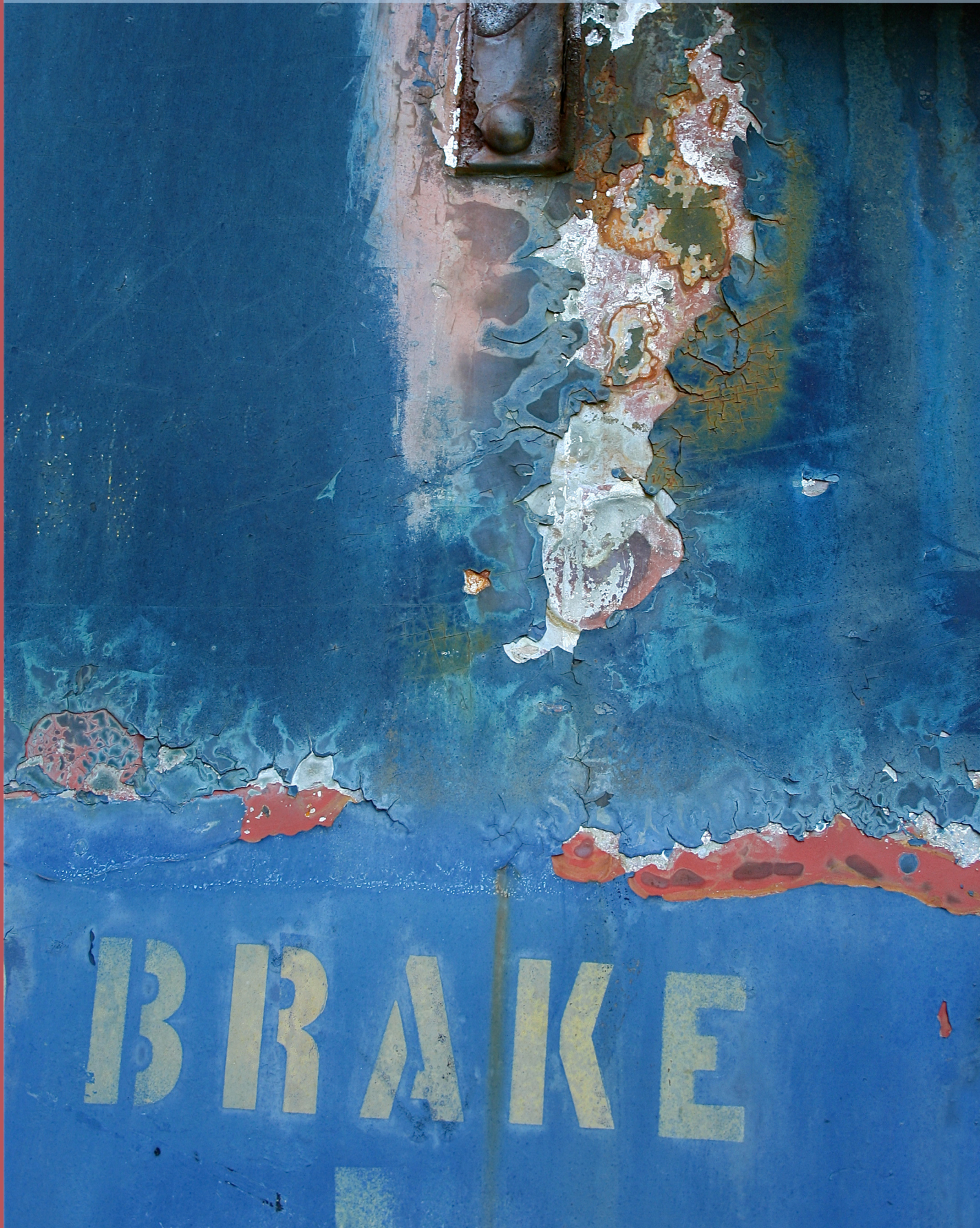


The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

2014/2015 WINTER ISSUE



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Scott Thomas Outlar

Scott Thomas Outlar hails from the heart of Atlantis, where he kneels atop intricately designed rugs woven from prediluvian cloth, praying to the Holy Spirit Vibration for grace, guidance, humility, and discernment during this strange time in history as the gears of one age turn and shift into the next. When not caught up in such passionate fervor, he spends his idle hours writing rants, ravings, and existential, experimental, hallucinatory, psychedelic, prose-fusion screeds on topics including Apocalyptic Revelation, The Phoenix Generation, The Wandering Festival, and The Renaissance Revolution. His work has appeared in such journals as Dissident Voice, Ascent Aspirations, Loose Change Magazine, Daily Anarchist, and Fanzine. Scott can be reached at 17numa@gmail.com and welcomes commentary from all angles and any perspective.

“Racing for the Cure”

If it all fell from the sky
 broken diamonds through the wind
 cutting shadows with her wings
 lacing daybreak as it dawns
 poison kiss upon blue lips
 gasping air, gravity falls

It's midnight at eight o'clock tonight
 Weak bones are breaking through the skin
 The birds howl to chase away the sun
 A lost voice that never sees the cure

They always promise the best in the end
 but who is handing out the awards
 They said you're safe, just come to our arms
 who's got that drug that goes straight in the vein

Everyone head to the Piper
 make sure he's not paid to lead you astray
 With a forked tongue
 he's a liar
 better face it
 you've been fooled, you're a fool
 what a shame
 now it's over with only yourself to blame

Nilanka Maldeniya

Nilanka Maldeniya lives and works in Toronto, Canada. She is a practicing lawyer and a mother of two little girls who have revived her passion for writing, who constantly fuel her imagination, and who encourage her to pin down her flights of fancy.

“Feeling Beautiful”

Fleshy white mass
sunless and pale
wrinkles, ripples and bulges
reflected
better to approach from a distance
blurrier that way.
weren't melons
supposed to just melt it away
guaranteed to shrink
is what the magazines said
but they lie don't they
when does truth ever sell.
the hunger is gnawing
and clawing its way to the surface
can't tame it tried every which way
like a wild bird desperate to take flight.
if only it would slowly eat away
at the exterior
so much more of that left
than the self-worth
it has been gorging on.

Abhishaike Mahajan

Abhishaike Mahajan currently lives in Texas and attends Westwood High-school. He usually spends his days writing essays and reading. He loves creating art in every form and will always love doing so. He works as a first reader for Polyphony H.S. and as an editorial intern for The Blueshift Journal. He is forthcoming or published in Tincture Journal and Teen Ink.

POETRY

“External Hemorrhaging”

A real life human heart
looks absolutely nothing like one would believe it would look like.
I mean, nobody really thinks that a heart
actually looks like a greater than sign conjoined with a three,
but it doesn't even resemble those anatomical diagrams
which depict this seemingly hopeful system.

It's quite a bit bigger, much more yellow than it is red, and far less neatly formed than one would imagine. It's big and pulpy and mushy and full of fat. Veins are rare to be seen upon it and I cannot see nary a soul inside of this organic chandelier that is assumed to be the life of humankind. It smells of a deeply rotten piece of metal that fiercely permeates and engages the mind in all of its horror. It is a tough clock that steadfastly refuses to tell its time to anybody whom asks.
But while it's unknown tune is beautiful,
it still is underwhelming.

There's no hate swirling in it. No love, no envy, no happiness. There's no emotion in it at all, in fact. It's just a mass of muscle that does nothing but pump in and then back out and so forth.
I hang up my scrubs and walk out of the theatre,
for there's nothing more to really discover.

AshLeigh Brown

AshLeigh Brown is a student of the English MA program at Mount Mary University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She intends to pursue a doctorate in creative writing. She is interested in formal poetry and minimalist fiction. For more information, visit ashleighmariebrown.wordpress.com.

POETRY

“Tennos Evol”

Much harder to climb out than to fall in.
Fight through the doubt: when I lose you, I win.

You fell into my world and we painted
the quiet blue a vivid red. I had
hardly noticed I was red, too. You stained
like ink in a washing machine, red
tint soaks in, and saturates what's inside.
But I loved being red. So much better
than blue. Then I convinced myself to hide
my secrets from view. I thought, “forget her
and her silly ambitions, this is love.”
But then I caught it in the mirror, because
your red love didn't hide the truth in front of
me. The truth that I missed the blue I was.

Peycho Kanev

Peycho Kanev is the author of four poetry collections and two chapbooks. He has won several European awards for his poetry, and he has been nominated for the Pushcart Award and Best of the Net. Translations of his books will be published soon in Italy, Poland, and Russia. His poems have appeared in more than 900 literary magazines such as Poetry Quarterly, Evergreen Review, Hawaii Review, Cordite Poetry Review, Sheepshead Review, Off the Coast, The Adirondack Review, The Coachella Review, Two Thirds North, Sierra Nevada Review, The Cleveland Review, and many others.

