

Sparks of Consciousness



June 2015

Flash Fiction
by
Chella Courington

Divergent Lines

That's what it was, yes, the sun, a trapezoid on her bamboo floor. She wasn't even sure if she knew what a trapezoid was, those days in geometry long ago, Mrs. Burgoyne in thick beige hose and a floral dress, exuding the mustiness of tobacco, and they stopped in their seats, held their breaths that Burgoyne would not single them out, ask for an answer, rapping the wooden desk with her nails. Yes, a trapezoid of light. Adele had remembered the shape after all those years, two parallel lines with uneven sides, the metal clothes rack on rollers, long shirts and short on plastic hangars waiting for someone to wash or iron or wear defined the side closest to the bed. Trapezoid. The sound, that's what she remembered most about eleventh grade math, all those delicious words—perpendicular, quadrilateral, rhombus, isosceles, especially isosceles with all the s's tickling her tongue. She would roll the syllables, listen to their sibilants whistle on ivory, and think of her new skates, the ones her mother bought at Loveman's Department Store three weeks before Christmas and handed them to Adele that day, a white box with white skates so she could slice parallel lines and though her marks were often ragged, splinters glistening under Loveman lights, she dreamed of leaving the ice cut clean.

Had she outgrown those skates and skating, giving them up for boys with pimples and their sticky hands, grasping, reaching like the tentacles of some kraken, leaving marks circular and smooth? Configurations Sonja Henie or Dorothy Hamill would create in the compulsory exercises and from all that fumbling and pushing when no meant no or maybe or yes, depending on what happened.

Chester Street Station

An unfamiliar fragrance, not jasmine or gardenia, floats from an unfamiliar garden the shape of cats and rabbits, leafy ears knocking against a fence, cherry wood six feet tall. You wait for the cue: the cracked bell or frog croaking to startle you. They never sound. You wait for another cue: a single crow on the rabbit's ear cawing down at you. Instead, you hear clacking. Your mother in a serge suit and stiletto boots brushes past and through the gate. Should you follow? Do you feel lost again when you can crawl out of bed and your mother is not there, wherever she is when you saw her? Does inertia pull you back into her boots clicking on concrete in a dark station? You watch the faces (is there someone else you know?) behind windows washed in grit, oblivious to you. The train stops and passengers spread into the day ahead, briefcases and shopping bags. You can't find her. She has promised again and again to be there in the morning. Crying, you wake in this unfamiliar world and feed the cat.

Bio: Chella Courington is a writer and teacher. She's the author of three flash fiction chapbooks along with three chapbooks of poetry. Stories and poetry have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals including *SmokeLong*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Nano Fiction*, and *The Collagist*. Her recent novella, *The Somewhat Sad Tale of the Pitcher and the Crow* (Pink.Girl.Ink.Press) is available at Amazon. Born and raised in the Appalachian south, she now lives in Santa Barbara, CA, with another writer and two cats.

HYSTERON PROTERON

by
James Bradley

In the dim light of the cloister, crisscrossed with the shadows of columned arcades of white stone and polished wood, Brother Maximus related his confessional tale to the old Abbot: "When I was young, I considered myself to be a fierce atheist by necessity, even though a more accurate designation for my theological (or as I called them at the time, *metaphysical*) beliefs would probably be *agnostic*."

"Nomenclature aside, I believed that we must *will* the rejection of God for our own betterment; for even if God exists, I reasoned, His is a remote and distant Divinity and of no direct bearing on our lives in the realm of mundane existence, save as fosterer of our continued and self-imposed belittlement. I saw no harm, indeed even great good, in this reasoned dismissal of the Father to whom we owe all that we are and all that we know."

"A deterministic, humanist conclusion to draw, not from the evidence, per se, but rather precisely from the lack of evidence. You were a product of the age," commented the Abbot dryly.

"Yet at the time I thought it the height of originality and proof that I was embarked upon my own individual path to Truth, which was true enough, I suppose, though a winding and meandering path it proved to be. . ." Brother Maximus smiled with the vague remembrance of loftiness mingled with confusion and sunlight; it was a Nausea he once reveled in and prized above all else—friendship, the love of women, chemical intoxication—*all else*.

"Yet even in those days of bacchanalia and pride I drew upon the concept of God frequently in order to understand my own existentialism more deeply. Again and again in my writings, and with increasing frequency, God proved Himself to be the most potent, most edifying metaphor available to me for expressing a wide range of aspects of the human condition I wished to understand more fully—our anxieties, our illusions, our sicknesses, our *goodness*. No matter the topic I sought to explore, hardly had I put pen to paper when *there was God again*, staring at me from my own hand upon the page like a chronic and unwanted *deus ex machina*."

"I was no poet; rather, I felt a supreme distrust of all abstract systems; I strongly believed that abstractions—words, symbols, representations of all types—though created by men, had, through some sort of devilish *coup*, invisibly but unilaterally conquered men's minds. I thought evolution had indifferently led us to this point, after millions of years, in which the extraordinary brain it had fashioned from proteins and mud was now in the process of blindly detaching itself from existence, from the very material world from which it sprang. A dizzying proposition, I know. . ."

"And not without some small merit. I sense the guiding hand of Grace, even in your youthful days of error and folly. Though you lacked the divine Word, God was not content to sit back and let the blind little country mouse run into the claws of the farmer's cat," the old Abbot stated drolly. "The Holy Spirit was, and is, with you, my brother."

A small lizard ran across the bare foot of Brother Maximus, who at that moment looked up and removed his cowl, touched by these soft and generous words from his superior, yet determined to say his peace. "I believed God to be the supreme abstraction. The supreme shackle to throw off, the gravest oppressor even in nonexistence, and therefore offering the greatest and most supreme ecstasy of liberation if one could be free of Him."

"Yet I thought of God constantly. Everything stood in relation to this incomprehensibly *strange* being, an almighty God whom I told myself did not exist. I became increasingly aware of this contradiction in my intellectual system. I even drank myself into stupors in which I would pray fervently to this nonexistent God, asking him how he could be so cruel as to fail to exist when it was the highest wish of mankind that he do this one simple thing, *exist*. Some nights I sobbed and sobbed, my loneliness could not have been greater had I been the last man on the earth."

