing.

Aimless though she believed her steps to be, Andie instinctively slowed as she approached *the* building. The filmy streetlamp was far too bright, too akin Heather's omniscient eyes, coaxing Andie to review her surroundings. Despite its discreet and welcoming design, the bland building exuded an aura of stigma and harsh judgment. Andie ignored the condemnation by counting the slightly uneven steps to the front door, knowing there were three—always three. Three easy steps. And a ramp. Easy access to a life in need of correction. A new life.

Andie knew she could indeed achieve a new life beyond those sliding doors, but knew that, upon exit, it would be a certified life without dear Heather.

As if sensing the building's controversial business, the baby kicked, and like a trained horse responding to a spurred heel, Andie moved on, wondering if she would ever muster the moxie to pass through those sliding doors during hours of operation.

Hands buried in the warmth of the jacket's pockets—and far too close to the sentient creature beneath the fabric—Andie found herself not only toying with thoughts, but something else. She withdrew her right hand, and between her fingers saw a bent tiny white feather, flailing in the cold wind. Pivoting her arm, she saw the seam—wider than the last time she had laid eyes upon it during a similar walk for “fresh air”—in the cuff of the jacket, the deflated sleeve having lost most of its voluptuous originality.

Andie imagined a similar opening along her abdomen. Imagined reaching in and removing her *tiny white feather*.

If only it was that simple.

A flash of the building in her wake, and the inspiration, along with the feather, flitted away in the bitter wind.

As cold breaths of air slowly defeated Andie's jacket, her worn boots detected uneven gravel well past the transition from smooth sidewalk. Down a quiet road she had never traversed, she found herself within the throes of longer,

deeper chasms of darkness, sporadic, weepy-eyed street lamps teasing tangled brush and sinuous, nude trees.

She, too, felt nude, but somehow freer.

The mysterious darkness beyond the last visible streetlamp illuminated a thought: *I can keep going.*

Her stomach ached with the kicks of countless babies, forcing her to stop. Alarmed by the swiftness of the onslaught, she felt something she hadn't since first daring to hold Heather's hand for all the world to see. Not the kicks of countless babies, but the fluttering wings of excited butterflies.

I can keep going!

In the invigorating darkness between tired streetlamps, Andie's mouth ached, both from the numbing cold and the lengthy lack of practice those deprived muscles had in performing a smile. For the first time in months, she no longer felt like an incubator to Heather's hopes and dreams, a lifeless machine providing life to a living, breathing miniature but weighty anchor, but a weightless butterfly sanctuary whose very inhabitants would whisk her off of her exhausted feet, and transport her to a place where mind and body were her own.

Keep going!

Her legs believed the hype, propelling her toward a terrifying yet exhilarating unknown.

A pale pair of silvery eyes pierced the dark vanishing point of the quiet road ahead.

She was faintly aware of the glaring negatives of this compulsion, instead savouring the gluttony of well-deserved selfishness.

The pale eyes grew brighter. Closer.

Butterfly wings pushed her forward. Baby kicks—or the fresh memory of them—threatened to pull her back to Heather, and the seemingly already-lived life she had fervently planned for the young trio.

The eyes moved fast and erratically along the road, illuminating Andie's route to freedom.

Her right hand detected another loose feather.

I gotta get Heather to sew that.

Her enthusiastic legs tripped on the old, automatic thinking. She regained footing, helped by Heather's firm grip on her stomach. Heather's property.

The eyes blurred into a single spotlight, blinding, roaring, racing toward her.

The baby issued a tremendous kick.

Darkness replaced the spotlight, somehow equally blinding.

Andie danced with minutes and millennia in timelessness until oblivious numbness spawned a sensation.

Somewhere in the darkness.

Soft.

Warm.

Spreading.

Familiar.

Sweetly familiar.

I don't wanna to wake up.

But the crying insisted.

Not the blaring adult female screaming that had paradoxically lulled Andie to the peaceful darkness where recent memory dwelled, but a quieter, tinier, reassuring song whose hypnotic quality gently lifted Andie out of her black limbo.

Between blinks, she rediscovered her predicament: outstretched arms bracketing her peripheral, the left hand curled in a tight fist, the right hand open, awaiting acceptance, her permanently paralyzed means of communication rendering her forever mute; the tiny white feathers continuing their way through the jacket cuff's enlarged seam, some clinging to the opening, seemingly hesitant to experience their newfound freedom, while others took flight without second thought; the shattered windshield where she began to see and understand the car manufacturer's safety design rather than the intricate abstract web-work of an elusive yet brilliant spider; alas, there were the twin spiders and their glob of reddened web—dead feminine hands clenching a deployed, blood-stained airbag.

For all the human and vehicular carnage, Andie felt no pain. Felt nothing but the tickling sensation inspired by severed and confused nerve-endings unable to see and comprehend the car before her and the tree behind her.

From somewhere behind the busted windshield, the crying of a newborn baby lamented its terrible start in life.

I'm sorry your mommy is dead, Andie hopelessly transmitted.

The baby cried louder: *"I'm sorry your baby is dead."*

Andie focused her numb senses on her stomach, the crushed filling of a gruesome sandwich. She mentally kicked the baby, receiving the stillness for which she yearned.

I can sleep on my stomach again.

The bent hood of the car was cool under her cheek.

Like its deceased mother's labour cacophony, the baby's crying wooed Andie into a masquerade of slumber. The nothingness was seductively delicious; the more obese she became indulging a diet of pure nirvana, the lighter she felt. From infinite seams on her deflating being, tiny white feathers went wherever such things go.

There was a final sensation.

Somewhere in the darkness.

Sweetly familiar.

About Mollusk

Mollusk Literary Magazine is a global online literary magazine that seeks to amplify the voices of a new generation of writers and artists. It was founded in 2023 by Founding Editors in Chief, Sascha Chernesky and Rida Zulfikar. We aim to empower those interested in submitting by implementing a transparent timeline for submissions, quick turnaround, feedback on submissions when requested, and additional resources for writers. We help writers and artists break into the industry, gain more familiarity with their writing, and promote voices that haven't yet found a place in the public eye.

Mollusk Lit believes that the word "watashiato" (*n.* curiosity about the impact you've had on the lives of the people you know) encapsulates our ideology succinctly, because we wish to expand the curiosity of everyone who happens upon our page—readers, writers, artists, and editors alike. Writing and art are exploratory mediums. Discoveries are made every day, ten million times over. Maybe you'll make a few here. Maybe you'll connect with this character or that culture. Some words and images will stick with you forever. Through the writers, artists, and works we promote, we hope to remind our creators that their work, their time, their words and images are not only deserving of their love and attention, but our love and attention, and that of the public eye as well.

Let us learn something new. Let us feel warmth, thrills, wonder. Let us share our fears and spread the burden of our hurt so that we all may carry a lighter load.

You have already left the world a better place.

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