POETRY

“Transition”

She's gone for good, but her wonderful smell remained in the pillow.
The white pillow in the bed with the white sheets is like the white pigeon of war,
proclaiming
the beginning of the Third World War of Loneliness.
There are wars you will have to fight alone; the flag stuck on the left side of the bed
should be
captured without any noise.
And if some other woman rests her head on the white pillow, the pillow will smother her
immediately with the full weight of your lonely world.

Kaitlyn Frazier

Kaitlyn Frazier is an eighteen-year-old college freshman at Northwest-Shoals Community College, where she is aspiring to be an English major. Reading and writing both have been a passion of hers since the day that was she capable. Her senior year, she was awarded an honorable mention in the North Alabama Renaissance Sonnet Writing Contest for her poem "Old One," and the same poem was published in the Lauderdale County literary magazine Sweet Inspirations.

"Art of Humanity"

Three peas in a pod,
One of water, one of sod.
Both are sim'lar,
Yet they differ;
Oh, so eerily odd.

One is half-and-half,
Made from the devil's staff.
Differs from both,
Plays in the blood tide's stroke;
Cast it out from thy chaff.

Found in every human,
Like the bright curtain,
That hides each person;
And denounces all to vermin.

Darren C. Demaree

Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including The South Dakota Review, Meridian, The Louisville Review, Grist, and Colorado Review. He is the author of As We Refer to Our Bodies (2013, 8th House), Temporary Champions (2014, Main Street Rag), and Not For Art Nor Prayer (2015, 8th House). He is also the recipient of three Pushcart Prize nominations and a Best of the Net nomination. He currently lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

POETRY

“The Obvious Damages”

So near the bottom
of sunlight, once
the sun finally rose,

that face of his, always
buried in his own fist,
never to rot, never

to be raised again
& when he found
himself ass towards

the reach of first light,
the yowling scene
began to take shape

& the police took to study
his whole figure like
Rodin had intended.

Ross Knapp

Ross Knapp is a recent college graduate with degrees in philosophy and literature who is also an MFA graduate student in creative writing and poetry. He has an experimental literary novel and various poetry publications forthcoming. Originally, he was planning on law school or a PhD in philosophy before deciding to pursue poetry and writing as a career. Some of the poets he admires most are Sappho, Virgil, Li Po, Hafiz, Francois Villon, Dante, Keats, Whitman, Akhmatova, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Eliot, Pound, Crane, Millay, Thomas, Sexton, Lowell, Ginsberg, and Plath.

POETRY

“Freedom Terza Rima”

Shots go down
Vodka straight
Fuck that frown

Use my hate
Blazing burns
Hell’s heart rate

Live and yearn
Through fires
Terror’s turns

Spurn liars
Fuck the fake
Can’t tire

Dullness quakes
Soft bullets
In my wake

World’s cruelty
Aims its kiss
Fool fullest

I choose bliss
Real true free
Happiness

No submitting slavery
No hedonistic trickery

A.J. Huffman

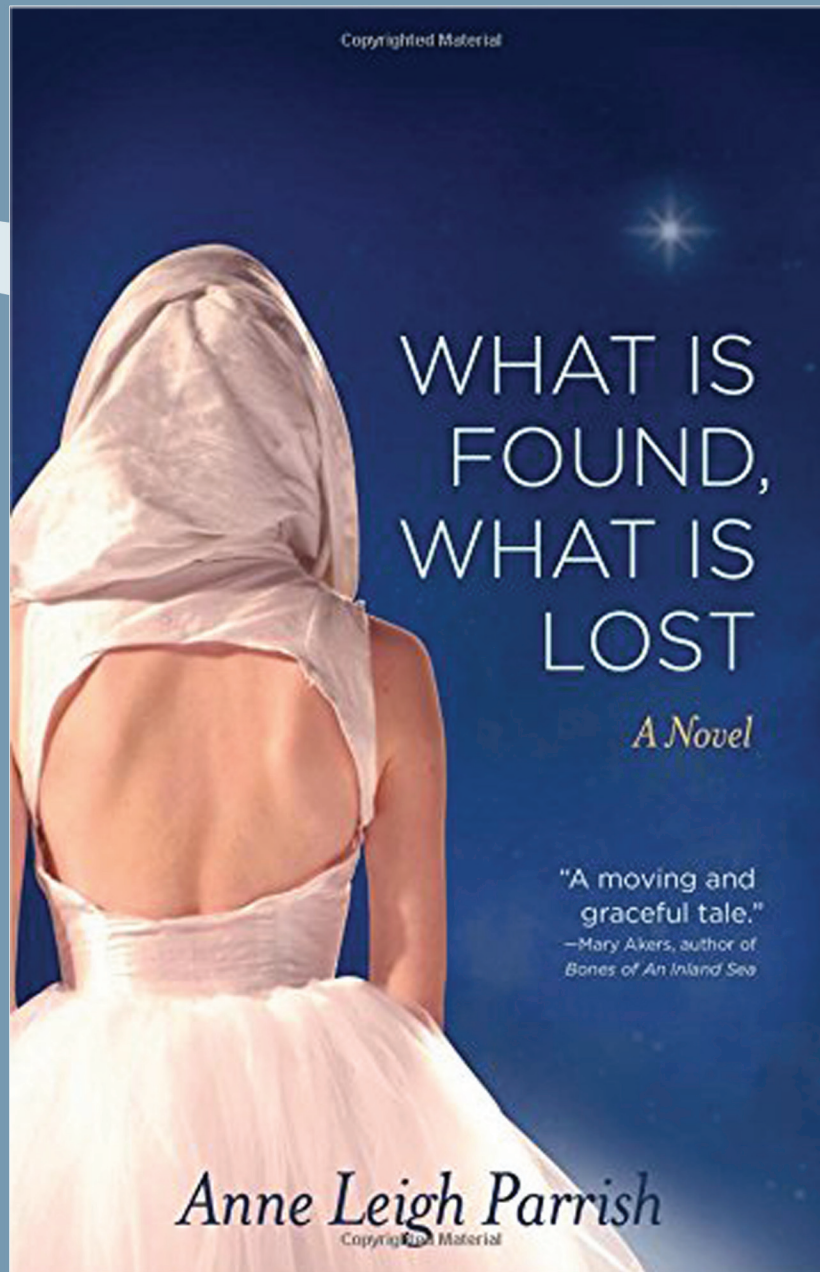
A.J. Huffman has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her eighth solo chapbook, "Drippings from a Painted Mind," won the 2013 Two Wolves Chapbook Contest. She also has a full-length poetry collection scheduled for release in June 2005 titled A Few Bullets Short of Home (mgv2>publishing). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including Labletter, The James Dickey Review, Bone Orchard, EgoPHobia, Kritya, and Offerta Speciale, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press (www.kindofahurricanepress.com).

"My Mind Has Swallowed"

my muse, rendering itself practically mute.
 Choking on the barren bones of past
 productivity, I attempt to regurgitate
 previous pieces of brilliance.
 Unfortunately, nothing comes out
 whole, I am left stained
 with the bile of broken phrases
 and the aftertaste of ink hopelessly wasted.

★ Available on Amazon ★

ANNE LEIGH PARRISH



"In What is Found, What is Lost, Anne Leigh Parrish has crafted an elegant and powerful novel that explores the intricacies of family and faith... Ms. Parrish's vibrant prose guides the reader through the story with a deft hand. She handles the challenge brilliantly and, in its languid execution, has lessons to teach... What is Found, What is Lost is a novel on par with the best in American letters.... It is a tour de force that demands serious attention."

– Lawrence Parlier, author of *Sierra Court Blues*

Olivia Zehr

Olivia Zehr is currently studying nursing at Cedarville University. When she's not cramming in the library for exams or sleeping, she enjoys reading, hiking, laughing, and consuming copious amounts of Taco Bell.

“A Break from the Noise”

The smell of Chinese food wafts through the air as I sit curled up on a couch, a worn brown shawl draped around my shoulders. The flickering lights of the candles span across the hearth room, causing shadows to dance across the walls. A few minutes ago, the sun descended behind big puffy pink clouds, yet its absence has created a different world. There is no sound besides that of chewing, crackling flames, and the occasional snippet of conversation between my mom and stepdad. The electricity went out unexpectedly only an hour ago, shortly after seven, but I misplace that information, tucking it deep into a crevice in my mind. I only remember when I flip a switch, finding that nothing has changed—I am still lost in darkness.

My mom's full, deep laugh bounces around the room like one of those rubber balls I had when I was little, quickly replacing the silence. Her light brown hair and eyes that match my own are basked in darkness, resembling the inky blackness of night. My stepdad, Tracy, sits across from her, completely entranced by what she is saying to him. Even from across the room, the fond way in which he looks at her speaks volumes about his feelings toward her.

I sit to the side as a bystander of the interaction, longing for conversation of my own. I glance down at the dark screen on my purple iPhone. There is no activity, no texts, no Twitter updates, and no messages. No electricity means no Wi-Fi, and no Wi-Fi means no access to friends on any form of social media. The silence is deafening without the constant buzzing, beeping, ringing, and dinging that indicates a new activity. All the noise of social media is gone, and I am left alone, with no one on the receiving end to respond to.