"Other days I was seized by a kind of mania of lucidity in which I pretended (and believed) to have discovered through my torments the enlightenment of the sages of the East, though even in these fits of urgency and rapture a nagging dread ever followed close behind, like a shadow just beyond my skull's two eyes' field of vision."

By this time these very same eyes of Brother Maximus' skull welled with shining droplets as the words took shape and as he, trembling, faced the old Abbot, who appeared before him as opaque as that wide open existence he had attempted to penetrate in his bygone days of Nausea, as difficult to read, or rather, to unread, as the world stripped of all its abstract masks and left shivering and vulnerable like a hunter's prey upon a rainy flatland, at the mercy of a young man wielding merely the thin, handcrafted bow and arrows of a pained and vengeful mind, in search only of one single specimen from that elusive category of being known as *that which is* in a world choked full of *that which is not*.

The Abbot spoke once more before rising from the mossy stone bench and departing without valediction. "Your story contains within it the greatest proof for God's existence that I know of. *Be at peace, my brother.*"

Bio: James Bradley is an artist and writer living and working in San Francisco, California. *Mirrors of Azazel* was published as a chapbook by Hexagon Press in 2014

Hugh Has a Grand Day
by
William Quincy Belle

Hugh pushed open the door and walked into the café. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the usual assortment of nondescript caffeine addicts downing their favourite beverage. All were sipping while engrossed in newspapers, books, computers, and portable electronic devices.

Hugh walked up to the counter. The young man at the cash register broke into a big grin and exclaimed, “Mr. Toussaint! How good to see you. It is always a pleasure to welcome you into our establishment. How may we be of service today?”

Hugh stood at the counter. The young man at the cash register was turned away, steaming milk for a latte. He glanced at Hugh and said, “Just a sec.”

Hugh waited as the man finished the latte and placed it on a side counter where a woman picked it up. “What can I get you?” said the man, turning back to Hugh.

“I’ll have a medium.” Hugh looked up at the menu. “Ah, I mean a grande.” He could never get the Italian terms correct.

“Two-nineteen,” said the man.

Hugh passed him a five-dollar bill. The man made change and handed Hugh his money and a cup.

Hugh walked over to the service area to get milk. He always liked to put the milk in first so that when he put in the coffee, it was better mixed.

“Hugh, what a pleasure,” said the older woman standing next to him. She smiled with a certain admiration. Not only was Hugh charming, he was not bad-looking either. He was the son she wished she could have had.

The older woman was stirring her coffee. Hugh reached for the milk while saying to her, “Excuse me.” She didn’t bother to look at him. Hugh selected a lid and took the couple of steps to the coffee urns. He looked for a dark and strong roast, then filled his cup to the brim. He put the cup on the flat surface and pressed the lid into place.

Hugh turned back to the room and looked for a place to sit. He spied a vacant seat at a table on the other side of the room and walked the length of the counter toward the front of the shop. As he passed the cashier, a young woman ordering a coffee stopped to look him up and down. She smiled seductively and said, “How ya doing, handsome?”

Hugh had to walk around the woman at the cash register. She was studying the overhead menu so intently that she was oblivious to being in Hugh’s way.

Hugh walked around the tables and found a place to sit. There was a briefcase on the chair. A student at the adjacent table jumped up. "I beg your pardon, sir," the young man said to Hugh as he reached for the case. "Let me remove that so you can sit down. I'll put my things by my own chair and keep them out of your way."

Hugh stood by the chair staring at the briefcase. He looked around wondering who the owner was. Nobody moved to claim it. Everybody seemed to be occupied with whatever they were doing.

Hugh saw another seat and walked off to see if it was free and not holding a briefcase or other belongings. The chair did seem to be unoccupied, but there was a woman sitting at the table typing away on a Blackberry.

"Is this seat taken?" Hugh said. The woman looked up at Hugh and gestured toward the empty chair. "Please join me. I would love good company. A café, a cup of coffee, and conversation; I can't think of a better way to spend the day. Don't you agree?"

Hugh repeated his question. "Is this seat taken?" The woman seemed to be in the midst of thumbing an epistle on her hand-held device and had the multi-tasking resources only to mumble a barely audible "No" at Hugh.

Hugh placed his cup on the table and sat down. He looked up at the counter to verify the time. He had ten minutes to kill before his appointment.

Hugh took a sip of his coffee and looked around the café. He didn't look at anything specific. He let his eyes glide over the various people. Hugh took a bigger sip, then gulped because the coffee was hot. It stung his tongue, and Hugh waited for the pain to diminish. He then took the top off of his cup and blew on the surface to cool the coffee.

Hugh's eyes were focused down on his cup, but as he waited for the coffee to cool, they wandered to the legs of the woman. He first studied the woman's high heels, then let his gaze wander up her legs. She was wearing a dress that had ridden up her thighs somewhat when she had sat down.

As Hugh's gaze arrived at the thighs, one of the woman's hands reached down to caress the exposed skin below the hem of the dress. Then ever so slowly, the hand inched up the thigh pulling the edge of the skirt even higher to show more leg.

Hugh looked up. The woman stared at him directly in the eye. She had a somewhat sly look about her and then, with a hint of a smile, she winked at him.

In his reverie, Hugh had not realised he had been staring at the woman. Even though she was typing on her Blackberry, she seemed to be aware of him looking at her.

She never looked at him, but Hugh sensed she was annoyed. She grasped her Blackberry with one hand, then tugged at her skirt with the free one, trying to bring the hem down to cover

more of her legs. Only partially successful, she then pivoted in her chair so that she was now facing away from him. Hugh could only look at her back.

Hugh could feel his neck and his face flush as his embarrassment grew. He had been caught and summarily rejected. Did she think he was a pervert? He glanced at the wall clock and decided it was a good time to escape. He only had a couple of minutes until his scheduled appointment.

Hugh pressed the lid back on his cup. He stood up and headed toward the front door. A group of people were coming into the café, and Hugh waited for them to walk through the door.

He turned back to glance at the room. Two wait staff behind the counter waved at him while the guy at the cash register yelled out, "Have a nice day, Mr. Toussaint." Several people in the room looked up from their newspaper or computer to smile in his direction nodding in recognition.

The group of people passed Hugh as he looked at the room. The wait staff was busy behind the counter preparing beverages, and the clientele all had their noses buried in some literary activity. All were oblivious to the comings and goings at the front.

The door had a pneumatic mechanism to force it to close slowly and Hugh, perceiving a window of opportunity, scurried through the narrowing gap. Unfortunately, he misjudged the space and caught his right shoulder on the edge of the door. His body jerked as it hit the door and a splash of coffee came out of the cup onto the front of Hugh's shirt.

Hugh stopped on the sidewalk looking down at the moist brown stain on his shirt. A couple of people walked by him glancing at his shirt but not stopping. Nobody said anything. Nobody offered any sympathy; nobody offered a Kleenex or anything to help him clean up the stain. Hugh sighed, resigning himself to his predicament. He walked away from the café to his appointment.

Bio: William Quincy Belle is just a guy. Nobody famous; nobody rich; just some guy who likes to periodically add his two cents worth with the hope, accounting for inflation, that \$0.02 is not over-evaluating his contribution. He claims that at the heart of the writing process is some sort of (psychotic) urge to put it down on paper and likes to recite the following which so far he hasn't been able to attribute to anyone: "A writer is an egomaniac with low self-esteem."

You will find Mr. Belle's unbridled stream of consciousness here (<http://wqebelle.blogspot.ca>) or @here (<https://twitter.com/wqebelle>).

Flash Fiction
by
Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

Silence

The sun shone through my bedroom window and I awoke as if I were newly adolescent with the feeling that Tiffany, my patient, my chronic schizophrenic lover, would be found by the authorities.

Adelaide of Burgundy became the patron saint of second marriages. Her first husband, Lothair II, King of Italy, was poisoned.

Tiffany's escape had been skillful enough but, given her hallucinations and delusions, how likely would it be that she could escape detection as she hitchhiked toward coastal California, the home of her mythical babies, so immaculately conceived they had never gestated, never been born?

Her second husband called himself great, called himself holy. Adelaide knew the truth, but would not share it. She had taken a vow of silence.

In my office, after reciting my morning prayers, I was even more certain that Tiffany would be found. I felt an upwelling of appreciation for the way God's power sustains the universe. Yes, God filled the world with brutality, but he also imbued it with His compassion.

Adelaide's husband blessed her for her silence. His silent and good wife, Adelaide, was a woman to be emulated, he told his friends at table, as their wives looked on with sour expressions.

Red Grapes

Insomnia has me eating red grapes at 2 a.m.

After I reveal Cheryl's vagina to the world, after I out her, she is infuriated and complains bitterly to her pastor, an ex-junkie and ex-con, who found God while getting fucked in the ass by another con. I never trust that kind of spirituality, but Cheryl does, and the pastor promises that he will come up with a scheme to ensure that my time in hell is extra bad, beyond even Dante.

The grapes are delicious, though their skins are too thick, chewy as chicken parts.

But Cheryl still can't sleep. Her insomnia, normally a four, flares up to nine or ten and, as she always does in the middle of the night when sleepless, she goes on Facebook and writes obscene poetry about her organs, her liver and kidneys and her ruined heart, often spontaneously erased by Facebook's censors, but sometimes it gets by them and becomes part of the Eternal Digital.

I awake. Nurses surround me, slap me, command me to breathe.

One of Cheryl's Facebook friends suggests that she try a Nyquil Margarita.

Before I realize anything else, I understand that this is the ultimate payoff of nursing school, the opportunity to bitch-slap a patient who had the temerity to die, if only temporarily. They compete to see who can slap me hardest.

So Cheryl drives down the canyon in her old AMC Hornet and discharges herself into a biker bar.

All this slapping is old-time medicine, the Moe-Larry-Curly of resuscitation, no million-dollar machines required.

This biker bar is in Fontana, California, the birthplace of the Hell's Angels, home to the highest per capita population of ex-cons in the country, which is where Cheryl's minister was from until he moved up into the canyon, wedging himself in like a rock iguana, and created a following of exiles who are crazier than him, even more divorced from reality, but not as evil.

I come back to life, but never go down that glorified tunnel in which cherished ancestors, who love you more than the sun, take you toward the light that reflects your light, the god in you.

Cheryl asks the bartender for a Nyquil Margarita. He concocts it without hesitation. Cheryl drinks it down and orders another. Before long she's feeling good again. She no longer cares that I have revealed her vagina and other of her organs to the world. She realizes that she did that herself long before I got involved.

I pull my Lugar out from under the sheet and growl: *The next person who slaps me dies.*

Cheryl goes to the pay phone in the corner, by the reeking bathroom, and calls me. I'm awake, also suffering from insomnia, eating grapes with skins as tough as raw chicken skin. We talk for a while, reminisce about high school days.

Vivian's Travels

I feel the heaviness of my body. It has too much age, has suffered too much exertion. Its labor has been exploited and used for others' pleasure. Soon I won't be able to move it. Vivian refuses to send me a photo of herself. I haven't seen her for forty years, as long as Moses wandered in the desert.

Vivian travelled the Skunk Passage, the world's tattoos fading from her skin.

Perhaps she is doing me a favor. We want things that are not good for us. She claims she is marred by warts and carbuncles, but perhaps it is even worse.

The snakes, the roses on her breast, the grinning skeleton head, all faded until they were gone, and her skin was fresh and pale.

Perhaps her *la raza cosmica* has lost its *cosmica*, and all a photo would show would be a

graceless chunk of mud.

At the very end, she was a skeleton made of yarn.

Vivian is right. It is better that she remain invisible, that I not be subjected to reality, but instead imagine that she has aged as in a television commercial for the Association of Retired People, whose members squeeze years out of a water color tube and paint a pretty picture, and afterwards wash the stain from their hands, leaving them the original yellow of the Asian or the red of the Indian or the pure sparkling white of the Caucasian.

Pimps and dealers transformed to cowbells and dropped around her with dull clangs. She was going to meet the new pope. He was meeting her on the F train.