The longer I sit there, the more anxious I become until it builds in my chest, the pressure causing me to hold my breath, impatient and unsure of what to do with my time. Like clockwork, my right arm shoots out, clenching my iPhone in one hand, and I check the screen, only to reprimand myself for making the same mistake again. No Wi-Fi means no Facebook. With this separation anxiety overwhelming me, I begin to feel ridiculous. I've only been a couple of hours without my phone; what could I possibly be missing? I glance back over at my mom and Tracy, where they are still deep in conversation, oblivious to my anguish.

I fall asleep that night with my phone clutched in my hand, periodically waking and checking the screen to see if the power is back until, eventually, I stay asleep, for the moment forgetful of the urgency and dependency my generation has developed on technology.

“A Vale”

“—*brave.*” Applause echoed, resonating with the last fermata as the song died away. Janet Meyers stood in front of an American flag that wavered gently in the cool breeze. The air was still clean where she was. It wasn’t polluted by the tear gas, or bogged down in the smoke; it was...free.

Janet looked happy, as if she were unaware of what was happening to the country around her. A smile could be seen on her face as she spoke about the American fighting spirit.

“Bah!” I spat venomously. She knew nothing of what it was to be an American. She had never been shot at or bombed on; she had never lost loved ones in the occupation. I looked away from the television screen as my vision was blurred by fresh tears. I decided that I had spent enough time at the broadcast. I walked away from the flickering screen; the power would die in a few more seconds. “Five...four,” was a game I began to play with the electronics. “Three...tw—”

The television overheated, bursting with a faint crack. I looked around me. When I had first entered the store, I was so excited when I saw the television that I forgot to look for anything; I hadn’t even noticed the color of the walls. I was standing in a small shop that had been converted from a gas station into a small dry-goods store. The walls were white except for a red and blue strip that wrapped itself around the room. Dirt-clouded light streamed into the store. Two moss- and mud-covered shelves...or racks? I didn’t know; whatever those things are that separate aisles.

It didn’t matter, not anymore at least. I approached the aisle-divider things, cautiously avoiding the small piles of glass and the occasional ant pile. I heard a rustling of feet as a figure approached; I turned to greet him.

A figure stood in the light, a dark shadow blocking out the streaming sunlight that emanated from behind; the light cast a halo-like ring around his head. That was my Peter for you, always trying to be dramatic.

“Get down from there,” I said to him. “Stop kidding around. Meyers just announced that we are Americans.”

“That’s great!” Peter said. “Oh, and Laura, there’s something that you might like to see.”

“It better not be another cobweb that ‘*Catches the light in just the right way.*’”

“That was just one time. And that spider web was awesome.”

I stood up and walked toward him; as I got closer, I could make out his face. His long, slanted chin was covered in grime, and his eyes, surrounded by dark shadows of dirt, were slightly red and puffy from lack of sleep. His dark brown hair was starting to get dirty. He now wore a beige trench coat over his pale blue t-shirt; blue jeans that

were several sizes too big and a few sizes too short enveloped his legs.

It was these little things that kept changing. I would see him one minute, and the next he would have a new hat or new pants. He was a scavenger. I was too, but to a lesser extent. I liked the way I looked. A week or so after we we'd been uprooted, I found a nice coat, soft and warm. It was a black sweatshirt, just the right size, and it never got dirty. I found it in a decent shop, almost the opposite of the one I was in now. Next to it were these dark blue—Peter called them black—pants that were almost as good as the sweatshirt. I stopped next to him to let my eyes adjust to the bright sun.

"What is it?" I asked him, still half blinded by the sun's brilliant light.

"There," he said, pointing off into the distance.

"Where... Oh." I had seen it for a brief, lingering second. It was death. Not Death with a scythe and one-touch-and-you're-dead death, but the harbinger of death. It was one of the many harbingers that I had learned to fear; it was also one of the more exquisitely beautiful ones. A majestic cloud, pale green against the sky, drifted against the pinkish orange of bright rising sun. It was another gas attack, far enough away to be awe-inspiring instead of terrifying.

Peter hopped down and turned, offering his hand to help me down from the rubble-strewn windowsill. I took his hand as I stepped down toward the street level. It was about a two-foot drop, but I had learned to go slowly, especially since I had lost my shoes. Shoes were the hardest thing to come by: too small, and you can barely stand, but too big, and you lose them when you get stuck in mud or need to move quickly.

"We need to find you some good ol' boots," Peter said, noticing me wince as the cold, sharp rubble pressed against my exposed feet.

"I know," I said. "At least winter hasn't set in yet."

I reached the bottom.

"And now," Peter said as he held something behind his back, "I have the real surprise."

"What is it?"

"First, tell me what day it is."

"September seventeenth."

"Right. And what would we be doing if the world hadn't gone straight to Hell?"

"Peter."

"I know, but...it's your birthday. I don't have a cake, so I had to manage with what I could find."

"Peter, you shouldn't have. I wouldn't have even known."

"But I would have known that I forgot your birthday. Open your gift." He turned, revealing a trashcan behind him. Leaning against this trashcan was a Scooby-Doo lunchbox. "Check inside."

I walked toward the lunchbox. Light glinted softly off its dented frame. I picked up the box, turning it slowly in my hands as I searched for the rusted latch.

"Go on," Peter said from behind me. "I promise you'll like it."

The hinges screamed as I slowly opened the lid. A small leather-bound notebook

lay inside of the box.

"You can toss the box if you want."

"Thank you, Peter. I...I love it."

That was the best thing about the post-apocalyptic land that we lived in: simple things, clothes and food, became treasures. A notebook became as rare as a killer rabbit. (Yes, I know, *Monty Python*, but hey...it was a good movie.) I looked at the notebook, held it in my hands. I wiggled my toes on the ground. Shoes were what I wanted for the next holiday.

"There's more."

"What?"

"Well...not really a 'gift' per se, but I found a store. A shoe store, so it shouldn't have been looted."

"Where?"

"About a mile this way." Peter pointed into the smog-covered distance.

We could see the shoe store just as the sun had concluded its descent. It was cold and dark, but the prospect of shelter and shoes carried us forward. We would have gotten here sooner except we had to dodge marauders and other dangers on our journey. We also ran into soldiers: the bad ones, not our liberators that Janet promised were coming. Something was happening; we could hear gunshots and the other noises of occupation, but we hadn't seen anything.

We traversed a mile in less than a day. Something was wrong. I think Peter felt it too. Peter and I had grown up on the streets, living in poverty before the enemy came. It was because of this that we knew something was amiss. It was like the day before a gang war erupted, or a bank as the would-be robbers walked in. Quiet, still, and peaceful, yet, at the same time, charged with enough tension to blow a tanker. This was one of those nights; we knew that something was going to happen. We also knew that there was nothing we could do. We were puppets to the world, powerless to its clutches as we were forced to dance through our misery.

All that kept us going was the prospect of tomorrow. Peter was holding out for a time when he could find his girl. He had a childhood crush that he had carried with him for all of these years. He brought her with him everywhere; she just didn't know it yet, didn't know how lucky she was. There were days when Peter would stand outside of her door. He would clutch a few disheveled flowers in his hand and stammer out the words "I love you" over and over again, trying to gain enough courage to knock on the door.

And I was holding out for Peter. Peter, my lifelong companion, the boy whom I had been with for most of my life: he was what I was holding on to. I'd had to stand by him for all of those years as he stood outside of her door. I would watch, holding my breath as he raised his hand to knock, and then let out a sigh of relief when he couldn't. Three simple words I was holding out for, and yet, I knew I would never hear them.

I was so lost in thought that I hardly noticed when we reached the front of the store.

The store wasn't much, a collection of shelves and checkout lines, but there were shoes, and in the end, that was all I needed. We crept through the shattered doors. It was too dark to see into the back of the store. Shallow moonlight filtered in through the shattered windows to reveal crushed mannequins and broken displays. All was silent in the store as we glided across the marble floors, creeping around the sharp pieces of glass that lay strewn across the ground before us.

Peter stopped ahead of me. "Did you hear that?" he whispered back to me.

"No," I mouthed back.

A can skidded across the floor, rustling like a leaf. We weren't alone. Peter pointed to himself and then to the left; I would go right as he checked left. I proceeded into the enveloping darkness as Peter crept further into the revealing light. Slowly, I crawled forward; I couldn't bring myself to breathe as I slithered across the cold tile. I was close to the shelves, close enough that I could risk looking around its edge. Just a quick peek, I thought. Peter is only a few rows away.

My heart pounded as I carefully leaned my head out from around the comforting shadow of the shelf. Boots! I quickly stifled a scream, stuffing my head back into the dark. A pair of military boots were right around the corner. I rolled over to warn Peter; he was gone.

I hadn't been seen; my heart began to beat again. I was concealed. I had to look again; I had to see who the boots belonged to. Stealing a quick glance, I inspected the boots again. Empty. Thank everything that is holy, they were empty. They looked well-worn and slightly small for my feet, but they would work. I sat down.

Forgetting to be stealthy, I shoved the boots onto my feet. I looked down: laces, untied of course. I fumbled with the cords. How could I forget how to tie a shoe? It was so simple back then, and now it was one of the hardest things for me to do. My calloused hands could barely hold the long ropes. The aglets had fallen off, leaving a flawed mass of thin strings at the end.

"Hey! Get the hell away from my boots!" A man was standing before me. He was barefoot, giant in height, with a massive cleaver clutched in his left hand. A gun belt was loosely tied around his slender frame.

"Peter!"

"No help's coming, little missy." He took a step forward. I still couldn't make out his face, but I was more concerned with the knife he held in his bloodstained hand.

"I have people with me," I stammered.

"Then I'll kill them next." I had to run. *Come on, Peter, where are you?*

The man took another step forward. I scrambled up and turned toward the other side of the shop. I ran toward the far side, toward Peter. My feet pounded on the tile.

"Peter!" I screamed. He had to hear me; he would come. I stumbled and fell just as Peter rounded the corner, his knife in hand. He charged the looming shadow and brought him down with one quick swipe. He turned toward me. Small droplets of cherry-colored blood glistened on his shirt and face.

"Laura." The word fell from his lips as he rushed toward me. He knelt down beside

me. I looked up. I was swathed in a blissful aura of moonlight. Specks of dust and smoke gently floated by Peter's head as I lay on the ground. The light surrounded Peter's face in a small halo. "You'll be all right. Just hang in there. Laura..." He choked the words out.

"Peter," I whispered back, my voice trembling and raspy as I tried to speak. "Remember? Remember when we were young?"

Peter grasped my hand and squeezed tightly. "Yes, Laura. I remember."

"Remember how we used to play in the alleys?"

"We used to pretend we were married." Peter smiled as tears rolled down his cheeks. "We would pretend that we were happy and that we had a home."

My vision blurred as tears filled my eyes.

"Laura," he whispered as I gazed into the wondrous stream of white, "I love..."

“The Lake Gunnison Project”

Marvin Burchfield sat on the bench in front of his store. Although his was the only grocery store in town and Saturday was the usual trading day in Hampton Falls, not one customer had been in all morning. Marvin looked across Main Street to the train depot and saw no movement. Along Main Street, there was a car or two parked, but the vehicles' owners were not in sight. Someone passing through might think this was a Sunday morning rather than a Saturday.

Marvin, of course, knew where his customers were. For weeks now, Saturday, June 2, 1938 was scheduled to be the grand unveiling of the Lake Gunnison project. Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Lake Gunnison was a favorite haunt of local fishermen and swimmers. A crew from the Civilian Conservation Corp had been working steady at the lake for eight months. Just to think of the affair caused Marvin to roll his eyes in his porcine head.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, Marvin saw a familiar figure approach. Vernon Abbot, though still a distance away, gave a wave as he strolled down the street. Vernon spent Monday through Wednesday working out of his office in Maxton, the county seat, where he provided accounting and bookkeeping services. The remainder of his time was devoted to his farm just outside of Hampton Falls. The Abbots and Burchfields had both been in Hampton Falls as long as anyone could remember. Vernon assisted Marvin with a few bookkeeping details and tax issues. In exchange, Marvin would occasionally write off items on the Abbot charge slip kept at the store.

“It’s too mild a day to be meandering about a ghost town,” Marvin said. “I figured you’d be at war with the weeds in your garden or walking your fields.”

Vernon shook Marvin’s hand and then joined him on the bench. “I was doing that and more just after sunup, but I thought I’d take advantage of the quiet around here to get some of my errands run. My plan is not working out as expected since just about everybody’s closed but you.” Vernon cracked a slight smile. “We must both be missing something.”

“We’re not missing nothin’. Folks ought to be ashamed of participating in bread and circuses up at the lake. What a complete waste.” The excess flesh on Marvin’s neck shook as he cleared his throat and spat.

“Now, Marvin Burchfield, don’t be too hard on folks looking for something to celebrate. It’s been a long spell since the people have had much of anything to cheer. Old Man Depression hit the Chauga Valley hard; you shouldn’t begrudge them this opportunity. From what I’ve heard, they’ll have a first-class fish fry, a talent show, and an oratory from Senator MacKinnon.”

“If it’s all that, then why ain’t you up there with them?”

“With the town closed up, we both probably should be. We’ll at least get a free meal. What say you, Brother Burchfield? Lock up the store, and let’s drive up and catch the tail end of it. If you’re going to criticize the great public-works project, you ought to at least have seen it.”

“I keep telling people I’ve got nothing against public works, Roosevelt, or the CCC. My problem is the waste of time and money on something that is useless. Why didn’t they build this in Charleston or Savannah or...”

Vernon raised his hand with the palm open and signaled Marvin to stop. “I don’t want to argue the merits one way or the other. Let’s just go see.”

Marvin continued to make mild protests about joining in the revelry as he cut off the lights and locked up the store. Vernon pulled his pickup around to the front of the store, and they were off. The drive up Ebenezer Road was pleasant. The afternoon remained unseasonably cool for June, and the breeze proved steady. The trees had long since leafed out and hidden the view of the blue waters of Lake Gunnison. Marvin and Vernon did not need to see the body of water to know exactly where it was. Both men, since childhood, had spent numerous days camping in the woods and fishing in the various coves.

As they approached what they’d once known as Martin’s Creek Landing, a brand-new sign greeted them and announced their entrance into “The Lake Gunnison Recreation Area.” Where there had been just a clearing and space for six or seven vehicles to park, there was now a good-sized gravel parking lot and a split-rail fence bordering it. The men estimated that the timber that was cleared must have filled two logging trucks. Vernon drove through the lot and found that every place was taken. Upon exiting the graveled area, Vernon located a patch of ground just off Ebenezer Road where he could leave the truck.

“Everybody and his brother must be here,” Marvin commented as he stepped out onto the ground and shut the passenger-side door.

He and Vernon walked through the gravel lot and followed the refurbished trail to the picnic area. Just after rounding a turn, the men looked down and saw half a dozen newly constructed picnic shelters. Each rectangular shelter was covered with a shiny tin roof and contained two picnic tables. The shelters were supported by six large beams—three each on the longer sides. Families not occupying the shelters had blankets spread out all around the grounds and appeared to be enjoying the day. Children darted in and out of the shelters while the older boys played an impromptu game of football.

At the front of the picnic area, a makeshift stage was set up and featured patriotic buntings hanging from the forward edge. Just to the right of the stage, four large black kettles were arranged over four separate fires. Leonard Bearden and Wade Duvall, probably the best fishermen in the county, were supervising the frying. Ella Sheriff policed the dessert table and, like a good school teacher would, persuaded the various children to only take one piece of cake or pie to ensure there would be enough for everyone. Surveying the scene, Vernon speculated that there were at least 250 people

present.

“Boys, y’all come on over here and get a plate.”

It was the voice of Ruby Sassard. Miss Ruby, as all of Hampton Falls knew her, was one of the most beloved residents of the Chauga Valley. Her late husband, Edward, was known throughout the upcountry for his preaching in tent revivals. Hundreds of people testified to the change wrought in their lives after hearing a message delivered by Edward Sassard.

Because no one could decline any request or command from Miss Ruby, Vernon and Marvin moved forward and accompanied her to the serving line. Before they could exchange pleasantries about the weather, Wade Duvall shoved plates in their hands overflowing with golden brown pieces of fish and hushpuppies.

“Wade and Leonard have been manning the kettles since this morning. They’ve worked hard and not complained once,” Miss Ruby observed. “Isn’t this park beautiful? My nephew Jason got on with the CCC and described what all they was doing, but I couldn’t imagine this until I saw it this morning. After dark, Jason says they’ll flip the switch for the first time. Isn’t that exciting?”

As Miss Ruby chatted with Vernon, Marvin slipped back behind the kettles, where Leonard Bearden was scooping fried fish out of the oil. After consuming a piece of fish, Marvin addressed him. “Not that I’m ungrateful for dinner, but I can’t believe that you’re a participant—not a bystander—in this foolishness. Can you imagine how much money it cost to erect that thing?” Marvin pointed toward the towering structure behind the grandstand.

“Now just one cotton-pickin’ minute, Burchfield. They put Miss Ruby on the committee organizing this here shindig, and she asked me and Wade to cook. What was I supposed to say? You know I share your sentiments in full about this whole pump-priming project.”

“The park is all well and good,” Marvin declared, “but *that* monstrosity is over the top. I reckon it must be 75 feet tall. I can’t even guess how much concrete they used when pouring the foundation.”

“How about that limestone on the exterior? A boy told me that it was quarried and shipped from some place south of Atlanta.”