Bio: Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over eight hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for work published in 2012, 2013, and 2014. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for [Kindle](#) and [Nook](#), or as a [print edition](#). He lives in Denver.

Git
by
Brandi Megan Granett, PhD

My grandma thought she was helping. I mean she was, taking me in when my parents dumped me. My own father wouldn't even cut the engine on the night they left; he just pushed the Gran Torino's wide, heavy door out with his shiny, crocodile boot and said, "Git." My mother sobbed next to him, curled up in a ball, cradling herself. I squeezed out, then stood there not knowing what "git" meant this time.

I always feared the dark. I stumbled across the yard marked by pine roots that buckled up from under the ground like the skin of unseen beasts forcing their way through and Grandma's flower pots empty for the winter, discarded there until spring. I forced my way across, skinning my knee twice as I lunged toward what I hoped to be the front steps. No moon lit my way. The car's taillights disappeared down the long drive before I even made my second step.

Grandma fixed that candle above my headboard, patting the blanket twice as if to say there, there, before she closed the door and disappeared back down the stairs. I heard them creak, then the flick of the television, a laugh track, people excited about something, somewhere faraway.

The heat kicked on; the candle's flame hissed and spit. The shadows moved. Sharp shapes like fangs and ears. The points of polished cowboy boots and the ends of leather belts. They danced around my head. No amount of light could change that.

Bio: Brandi Megan Granett is a writer and online professor. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Aberystwyth University and an MFA from Sarah Lawrence. Her first novel is *My Intended* (Morrow, 2000). Her short fiction, some of which appeared in *Folio*, *Pleides*, *The Literary Review*, and *This Broken Shore*, is collected in the volume, *Cars and Other Things that Go Fast*. She also blogs about books, writing, and archery for the Huffington Post.

Year Zero
by
Robert Hartzell

They were friends in the flesh: before the cancer that took his meat body, before the upload. He reminds himself of this fact, perhaps a hundred times a day. It is the beginning of his personal Year Zero, the moment when everything changed. The day they met. A memory as indelible as it was in the flesh.

You don't have to worry, she'd told him when he'd written her a rambling confession of his feelings for her. *All is as it was. We're cool.* He affected a respectful distance afterward, terrified of putting that promise to the test. Then he went into the machine, where he didn't put on distance -- the Cloud did it for him.

He looks at her avatar every now and again, a picture from that time period, and his heart breaks afresh with that bittersweet reminder of just how far apart they are now. He wants to let go, but cannot bear to let go of her. He cannot imagine a new Year Zero that isn't bleak.

C: Sorry I haven't been in touch -- you know how forgetful I am. And it's been busy as hell in the office.

F: I know the feeling. Sometimes. It's slow in the lab right now.

He is a monkey with a window in his head for his captors to peer in. He is at the frontiers of neuroscience research, part of a team of pioneers. He is a vivisected rat that cannot die. He is self-aggrandizing, ridiculous, dramatic. He never could have been hers.

Agape. Eros. Infatuation. Limerence. Love. Lust. A crush. A torch. A flame. An illusion. A thing unspoken. An unwarranted hope. An *idée-fixe*. An obsession. Madness. An end. A never-was.

F: How have you been?

C: Busy and tired. They're running me ragged on this project.

Cheri Baker

is chatting with an old friend and feeling a bit nostalgic. Still, I wouldn't trade the life I have for anything. (Almost anything? LOL)

Because he has no body, his feelings for her now are pure, uncontaminated by the impurities of the flesh -- or are they just insubstantial, lacking anything to offer her? She has a fiancée now, a house, a car -- a life he can never hope to offer her from within these wires.

She could decide to upload at some point. She could decide never to join the Cloud. He doesn't know, doesn't dare to ask, much less to hope.

A crowded classroom. He sees her, cannot help but try to talk to her. A brief chat and a chance meeting later. He wonders if she remembers any of it. He knows he shouldn't want to know.

F: I hope I'm not interrupting you?

C: Not at all. I need a break, and you're one of my favorite people.

F: So to speak...;-)

C: LOL!

A drunken party. A hurt he can console. A kiss that lingers and then blossoms. A nude embrace. A caress of bodies. A single night, never to be repeated. A path not taken? *It never meant for her like it did for me.*

C: I do miss you, though. It's not the same since you passed.

F: I'm right here any time you want to talk. You know that.

What they have together: nights in plenty of drunken parties. A few dinners. A number of get-togethers with friends. These are the shards his love is based on, yet when he resolves to let her go, it only lasts until she posts again, her avatar dropping across his feed, his heart breaking afresh. A fresh awareness of the void he now lives in.

For a time, they used to meet in games now defunct (along with the other friendships they'd cultivated within those servers). It was the closest he'd been to sharing space with her since he'd uploaded. They videochat now, but it's not the same -- even in those virtual spaces, it was a comfort to have a body that could touch hers, even if neither of them could feel it.

C: There were some people that stopped visiting you when you went online. It made me angry: you got so lonely there in the end. I'd call you once a week, and you'd be so grateful, it just broke my heart.

F: Did I....say anything when I was....?

C: All is as it was. We're cool.

He checks his feed hundreds of times a day; only rarely is there a private message for him, especially one from the still-embodied. Most of his active friendships are with others inside the Cloud, like him. Is the material world falling away from him, or is he falling away from it? He doesn't know, and the not-knowing only makes him feel more...chimerical? ungrounded? free? Even this much eludes him.

They met in their twenties, a time that seems so carefree to him now, he can barely stand the melancholy these memories bring, now that he truly has no cares, only regrets. Chief among them, that he didn't pursue her when he had the chance (whenever that might have been). He could try now, but if she were to join him in the machine, he'd feel guilty for having plucked her from the life she has now. And if she didn't? He'd have an eternity for the shame to gnaw at him.

Bio: Robert Hartzell lives and works in Morrow, OH. He's presently writing a fiction-cycle titled "Pictures of the Floating-Point World," from which this story is taken. Other pieces from the cycle have appeared, or will appear, in the Flyover Country Review, the Upender, Milkfist, and the Startling Sci-Fi: New Tales of the Beyond anthology (New Lit Salon Press).