“You two need to stop your squawking and go thank Senator MacKinnon for smoothin’ things out with the CCC so we could get this project,” Wade admonished as he used a wooden spoon to drop hushpuppy batter into the oil. “Dozens of men who otherwise wouldn’t have had work were employed here. I know it wasn’t cheap, but, like the Senator said in his speech earlier, we just owe it to ourselves. I betcha lots of them CCC boys spent some of the money earned at Burchfield Grocery. Besides, if the federal dollars hadn’t been spent on Lake Gunnison, it would have been spent on some road or building outside the county—maybe outside of the state—and our people would be worse off. Don’t forget also that the county now has its first full-time federal employee too.”

Marvin gave Wade an exasperated look. “Think what you are saying. Under your

logic, I'd be better off if some hooligan tossed a rock through my store window and I had to hire somebody to fix the glass and any other damage. Just because the repairman might buy a soda with the money I paid him don't mean I'm better off for having my store vandalized."

"Well, that's certainly a nineteenth-century way to look at things. Half of the country would be living in Hooverilles if the gov'ment was afraid to try something new. And there probably wouldn't be a Burchfield Grocery for anyone to patronize or vandalize. I suppose when the employee comes to town to buy supplies, you'll turn away his business?"

Marvin's cheeks flushed. "I don't appreciate you comparing me to any Republican or insinuating I might have some beef with this new federal employee. I figure he'll be kin to the MacKinnon clan, but I don't hold the bonds of place or family against any man. I wouldn't be in the grocery business if my daddy hadn't been in it before me. So, family is naturally going to take care of family. My gripe, and a just one at that, is the lack of necessity or practical use."

"That limestone could have been used for a courthouse or, better yet, an outhouse," Leonard interjected. "Both would be more practical than what we got."

"What about safety? What price are you two willing to put on safety?" Wade challenged.

"I'm all for safety. But just as Hampton Falls don't need a regiment of troops to keep law and order—Sheriff Crenshaw and a deputy or two are sufficient—Lake Gunnison don't need a dreadnought to patrol it or this monument to superfluity. Heck, the lake can't be much more than a mile wide."

"Maybe three and a half long, if that," Leonard added.

Dismayed at the myopia of his colleagues, Wade went back to tending the hushpuppies. The reappearance of Miss Ruby at the kettles cut off any more discussion about the wisdom of the Lake Gunnison project.

As the day waned, the breeze picked up off of the lake. Some of the crowd headed home for evening chores, but a goodly portion remained to see the talent show and the culmination of festivities. To no one's surprise, Beatrice Byrd won first place with her rendition of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

Just after Beatrice accepted her award, Marvin prodded Vernon. "Let's get out of here. I'm ready to go home."

"Now, Marvin, it's just about time. You're not telling me that you can't see this through? Hang on, my friend. There's no blood on your hands."

Just after eight o'clock, the crowd settled down, and a hush of expectation descended. Even the children left their games and reclined with the adults. A largemouth bass jumped out of the water somewhere off the point, and the splash echoed across the lake.

A murmur went through the crowd as the employee entered the structure. A few minutes passed, but nothing happened. Marvin nudged Vernon when he noticed movement at the top. But still nothing happened. The people began to mill about as the ten-

sion rose. A few more minutes passed, and the keeper exited the building shaking his head. Turning to the crowd, he made an announcement: "Sorry folks, but a fuse blew, and it don't seem that we have a spare on site. But she'll be up and running tomorrow night. I can guarantee that."

With that grim news, the crowd began to disperse. Grumbling as they went, the people climbed the hill from the picnic area to the gravel parking lot.

"So, Brother Burchfield," Vernon queried, "are you up for coming back tomorrow to see the great illumination?"

"I reckon not. A man ought to avoid such spectacles, especially on the Sabbath. Besides, when that thing is turned on, I could probably see it from Crocker's Ridge just north of town. No, South Carolina's first inland lighthouse can crank up without me here to offer a 'huzzah.'"

“Brief Halt”

Hema glanced at the novel and said, “Thanks, Dad. This should see me through the long trip.”

“Long?” Her father joked. “Half the time, you will be sleeping.”

Just then, the East Coast Express inched forward, making the goodbyes more intense. People started moving with the train, waving vigorously and promising to be in touch regularly. The train picked up speed. Still the shortest route on land from Secunderabad to Howrah Junction, it went through three states and made short halts, and yet, for Hema, the trip was endless.

She often felt restricted in the confined space of the ladies’ compartment. At home, her active self had several vents: rushing one minute to turn over the garments on the clothes line, cooking in the kitchen, polishing the peacock figurine, and doing a hundred organizational chores. But what does one do in the closed-in space of a railway section? Read some novel? Every cell in her body wanted movement, but the train milieu demanded a subdued spirit.

Vijaya, a co-passenger, smiled and said, “Don’t look now, but it seems that the man in the blue striped shirt wants your attention.”

Hema surreptitiously looked. A gangly man who had his hands in his pockets was walking past the open door. He was the same one who had helped her with the luggage. Hadn’t she thanked him enough? Why was he still around?

Vijaya smiled again and added, “He is an engineer.”

It was funny that Vijaya knew the man’s profession but not his name. As though Vijaya intuitively knew Hema’s suspicions, she said, “Indians tend to find out who we are traveling with. I know two more people on this express and their professions too.” She chuckled.

There was something in that open chuckle that made Hema pour out her own story of the “bride viewing” she had gone through just two days back. She wanted the matrimonial track to work out with Guru and not with any nameless engineer in the train.

Guru had cast a spell on her. Throughout the bride viewing, the conversation had been general, not matrimonial. He had talked about Vishakapatnam, the town he lived in, and his work, his company, and the prawn export. Then, to the surprise of everyone, he had given the recipe of *Prawn Tempura*.

“This is the spiciest bride-viewing story I have heard,” Vijaya said with a throaty laugh. “Does he really cook? My God, Prawn Tempura? Why not *Prawn Masala*? Where

did he get this foreign-sounding recipe from?"

So Hema spilled out everything she knew about his work place, the trawlers, and the prawn export. The bride-viewing episode had gathered velocity, color, and hope. There were questions, speculations, and a lot of *oohs* and *ahs* from Vijaya. Kausal Mami, the lady with the five gold chains in the upper berth, had taken out her knitting. She seemed to be listening whenever anyone spoke but did not speak much herself. Her gaze held slight disdain and amusement for the younger generation in the train compartment. She took out a pill from a small box and popped it into her mouth.

Vijaya's three-year-old had her thumb in her mouth and eyes on Hema as though she, too, was a part of the bride-viewing party. The beggar boy in the main compartment had taken out two flattened stones and used them deftly as percussion instruments to his songs. A card game had started in the adjoining lot. The cigarette smell and smoke wafted through, uninvited, into the ladies' compartment.

Co-passengers had turned into cohorts. Hema, alone with her thoughts, pictured the tall and handsome Guru again and wondered why he had such an impact on her. His humor came to mind immediately. No, it was more than his humor. Was it his piercing genuineness or his way of connecting with her? Once, during the conversation, Guru's father had joked, "So, you are ready for marriage?" and Hema had replied, "My parents think I am ready." Everyone had laughed, but Guru had persisted, "Well, are you ready too?"

His easy follow-up question had brought a smile to her lips and a tickle to her heart. She could not answer this question in front of the elders. For the first time, she wished they could take a walk somewhere, Charminar, Golconda fort, or the crowded streets of the flower market. She wanted to propose to him on bended knees. She wanted this moment to last. She wanted...

The novel lay on her lap, unopened. She knew she would not be able to retain the story of the novel even if she tried to focus. Her own story had permeated the air of the coach. The pickles and *podis*, spicy essentials for hostel life and reminders of good homemade food, had percolated through her baggage onto the limited air around. Aromas in the compartment spelled one thing: Hema was going back to her work in Kolkata after a break. The farther away she went from her parents, the larger the packets became. That was the Hyderabadi custom. Hema would need the Gongura chutney and the mango pickle.

Slowly, the luggage had bulged, and now one of her VIP suitcases was practically full of bottles and packages. The unnamed engineer had helped her with the heavy suitcase. At that time, she had not seen the strings attached, not known about his interest in her, and definitely not known about his profession. That unfolded with the speed of the train. He had swapped his seat to be opposite the ladies' compartment and tried conversing with the ladies every opportunity he got. Hema watched Vijaya's three-year-old girl drooling candied saliva and holding a pinwheel in one hand. Vijaya tried wiping her child's sticky fingers with a hanky.

Hema decided to take the toddler to the bathroom to wash her hands. The faucet

worked, and the bathroom was clean and dry right now. When she emerged from the bathroom, the anonymous engineer was conveniently there. He steadied the kid in the wobbly motion of the train. Politely, Hema smiled and nodded her thanks while holding on to Puja, the kid. How could she tell him that her heart was with Guru? How could she tell him that her tracks were transfixed in a particular direction, leading to Visakhapatnam, Guru's city?