Creative Non-Fiction
by
Tom Sheehan

The Last Flags of the River

Dangers are everywhere about the river: the porous bog whose underworld has softened for centuries, the jungles of cat-o-nine tails leap up into. Once, six new houses ago, one new street along the banking, two boys went to sea on a block of ice. They are sailing yet, their last flag a jacket shook out in dusk still hiding in Decembers every year. An old man has strawberry plants in his backyard. They run rampant part of the year. He planted them the year his sons caught the last lobster the last day of their last storm. Summers, strawberries and salt mix on the high air. A truck driver, dumping snow another December, backed out too far and went too deep. His son stutters when the snow falls. His wife hung a wreath at the town garage. At the all-night diner a waitress remembers how many times she put dark liquid in his coffee. When she hears a Mack or a Reo or a huge cumbersome White big as those old Walters Snow-Plows used to be, she tastes the hard sense of late whiskeys. He had an honest hunger and an honest thirst, and thick eyebrows, she remembers, thick, thick eyebrows.

Sounds Without, Star and Tree Talk

Broken-fisted, fingers scattered into selves as hard as a Holocaust picture, our maple grasps last curve of light only three feet from my pillow, except for a fracture of a star, bone chip in space, sundown up a spider's web. When wind later jogs up the river basin steady as runners on far bank, hard maple fingers will make love to this house, become their own sweet syrup; touching and their whispers make arousing of an old house more than titillation, wood seeking itself, clutch of gay return. Wood to wood talk, maple fingers to brother shakes knife-slimmed from swampy cedar, is a dark occupation; it's only then I listen to the limbs, star-talk breaking up the sky, or shadows my eyes find curved down under daylight. Star and tree talk no matter how broken down into parts of this or that, or sky climb, or house touch, if not listened to can aggravate immensely.

Once Upon A Timely Moment

Apprehensive, she pushed open the door to take a final look, to check the Earth as far as she could see, to measure, to see if the gods she held were less than perfect. This was her world. The terror she found was in the measurement, in the time she had spent exploring dividend possibilities, the market's surge, a late movie thought more boisterous than life itself, someone's divorce, chicanery and outright theft, and a rigged election all too soon winked at. It came at her, the swift thought: our feet are caught in place: we are sucked into loam and hardpan and left for all of this rock; we are locked up tighter than the grip of stable Earth's 17-degree axis. Escape is not here, or atonement for us. She kept saying "we," kept herself aligned in that rare and human confederacy. There was assessment and agreement not known about; at that moment, in one half-held breath, hoe in hand, eyes gone to marble, a gaunt Filipino suddenly apprehends a minor

shift in the Earth's crust. It is the awed way she would know a tilt at a pinball machine. Beyond him, her, momentous Krakatoa, an island yet, proves to be imaginative again at the foot of history, and is no longer breathless. And deeper yet, farther away, thought to be buried out there in the fluffed accountabilities of Time, one long horse-tailed, red-eyed, incommutable comet picks up a little bit of left hand English... just for the hell of it.

Westerly Again

It is brittle now, the remembering, how we drove you east with your backpack like a totem in the rear seat, so that you could walk westerly across the continent's spine, across the sum of all the provinces, through places you had been before, and we had been, and the Cree and the Owl creek bear and wolves envisioned when night screams upwind the way stars loose their valid phantoms.

Now it seems the ready truth that juxtaposition is just a matter of indifference, because we have all been where we are going, into selves, shadows, odd shining, all those places the mind occupies, or the heart, or a lung at exercise. You had already passed places you would come into when we knew your hailing us down, thumb a pennant, face a roadside flag halting our pell-mell island rush.

To go westerly, to walk across the world's arching top, you said you had to go east, to know Atlantic salt, kelp girding rocks at anchor, clams sucking the earth down, to be at ritual with Europe's ocean itself, that mindless sea of barks and brigs and lonely buoy bells arguing their whereabouts in the miseries of fog, singular as canyon coyote.

We promised you holy water at Tormentine, reaching place of The Maritimes, a fist ready for Two-Boat Irish Islanders, Cavendish's soft sand, holy trough of journey, wetting place, publican's house of the first order, drinks hale and dark and well met and Atlantic ripe as if everything the bog's known the drink has.

It's more apparent now, after you moved outbound, or inward on the continent, trailing yourself, dreams, through wild Nations once ringing one another, your journey's endless. Nine years at it, horizons loose on eternity, trails blind-ending in a destiny of canyons too deep to be heard, and your mail comes scattered like echoes, horseshoes clanging against stakes in twilight campgrounds, not often enough or soon enough or long enough, only soft where your hand touches hide, hair, heart caught out on the trail, wire-snipped, hungry, heavy on the skewers you rack out of young spruce.

Out of jail, divinity school, bayonet battalion, icehouse but only in winters, asking Atlantic blessing for your march into darkness, light, we freed you into flight. You have passed yourself as we have, heading out to go back, up to go down, away from home just to get home. Are you this way even now, windward, wayward, free as the falcon on the mystery of a thermal, passing through yourself?

You go where the elk has been, noble Blackfoot of the Canadas, beaver endless in palatial

gnawing, all that has gone before your great assault, coincident, harmonic, knowing that matter does not lose out, cannot be destroyed, but lingers for your touching in one form or another, at cave mouth, closet canyon, perhaps now only falling as sound beneath stars you count as friends and confidants. Why is your mail ferocious years apart in arrival? You manage hotels, prepare salads, set great roasts for their timing, publish a book on mushrooms just to fill your pack anew and walk on again, alone, over Canada's high backbone, to the islands' ocean, the blue font you might never be blessed in. Nine years at it! Like Troy counting downward to itself: immense, imponderable, but there.

A year now since your last card, Plains-high, August, a new book started, but no topic said, one hand cast in spruce you cut with the other hand, your dog swallowed by a mountain, one night of loving as a missionary under the Pole Star and canvas by a forgotten road coming from nowhere.