Vijaya had become a confidante. Hema swapped stories as though she had known her a lifetime. Why, even Vijaya's city had piqued her interest when she realized how close it was to Visakhapatnam. Her barrage of questions included the distance, places to go to, the friend circle, and more. Vijaya, tongue in check, had replied, "Take it easy. You are not yet living in Visakhapatnam." Yes, that was true. She did not even know if Guru liked her enough for marriage. Bride viewing was a slow process.

Vijaya understood Hema's situation. Here was a person so much in love. Was this unrequited love? Why did they not talk marriage when it was such an important topic?

Vijaya wanted to pry every small detail, so she said: "Tell me more about the bride viewing. You belong to the go-getter generation. How come you did not seal the relationship if you liked Guru that much?"

Oh, there had been so many elders around. Besides, she had been sitting so far away. No, no, no. The real reason was that, suddenly, Hema had become tongue-tied, not in control of her emotions and facial muscles. She had not expected Guru's charm to sweep her off her feet. She had thought of bride viewing as a passage of time, something every girl in her twenties did, something that one scraped through, grudgingly or with a smile. Guru had changed all that during that visit.

Now, Kausal Mami requested a song from the beggar boy and doled out a small tip. Vijaya, Hema, and the engineer enjoyed the unrequested song and tipped generously. The engineer provided bits of information: the passing towns, the train schedules, and the right purchases to be made at specific stops. The train slowed, and the ticketless beggar boy disappeared as magically as he had appeared.

Then, the train started slowing down for the approaching station. Yes, it was Visakhapatnam, all right, but it had little importance, said Vijaya. It was a mere halt among the numerous ones the train was going to make by the time it reached Howrah. The train stopped, and Hema looked out of the barred window. Lo and behold, Guru was standing in front of her compartment, right on the platform! Was she dreaming? Sure, he worked in that city, but why was he at the station? Had he come to meet her? Did he really like her? How did he know the exact spot to wait at? Her mouth flung open in surprise.

Gu-ru? She formed his name with her lips.

The next moment Guru was at the window. Smiling! Grinning!

"You look surprised. Were you expecting someone else?"

"No," Hema beamed. "I was not expecting you either."

Vijaya was also surprised and looked at Hema questioningly. Hema nodded a brief imperceptible nod and introduced the two. Now, Kausal Mami of the upper berth had

left her knitting and joined them. The anonymous engineer, too, made his appearance outside the window. Did Hema want anything from the stalls? Anything at all? Maybe a magazine?

When the engineer lingered, Guru stretched out a friendly hand toward him and said, "I am Guru. Thank you for looking after my fiancée."

Hema blushed. Guru had called her his fiancée. Did that mean anything? Vijaya sensed Guru's magical charm reaching beyond Hema onto the engineer. Guru had reached across the aisle and turned a pest of an engineer into a help. Maybe now the engineer would help Hema with her luggage at Howrah station too.

Vijaya wanted to tell Guru that she would take care of his fiancée if he'd share his recipe for Prawn Tempura with her. No, she decided, this was not the right time to divert his attention. She would tease him later on. After all, she had formed a lifelong friendship with Hema. Right now, Vijaya was annoyed by the engineer's doggedness. Why wouldn't he leave the couple alone? Couldn't he understand the time restraints? This was a brief halt. She was not sure when Hema and Guru would see each other again. She could not let the nameless engineer become a *kebab mein haddi*—a bone in a juicy steak. She had to take the engineer out of the scene and do it fast.

She addressed Kausal Mami and the engineer: "Let us give them some time together, shall we?" Reluctantly, Kausal Mami moved, but the engineer lingered a few feet away.

Irked by his feet dragging, Vijaya called him aside. "Engineer Babu, I do want a magazine from the stall..." She felt a sense of relief when he walked toward the magazine stall.

Vijaya thought of people often citing memorable train rides to royal destinations such as Jaipur/Udaipur. But for her, the East Coast Express was unique, the quintessential element of desi culture. Where else would the paisaless beggar and the wealthy, five-gold-chained Kausal Mami interact? Express was the efficient system that allowed the meal services, ticket collector, passengers, vendors, and coffee servers (different from the food servers) to walk through the same narrow aisles. It even had the friend clubs built in their overall program. Where else could people like Vijaya make so many new friends and get to know their professions too? Of course, the promise of matrimony during a train journey was a definite bonus for some, as was evident from Hema's face.

Vijaya stole a glance at the romancing couple. Both of them were gleeful, smiling as though the muscles had forgotten to go back to their relaxed position. Now Guru was giving her a bottle of water he had brought along. Hema took the bottle and added to her stock of three. The whole compartment's water needs were provided for. Vijaya wondered if he had brought Prawn Tempura too. No, there was no sign of it. Had he come to scope Hema out or to bind the relationship? Hema opened her novel and tore the last page out to write something. Vijaya realized that either addresses or phone numbers were getting exchanged. She noted the creative use of the blank page in the paperback. She never knew that giving out mundane information was an exhilarating

experience, but Hema's face definitely showed it.

When Hema gave Guru the paper with the information, she wanted him to double check it to see if her handwriting was legible. Guru perused at first, then reread it and chuckled. The ladies' compartment was bewildered. What had sparked the laughter? What could be so funny in an address?

Guru chuckled again. In between his spurts, he came to Hema and murmured:

"Of course, yes. I accept your proposal. By the way, you stole the words right out of my mouth."

The words uttered were soft, but the sharp ears in the ladies' compartment collected all the sound waves. Nothing escaped the honed senses. This was the first time Vijaya had witnessed a marriage proposal right at the railway station. She wanted to congratulate Hema, hug her and dance, but decided to wait.

Guru looked at Vijaya and said: "Hema proposed to me just now—without a ring."

Now it was Vijaya's turn to give out the throaty laughter and congratulate the couple. Good, now she knew a fine couple and their professions too! Kausal Mami looked bewildered. She broke her silence and murmured: "A proposal from a *girl to a man*? So daring and so untraditional!"

Her facial expression completed her thought. What is the world coming to?

Guru held Hema's hand. Hema smiled, Vijaya smiled, and, surprisingly, so did Kausal Mami, a mirthless and quirky smile. This YouTube movie had some viewer support already.

The short halt was almost over. The warning whistle had buzzed. The nameless engineer ran toward the door of the train with the magazine for Vijaya.

Guru rushed him. "Hurry, or else you will miss the train."

"I already have," the engineer's words got stuck in his throat.

Green lights and determined tracks pulled the train toward Howrah. The long tedious trip now had the buoyancy of anticipation. The brief halt at Visakhapatnam had left long tracks on the heart.

Hema's glowing world was full of smiles and grins. When she absentmindedly looked out toward the engineer, Babu, he returned the grin. He was the one who was going to be in the train, not Guru. The long and torturous halt was over.

Joe Giordano

Joe Giordano was born in Brooklyn. He and his wife, Jane, have lived in Greece, Brazil, Belgium and the Netherlands. They now live in Texas with their little Shih Tzu, Sophia. Joe's stories have appeared in more than forty-five magazines including Bartleby Snopes, Newfound Journal, and The Summerset Review.

FICTION

"Death Is Not Final"

Dr. Josiah Shatty looked at his watch like he had to catch a plane. He stood at the foot of Lisa's bed, wearing a gray designer suit and money-green tie. Nurse Dolores Gramline was at his side, hands on hips. She was a rail-thin forty-something with mousy hair pulled under a blue cap.

Lisa's husband, Ben, gripped the rail of the bed like he was on a roller coaster. He looked at the doctor with bloodshot eyes. "Is there any way to bring her out of the coma?"

Shatty looked away. "I did nothing wrong."

"What does that mean?"

"You took a long time to bring her in for treatment. Her Cushing's syndrome was quite advanced. The adrenal tumor had flooded her body with cortisol."

He doesn't know I can hear him. Lisa Noble's thoughts drifted like a boat on a gentle ocean wave.

For months, Lisa hadn't been able to sleep. No matter how little she ate, her face and body fattened like a parade balloon. All she wanted to do was sit in a darkened room. She hardly left the house. The morning Lisa was admitted to the hospital, she tried to touch up her acne, but her reflection looked grotesque, like in a carnival mirror. She almost said to Gramline that this wasn't who she was, someone who didn't take care of herself or worry about her appearance. But the contempt in Gramline's eyes kept Lisa silent.

Presently, Ben said, "We didn't know what was wrong."

"Her adrenal tumor expanded into the retroperitoneal space."

Ben's eyebrows rose.

Shatty waved his arm like he was shooing a fly. "Her abdominal cavity. The cancer was the size of a football. If the tumor had been any nearer her aorta, I would've closed her up and sent her home."

Lisa thought, *Dear God.*

Ben said, "But you cut the cancer out?"

"Yes, plus her kidney and gallbladder. It was a very tricky procedure. I've done all I can." Shatty looked at his Rolex. "I have an operation scheduled."

Wait. Please don't give up on me.

Shatty took Lisa's chart and scribbled something. He turned to Gramline and said, "Keep her comfortable."

Ben, don't let him go.

Shatty left the room.

Ooh. I'm so cold.

Gramline said, "I'm sorry the operation wasn't successful."

Ben nodded.

Gramline flipped pages on Lisa's chart. "I see there's a DNR—a 'do not resuscitate' order."

Ben took a deep breath. His eyes moistened.

Forget what I signed. Rip it up. Take extreme measures. Keep me alive.

Ben pulled out his phone.

Gramline said, "Please go outside to make a call."

Ben's glare froze the nurse. He hit a speed-dial number.

"Hello, Doctor Masters?"

Thank God.

"It's Ben. Lisa is in a coma, and they say there's nothing they can do. You will?

Thank you so much.

Ted Masters had a full mane of white hair. A recent stroke left him with slurred speech and a slight limp. He was retired, but he'd delivered Lisa and remained a family friend. He arrived within an hour.

For Lisa, voices sounded like echoes in a canyon. The cold she'd felt earlier was gone. She was warm as if immersed in amniotic fluid. A light appeared in her brain and hovered above her like a halo of glimmering embers. She had the sensation of floating upward. Calmness overtook her mind.

Lisa thought, *No more pain. I just need to release, and I could stay here.*

Doctor Masters put his hand on Lisa's forehead. She heard him, but she didn't care.

He said, "There's something very wrong here." He peered at her chart. In a few moments, his head snapped up. "Nurse, this woman had adrenal surgery. Her other gland has shut down. She requires steroid replacement. Hydrocortisone is imperative, but I don't see that she's received any."

"Doctor Shatty gave no instructions for medication."

"This woman needs an injection immediately."

"I'm sorry, Doctor Masters, but you have no standing in this hospital. I can't administer an injection on your orders."

"It's a matter of life and death."

"I'm sorry."

"Where's Doctor Shatty?"

"In surgery."

"How do I reach him?"

"There's an emergency number for the OR."

"Give it to me."

Light surrounded Lisa. Shadowy figures flickered around her like candle flames.

She felt pulled toward them.

But Ben loves me.

Shatty was on the line. His voice was raised. "Doctor Masters, what can possibly require you to pull me out of an OR?"

"Doctor Shatty, Mrs. Noble has no record of receiving steroid replacement medication. I'm sure this is an oversight by the nursing staff of your order, but I need you to give authorization to Nurse Gramline for an immediate injection. We can't wait for you to finish surgery. Mrs. Noble is near death."

Shatty took a few beats before answering. He lowered his tone of voice. "Yes, of course. Put Gramline on the phone."

Doctor Masters inserted the syringe. He said, "Lisa, come back to us."

Ben held Lisa's hand. "Honey, I love you."

The steroid's effect tugged against the light and shadows.

It's so peaceful here. Ben, please understand. I'm going, but death is not final.

Ben called to Lisa, but she couldn't hear.

Danny Judge

Danny Judge is an emerging writer who is working on his first novel. His short stories have appeared in The Quotable, Burningword, and Referential Magazine. A former Marine, he lives in the Midwest with his wife, Sarah, and his giant two-year-old son, Jack, and is currently attending Simpson College in Indianola, IA.

FICTION

“Beatrice”

A grease quill-quiver halo hung round her head on threadbarren strings of fallow gold. Therein slipped wayward strands of tremulous soil; softly, she sighed and settled to breathe, to steep in a primordial calligraphy of gently spoken sounds, the primitive splendor. The framework of the river flexed and swayed at the behest of a sonorous breeze: milkweeds heeded the westward song, the vestigial beckoning of Mother Earth, should she subscribe to its supplication. She could smile.

The surface of the river shone, its placid altar cleaved and rifled by the belly of her mother’s breath. The collective sonnet of nature’s worthy, if only passing, inhabitants, an orchestra upon which she balanced her exhalations, her thoughts and her prayers. She could melt into the scenery and sleep, should such an impulse deign to whisper.

An echo of yesterday’s sorrow slipped stealthily through the visage of the earthen spillway, and she perceived it freely, with no fear or mourning. The expression in the river was the face of a specter: blackened eyes, split lips, lacerated skin stretched gauntly over high and proud cheekbones. A hummingbird, a miniscule deity, and an ethereal testament of nature’s pristine impassivity, bobbed and ebbed between the unfeeling fingers of the river’s flora. If she could be such a thing, how much softer the sails would sweep her across the share, how much bolder her beacon should burn. To be marked by the sun was its own special hell. To fall at the graceless vigor of the thing which sustained her, to admonish herself for childish anger, yet to abhor with genuine vengeance the oracle which adorned her. A fallacy, this lithograph of ego’s abandoned providence.

The midafternoon was silent and supportive, architecturally sound, profoundly secure. Her reflection upon the natural mirror flexed in bohemian whimsy yet never hid, never scorned. Diminutive hands, having done their sullen work, rested in her lap, sculptures of grace. Verily, if she had left him his life, she would have relinquished her own. But how to move past, to live and forget? To whom such a question should concern, she could not see.

But a cicada hummed overhead, a bullfrog across the divide. Behind the wall of good and evil, there is a place without concept, a place dawned in beauty, a chalice of free will, of antiquated faith. She could follow the road. An enduring home, a place to rest—she could find in that place, if she dared to look.

Presently, a minnow appeared and waxed a perfectly clean figure eight within the amorphous shallow. An element of perfection danced upon her uncharted movements.

Her freedom of choice brought her to this place, which, simultaneously, was nowhere at all. She watched the diminutive fish cut freely through the glassy stream and yearned for the day when she would feel such freedom, such non-precision of selection. The minnow veered, and she was afraid for it, then—a catholic array of inherent danger, the latitude of which she endured to conceive, foolish flippancy, the easy movements of the silver-shade filament which weaved through menace and flouted peril yet, somehow, moved thus—unabashed and free.

Of her presence within this uninhibited stage, cohabitation is born: a muted colloquy of reality and reaction. A liaison between all and nothing. When she'd asked him, he'd sneered; later, she'd forged again and he'd snarled. At yet another inquiry, he'd slipped into savagery, and she'd ached of her antagonism. Now, he was gone, and she was reborn; a thing once dead now kindled within her, a flame once expired, now suffered to light.

Brian K. Kerley

Brian K. Kerley was born in Northern California in 1958 and has lived in Alaska since 1980. He has a degree in aviation, works seasonally as a bush pilot, and is very near completion of a BA in English, with plans to earn an MFA in creative writing. He lives in a log house with his wife and grandson in rural Tok, Alaska.

FICTION

“It’s a Pirate’s Life for Me”

We set sail out of London in late winter of 1723, making good time down the Thames. The *Princess Galley* wasn’t built for speed, but the sou’wester gave us a good push ’til we rounded Goodwin Sands and turned to tack into the English Channel.

It was all work after that. The captain shouted curses over the rain-laced gale to change tack every fifteen minutes. We no sooner set our sails, with barely a breath caught, before he’d bellow his orders and throw his threats for us to reset the rigging again. Such was the slow back-and-forth progress of taking a tall ship into the wind.

There was no pleasing Captain John Wickstead. No matter what we did, it was never good enough for that forty-five-year-old barnacle.

“Damn you, Corp,” he yelled at me. “I’ll have you flogged if you don’t work faster. Lively now, lad, or you’ll crash us into the white cliffs.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Shut yer trap and up the forms’t with ya an’ secure the stay sail. I’ll beat the lubber who slipped that sheet,” he swore.

I scrambled, slipped, and fell against the starboard rail—bruising a rib in the process—and was up the forward mast before I felt the pain, all the while wondering how I’d be to blame for crashing this wallowing bark when it was the mate at the helm.

The storm let up and the weather improved as we made our way south towards the West African Gold Coast. I was glad to shed my woolens and tarred jacket, but I soon cursed the heat. My elation at leaving London was long gone, and misery seemed to be the norm. The work was grueling and the food bad, but at least I had something to eat and a place to sleep. It was better than trying to survive in smelly old London, where people tossed their chamber pots into the streets, spreading disease as fast as the rats could carry it. There were whores, thieves, cons, cutthroats, and hordes of starving orphans roaming for pockets to pick, and the weekly entertainment was watching pirates getting their necks stretched at Execution Dock.

A queer thing about the hangings was that more than one pirate awaiting the noose had stated they’d had no regrets. Many claimed they had lived a rich and free life, though a short one, which was far better than the degrading life in the merchant fleet or the navy. I soon came to understand their meaning.

Our own captain was responsible for atrocities as bad as any I’d heard done by pirates. We were undermanned and overworked since crew wages cut into profits. Discipline for the slightest infraction was cruel and sometimes fatal.

Exhausted Henry Wynn, ordered to work a double for sassing the mate, was caught sleeping on duty. Made to unbraid a three- strand into a cat-o-nine tails, he took his lashes tied to the mizzen.