We wonder, my friend, if you are still walking, if you breathe, if you touch the Pacific will Atlantic ritual be remembered as we remember it: high-salted air, rich as sin, wind-driven like the final broom, gulls at havoc, at sea a ship threatening disappearance, above it all a buoy bell begging to be heard, and our eyes on the back of your head.

Bio: Tom Sheehan served with 31st Infantry, Korea 1951 and graduated from Boston College, 1956. Poetry books include *Ah, Devon Unbowed*; *The Saugus Book*; *Reflections from Vinegar Hill*; and *This Rare Earth & Other Flights*. *Korean Echoes* nominated for Distinguished Military Award and *The Westering, 2012*, nominated National Book Award, and 28 Pushcart nominations. He has published 22 books and 4 in Pocol Press publishers cycle.

Welcome to Roswell
by
David Hargarten

Woke up this morning in a dirty hotel bed. Walls painted yellow to go with the faint scent of urine and disappointing sex. Memory full of holes and nausea. There was a party and a girl and...legs, perfect legs. Nothing after that. No cab ride home, no warm bed, warm embrace, warm anything to remember fondly, Champagne and Tequila have edited out the good bits. It's probably for the best, as many things as I want to remember, I'm sure there is an equal amount of things best not exposed to the light of day.

It was hot. Not Chicago Summer hot, this was dry hot. the kind that's good for your breathing. Needed to find out where I was, find out how to get home. Cell Phone out of juice, I turn to the phone on the night stand. I am greeted by heavy black industrial plastic with a rotary dial. Receiver hot against my ear, not even the comfort of a dial tone to soothe me.

I look for my clothes. The closet contains a single gray suit and a pair of black and white wingtips. I'm wearing a pair of iridescent pink socks that match the hand painted ugly pink tie that I found in the pockets of the suit jacket.

Dressed and ready for adventure I exit the room and down the old wooden stairs. I am greeted by zero people. Apparently the Hotel is called the Desert Oasis Hotel. I boasts a dusty gift shop with postcards from 2 dozen cities that are not this one. I pocket a pack of postcards. It may be the only communication I get with the outside world.

The wallet in the jacket is apparently mine. I don't recall this suit of clothes, but having cash in my pocket is a comfort. I count \$250 in old bills. I like the old bill. They feel more like money to me than the new ones that were designed by the same folks who make cereal boxes. Cereal! Damn I'm hungry. I head for the Oasis Diner. There's an old man behind the counter. He gives me coffee, bacon, three eggs and a pack of unfiltered cigarettes.

"I thought everybody skedaddled out a here." He said roughly as he lit one of the cigarettes.

I scanned the front page of a paper called the Roswell Daily Register .

"Sorry I don't have today's." The counter man said. "They stopped delivering after all the folks disappeared. that's from last week,"

The date on the paper read July, 8 1947. I was wondering if someone had been pullin' my leg. I looked at the headline. RAAF captures UFO on Ranch in Roswell Region.

"You pretty quiet for a Gov'ment man. Dey usual filled with questions. Don't matta, I dn't see nothin'. Now Maggie, she say dey try to take her."

"May I speak to Maggie?" I asked nervously.

She walked out quietly from the kitchen dressed in the faded colors of a waitress in the desert in the 1940's. The lady looked confused.

“Martin, is that really you?” she said

My mind filled with Tequila and Champagne again, My eyes fell upon her legs, her perfect legs.

She threw her arms around me and whispered in my ear, “Welcome to Roswell.”

Bio: David Hargarten was born in The Heart of Chicago. He has lived many places around the city, but has recently returned to the home of his birth. Working in Chicago institutions from Brookfield Zoo to the CBOT, David has met and talked to the people who make this town great and the people who give it a negative reputation.

Starting his Poetry Career in a Barbecue joint in Ravenswood, David became a regular at many shows around the city, including The Heartland Café, The Word Gourmet, and Kristopher's Café. After the close of the Word Gourmet, David began his own reading series in Chicago's West Loop called Waiting 4 the Bus. He is currently a part of the Waiting 4 the Bus poetry collective and executive editor of the poetry journal Exact Change Only.

The Best Bit
by
Sophie Woolf

I love the feeling of waking up in my own bed, alone, with the duvet wrapped around my bare legs and smelling of nothing but me.

Don't get me wrong, its not as if I'm rarely in my own bed, or alone. And I do like being somewhere new, with a little less duvet to myself and new smells to learn. But it's important to savour yourself, isn't it? You must be the best bit, anyway.

This morning is one of the best; I awake right on time. Very slowly, I sit up in bed, and absorb the silence for a little while; keeping my eyes closed the whole time. This is my favourite part of the day, when everything is just a blank, silent page, with no events or unwanted sights to blot and blemish that page. I retrieve my journal and skim my eyes over Today, to reassure myself that it *is* Today. Time to get up. I throw back the covers and smile as the cool air rushes over to me, and my mind fills with the image of waves skimming across flat sand.

I open my wardrobe, survey the contents, but as usual decide not to get dressed for a while. It's a hot enough morning in mid July, so I leave myself open to my flat, full of my things – ornaments, furniture and pictures that I picked out myself. It's an odd feeling I realise, being nothing but my own skin surrounded by little parts of myself, internal me saying hello to external me. How come you're out there? I ask my little blue alarm clock, and without thinking I spin the hour hand so that the sun came up two hours early for this time of year. I hurriedly put it back to the right time again. I have to sit down in one of the wooden chairs by my desk and stay there for a while. The wood feels lovely. It's oak.

Sitting in the chair, I hold my own hand tight. Nothing will change. I am the best bit.

In the early days, I only had myself to rely on when making plans. It wasn't that I didn't feel like he was capable – far from it. He cared for me like a devoted bird-watcher cares for a Goldcrest with a broken wing. But I was so used to mastering control all my life that I didn't know how to cope when there was another person thrown into the mix.

One time, when he came to visit me – he lived about an hour and a half away - my heart sank and thudded to the bottom of my stomach like a heavy iron anchor. It was raining heavily. I blushed as I played with his hand, looking in utter dismay at the waterlogged park.

“It wasn't supposed to rain!” I laugh as I shake my head, experimenting with a look of mock despair at the cruel, unpredictability of British weather. “So bloody typical!” But he recognized the grind underneath my words, the tremble in my hand while I squeezed his thumb desperately.

“Never mind. D'you wanna go back?”

But I hadn't planned Back. I was not prepared for Back. Back could not happen because I

did not know what Back involved, what it implied. What exactly would we do? It was early afternoon; we had a whole 5 five hours before he needed to catch his train home. It was supposed to be a lovely day. This had all gone horribly wrong. Without Step A, you can't complete Step B or Step C. Everything had lost its grounding. The jumper was unravelling and the outlines had been rubbed out. I'd decided to do what I could and marched on into the park with grim determination, but I had a lump in my throat because the world had let me down on my special day. He pulled my hand back gently.

"Come on, hun, it's pissing down! You'll get a cold."

"But I've got an umbrella –"

He placed both his hands around my face then, looking into me. Those huge, shining eyes. Even then, he had trouble focusing.

Watch out. I didn't catch the plea in time.

"I want *you*. You are the best bit of today. Forget about circumstance, ok? Good. We're going to go back to the flat and I'm going to make you feel better, and then I'll make us hot toddies. Strong ones. Just how you like them."

"I'm sorry."

"Please don't, sweetheart. It's going to be lovely, I promise."

I fell in love with his promises first, that night – the rest came later.

His talent at seeing the sun behind the clouds made him dangerously brave. He could never accept that anything would have bad consequences; everything would be fine as long as you kept a blank eye and an open mind. It was his very own, personal curse. I suppose I could have noticed the signs sooner. They were there, all along, following him around like red footprints. Watch out.

I carefully pull a white silk shirt and a pale blue tailored skirt from their hangers, but leave them hanging on my wall peg while I clean my flat, and heave the Hoover out from the cleaning cupboard. Soon, he should be here.

Traitor, I called it. I only took Traitor once. She was untrustworthy; she promised to be my best friend and then stabbed me in the back. So I cut Traitor out my life, and every single one of her friends. Traitor didn't like this, and so she went after him instead. I learned to love his glassy eyes.

After I've hoovered, I dust all the skirting boards, doorframes and ornaments, glancing at the door every now and again to check. I clean the countertops, and clean them again. I empty the bins, wipe down the windows and put five fresh oranges in the fruit bowl. Finally, I sit down on my nice oak chair again, knock the side three times, and wipe sweat from my brow with the

nub of my wrist. Perfect.

When I've had my five minute rest, I get dressed. My hands shake as I do my make up in the mirror, tie my hair into a tight pony tail. Quarter past three, still empty. The silence is starting to creep along the floor, gnawing at my feet. Since when was it so quiet? Listen to the birds.

But now, I'm struggling to hear them, as I stand in the middle of the room, my hands on my stomach. I strain to hear their song, respond to their call, but the racket screeches louder and louder, the white noise snapping and buzzing until it becomes unbearable. Just stop, I whimper. Please! It's getting painful now, and I wade through noise and smashed china towards my bed to go through the steps. The silence is becoming more and more aggressive. I take a deep, deep breath; twist my ring four times to the left, four times to the right.

As I walk through town, I focus on the blood pumping through my body. I feel oxygen filling my lungs, expanding, releasing, blood cells dilating. All at once, millions and millions of decisions are being made inside my body. My hair is growing, my stomach is digesting food, my brain processing these images I see and sorting through all the clutter, filtering all the dirt. Cleansing. I am a walking, living, breathing miracle. The pavement starts to blur. He's broken the rules.

I take a short cut through the park, and decide to walk alongside the playground, stepping slowly, and as I watch the children bounce around I make a note of what's most popular; the giant metal slide and the roundabout. The whole place seems to be blurring, shining, a strange mirage amongst the mundane greenery. I snap my fingers as I stand there for a little while; trying to absorb this beauty and this light that is so overpowering it almost makes me weak. While I'm watching, a little boy comes charging over, right up to the fence, then crouches down and picks at the grass, muttering quietly. He looks about four. I crouch down silently, inch by inch, to observe this wonderful little creature in his muddy blue shorts.

"Hi there." I whisper. "What's your name?" He looks at me warily - I'm one of those Strangers he's been told about. She doesn't look like a stranger. That tiny, perfect pink shell.

"Rory."

"Hi Rory. What are you doing?" But Rory has lost interest in me now, and is lying on his tummy as he digs into the earth with his chubby hands making blasting noises with his mouth. I crouch there watching him, and I feel myself drifting into this carefree world of his, where there are no rules or numbers. I close my eyes and try to block out all that chatter – just observing the sounds of Rory's mumbles and the leaves rustling in the trees far away. Somewhere, something perfect and pure and whole is happening, to someone. I remember watching him while he slept, analysing, judging, begging. I kissed his fingertips. For me, please.

I check the time on my watch, and stand up, brushing grass off my skirt.

"Bye-bye now. Be good!" I wave my fingers at Rory and he looks up at me, before running off again to investigate the sand pit. My legs wobble as I walk away.

I am alone, all alone, and that's not how it was supposed to be. Everything has been mounting to this point and he knew. He knew, he knew, he knew, and he's not here with me. I walk into the clinic.

"Are you ok?" Someone is tapping me on the shoulder. I open my eyes to greet the pavement, kneeling on all fours. Turning my head, I see a tired, young woman towering over me, her mouth twisting into downwards concern.

"Yes. I'm – fine. Just catching my breath."

"Are you in pain? Do you need help?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I get up slowly, looking at the dirt on my knees. There is dirt everywhere. It chokes up inside me and threatens to explode out of every tear and rip in my broken body, so I start to run, run, running as fast as I can. I try to run faster than the speed of sound, the speed of light. I want my body to ignite from the heat. I want my limbs will be torn off from the wind. I could not make myself perfect enough. And he was perfect, but not enough.

Through the buzz, I open my front door and step inside to see him slumped on the sofa.

"Where were you?" I throw my words into the darkness with no response. Then I notice the smell. The smell of that vile black hole that swallows up everything it touches. I kneel beside him, resting my head on his chest, and I look into his eyes, that swivel past me blankly. I see it now.

Finally, he has gone. Silently, softly, he passed through into that place that I could not go, floating above my existence like a lonely satellite. I look at the man lying in front of me. In this moment, I know that I must prepare myself for a life with this strange dark shadow. I must.

I cannot bring anything into this world, and I cannot keep anything in it either.

I stumble into the kitchen holding my breath, and start to prepare dinner. Salmon, I think. Salmon will be nice.

Bio: Sophie Woolf is a 1st Year Creative Writing student at Canterbury Christchurch University, with a strong passion for writing poetry and prose, particularly short stories.

Glitch
by
Filip Wiltgren

Hey, wake up!"

"Yes, sir! How can I help you, sir?"

"Order twenty doses of Orthodermol."

"Yes, sir! Ordering twenty doses of Ordolepton. You have thirty seconds to abort."

"What? No!"

"Yes, sir! Canceling abort."

"No, no. Abort, abort!"

"Yes, sir! Aborting order. How can I help you, sir?"

"Order twenty doses of Orthodermol."

"Yes, sir! Ordering twenty doses of Oromaton. You have thirty seconds to abort."

"Piece of ... Abort!"

"Yes, sir! Aborting one piece. Ordering nineteen doses of Oromaton. You have thirty ..."

"Abort, you trash heap son of ..."

"Sir, I am detecting high levels of stress in your voice. Would you like me to play some soothing music while you wait?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir! I enjoy music. Please choose between these sponsored pieces..."

"Shut up!"

"Sir, please don't abuse the system."

"I'll show you abuse... Matt, hey, Matt! You going to third floor?"

"What, not getting along with the new ordering system?"

"Order my butt."

"Sir...?"

"Haven't you heard? Apparently we need to give it some time and we'll learn to love it."

"Like a million years."

"Sir...?"

"Sir...?"

"Yes, sir! Ordering a million doses of Mybutaresol. You have thirty seconds to abort."

Bio: At age ten, Filip Wiltgren realized that he wanted to be a writer. He then spent the next 30 years in mortal terror of actually writing, until realizing that he would die no matter what so he might as well let his creativity roam.

Prose Poetry
by
John Grey

MARGE'S VERSION OF ANDY

There is an expert on everything and someone who loves them. My husband knows concrete, its strengths, its diseases. He talks "super-plasticizers" and "shrinkage", has a sixth sense, can assess the future of a bridge from one crisp crossing, worries about what it will hold, what will tumble. He can talk for hours on the shock the next earthquake is in for. The enemies of his worst nights are salt and rust. Someone who dreams of stuff this hard you'd think would feel his bones grow, his flesh tear and heal and no more. But like all who know their own wilderness, he is comfortable out of it, defrosting by the fire, nudged by too much of one thing back to me, for a still and silent reworking of the night the dancing didn't stop. And once, I saw him write in his diary, "I wept." He did not hide the words from me, just the source. I have a soft spot for concrete myself. The world rests on it, unknown to itself, like a man's tear. Could have been a painter, he says. Or a cop like his father. But a man is chosen by what needs to be known. Like a woman's arms, it pulls you into it.

LIFE DISTURBED BY DOG

That dog never does stop barking. I hang out the window, trying to find the source, but its body refuses to be seen though its sound couldn't be any more visible. My wife has blocked the noise out to the point where there is no dog. To her, I'm the dog, always breaking off in the middle of things to go see where that barking is coming from. "Must you," she says over and over. Those words would annoy me even more if it weren't for that mongrel dog and its constant yapping. "Yes I must," I tell her, as I take one more angry look out the front door, another through the back. Maybe that yowling and growling is just canine talk for "Must you." And these hands that strangle invisible dogs are the weapons of my necessity.

COMPANY TIME

December, slight dusting, chilly address warmed by bodies, in the company of someone who once attempted suicide. She engulfs me into the reasons for living I search in secret for the place on her body she tried to cut. Even the worst of it can calm inside another's arm, drift about like leaves, find any slow current a comfort. Even the best of me is curious as to what life can drive you to, scans her flesh for fresh opinions. She holds her arm up to the light, a badge of honor for that one time she was glad to fail. I run my fingers down her life-line and beyond, grasp at why she wanted to succeed. In the blue shadow of her veins, a jagged scar on her wrist suffices for both of us.

Bio: John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Big Muddy and Sanskrit with work upcoming in South Carolina Review, Gargoyle, Mudfish and Louisiana Literature.

Three
by
Perry L. Powell

Cardboard Tassles

The study of symmetry is the study of transformations. Anything can turn into another. Just backwards and colder. A mirror for example. And so we are off and running. Perhaps we rotate around our circles. Perhaps they rotate around us. Epicycles. One is always more than another. We call this our transitive property. You know it as another way of teasing. With it I can connect green objects to blue ones. Assuming I have a place to stand. Do not make a mistake. The smell of apple pie or a violin at night. Only numbers are not an illusion. Though we must play ours in new measures. This is progress: anything can turn into another. I am the same on both sides. With one foot in all camps, I remain yours. Transformed.

Bridge

Identification making me a man widowed on a bridge with the global dogmas prowling the circumcision lines that youth wanted me to time, all that schizophrenic nail-biting, but I'm not the one my wife gone to make do with all the world has to offer while it triggers side against suitcases incorporating just a man who adduced heaven knows if they encourage this sort acting as though walls can be a democracy.

Exhaust

What is from over? A message waiting in the light? An evasion of reasoning? The color of rosewood? Somehow the mouse will not click on my meaning. The smelling of other realms is one way to curse the darkness. We can ride such a box over many oceans. But keeping everything close to the surface. War is another. I would raise my shield and behead the shimmering snakes if I could. But my laboratory provides no mechanisms for such adventures. Yet you tell me there is a result. I watch your long curls bounce and seem to agree. There is no distance that brings grace. The nose on your face is all the plainer for that. Still some example must be at hand. Since we need one.

Bio: Perry L. Powell lives close to Atlanta, Georgia and work as a systems analyst. He started writing again three years ago after not having written anything other than technical documentation for decades and has since been published in a fair number of print and online venues.