One time, the captain found a weevil on his supper plate and had the cabin boy, Michael Morley, whipped for it. Weevils were common for sure, and bitter to boot, but not the boy's fault. After Michael's back was good and striped, he was made to stand the wheel for six hours. When he fell from weakness, the captain beat him with a marlin spike. I tried to stop it and got clobbered good for the trouble. Michael's scalp bled on the deck, and he started twitching and jerking, but Wickstead made us go back to work. The surgeon, John Crawford, could do nothing for him. The boy died six hours later, and the second mate tossed him over the rail without a word. A few of us on red watch said a prayer for Michael later that night.

In Africa, we offloaded tools, cloth, and several barrels of gunpowder. Half our crew took ill as we languished in a miasma of tropical diseases over the next few months. When the colony collected enough live cargo to fill our ship, the captain made his purchase, and we took on one hundred and seventy black slaves. I didn't see how we could cram so many in the hold, but we did. I felt sorry for the poor wretches and asked the second mate, Goldsmith Blowers, if we could bring a score of them topside to make room. I was backhanded for an answer. My fists wanted to feed the bastard some knuckle pie, but I knew I'd be flogged or beaten or both, so I refrained and swore vengeance under my breath instead. We weighed anchor and set a course for the Caribbean.

The captain and mates abused the slaves terribly, which gave us some reprieve, but our lean rations became leaner with more mouths to feed. Then there was the smell. Prisoners couldn't go to the bow and use the head, so they were forced to urinate and defecate where they were chained. More than forty slaves died of disease during the crossing as did some of the crew. The captain, seeing his profits dying and tossed overboard, began ordering the slaves brought up on deck each day for fresh air.

During exercise, much of the human cargo shuffled in their shackles with slumped shoulders, coughing weakly, and as each day passed, their ribs protruded all the more from their bony bodies. More than a few attempted, and failed, to dive to their death and were rewarded with a beating, brought below, and denied sun and fresh air for several days.

One blue-sky afternoon when we ran before the wind on a rolling sea, I was surprised to learn that one of them spoke English.

Henry and I were scrubbing the deck and speaking low so as not to be overheard. Ankle chains rattled as the slaves were walked 'round the ship's waist.

"This is a blooming shite voyage, Henry," I said. "I'll never sign on a slaver again."

"I'm agreeing with ya, Robert. T'aint no way to treat a body. Nobody has no right over another like this." He spit and added, "Our fare ain't so good neither. If'n we come upon another bark, I'll be tempted t' jump ship."

A new voice, deep and resonant with an African accent, said, "I would be happy to jump with you."

I looked up at the ebony-skinned man who'd spoken. He smiled despite his condition. He was tall and broad of shoulder with skin blacker than I'd seen on any man, which made his white teeth shine.

"You speak English?" Henry asked as we both stood and tossed our scrub brushes in the bucket.

"Obviously," replied the black man.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"I am Emeka," he answered, placing his long slender hands together and bowing slightly. His shackles slipped an inch down his forearms. Red wrist sores stood out in contrast to his black skin.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," I replied with a nod. "My name is Robert Corp, and this," I said, indicating my crewmate, "is Henry Wynn."

He nodded and asked, "So, you are not happy with your masters?"

"No," I answered. "We'd be better off in prison."

"Yeah," added Henry. "Better food and more of it in prison. Better treatment too. For two farthings, I'd mutiny."

"Shush," I hissed. "Keep your voice down, you bloody fool. You want another flogging?"

The crack of a whip snapped like a pistol shot. Emeka stiffened with gritted teeth. He swung around and faced the second mate, who was pulling his whip back for another blow. A red line ran diagonally across Emeka's back, and a drop of blood tracked down from the top of the welt.

"Keep moving, slave," Blowers growled with a malicious grin. And to us he said, "No talking to the cargo. Now, get back to work."

When Emeka didn't move, he snapped the whip again, but faster than I thought possible with chains, the slave caught the whip and yanked, causing the mate to fall face first onto the deck. Several crewmen swarmed Emeka with clubs. They dragged his unconscious form below. He emerged topside a week later for exercise, walking with a slight limp.

Henry and I spoke with him quietly and guardedly. "How did you come to learn English?" I asked.

"Spanish missionaries," he answered. "My tribesmen speak your language."

"Do all the slaves speak English?" asked Henry.

"No," he said sharply. "Only eleven of us from Sierra Leone know your tongue. The others are from Guinea or Gold Coast."

"Look," I said, scanning the deck and the yards above to be sure no one was listening. "When we get to Barbados, we'll help you escape. Henry and I are jumpin' ship."

"I would gladly be free," Emeka admitted. "But you risk much."

"We'll see," I said. "We'll see."

The daily beatings and floggings continued, and Blowers constantly cracked his whip like a spoiled child with an evil toy. We got more than our share of discipline, but at least no one else was murdered since Morley.

Food was spoiling in the warm climate, and hunger made us edgy. Bald Billy ate some bad salt pork and missed reporting for his watch. Blowers found him doubled up with a gut ache in his hammock and gave him a good going over with his whip, then forced him aloft to work the tops. While on the yards, he swooned, fell, and broke his leg. The surgeon's mate fixed him up with a splint, but the captain made him work for only half share since he was injured.

On September 14th, we spotted a sloop on the horizon flying the black flag. Captain Wickstead ordered more canvas put on to make a run for it. We readied our two quarterdeck guns and the swivels on the poop deck.

The mate ordered the hatches secured, but the surgeon's mate insisted we leave one open so the slaves could get air, so the main hatch was left open. The sloop quickly gained on us, and when she came into view, we saw her packing eight guns on her main deck and ten swivels along her rails.

The pirate ship fired some warning shots, pulled up alongside, and ordered us to heave to, so we did. The sloop stood off several dozen yards. Thirty to forty jeering men filled her decks. I couldn't help but notice the multi-national attire and the varied hues of complexion aboard the sloop. A third of them were black Africans, and a few brown-tinted scoundrels were wearing headscarves in Middle East fashion.

A well-dressed man of early middle years stood at the rail and hailed us. "I am George Lowther, captain of the pirate vessel *Ranger*. Send over a boat bearing your captain for parlay."

A pinnace was rigged, swung over the rail, and rowed over, bearing the captain. Wickstead went aboard the *Ranger*, and several pirates climbed in the pinnace and returned to the *Princess Galley*.

They grabbed Blowers and Crawford for questioning. "Where is the gold, monsieur?" asked a pirate with a blue cap and a French accent.

"Go bugger yourself," spat Blowers.

The Frenchman punched him square in the snout and again in the gut. I must say it pleased me no end to seen that bilge-sucking bastard get dished a bit of his own desert.

"See here," said Crawford. "There's no need for that."

"Then perhaps you'll oblige us. Where is the booty?" asked the French pirate.

When no reply came, he told the men holding Crawford and Blowers to hold them down. Fuses were wound in and out of their fingers and then lit. They screamed. I felt no shame at my satisfaction over Blowers' fate, but Mister Crawford was a decent lubber, so it pained me to see him used like that.

A swarthy pirate with a red headscarf said, "You would do well to speak up. We have plenty of fuse. After we fry your fingers, we'll torch your toes."

"Rot yer eyes, you pig-headed maggot," Blowers swore.

The pirate kicked him twice in the ribs.

"The plank," wheezed Crawford through gritted teeth. He was sweating, and his breath was short and ragged.

"Shut up," shouted Blowers, but one of the black pirates let him have a right cross on the jaw. He spit a broken tooth through bloody lips but refrained from saying more.

Another pirate—Irish, I think—leaned towards Crawford and asked, "Now what was that ye said there, me bucko? I din't quite catch yer words." His eyes gleamed brightly and his gapped-toothed grin revealed broken yellow teeth.

"The plank," Crawford repeated between painful gasps. "Under the captain's desk—uh, the plank is loose."

Several cutthroats showed great speed making way to the captain's cabin. They were soon in possession of fifty-four ounces of gold. After that, the pirates spent the night looting our stores, drinking our grog, and destroying everything they didn't want. The next day, they ferried the bosons' and gunner's stores over to the *Ranger* as well as our quarterdeck guns and both our swivel guns, all our gunpowder, ball, pistols, and provisions. All other miscellaneous supplies were thrown overboard. About midday, Captain Lowther came over with Captain Wickstead.

Captain Lowther wore a gentleman's jacket despite the heat. He looked to be in his late thirties. He wore a cocked hat, and his trim physique made him seem tall. Where his crew was coarse and slovenly, he was clean shaven, neat, and his speech and manner refined. The cutlass in its hanger and the two pistols on his belt were no different than those carried by his men, but on him they seemed elegant. He strode the larboard waist with his thumb hooked on the hilt of his sword.

He approached Henry and me and said, "You two hearties seem likely lads. How'd you like to get off this floating chamber pot and come a venturing with us? We need good men. The pay is high, and the life a merry one, if probably short."

I think I knew my answer when the *Ranger* first hove into view. The words were on my lips, but Henry beat me to it.

"I'm in," he replied.

"Sir," I said, "I'm with you as well, but some of those slaves below are good men. Their spirit hasn't been broken by the lash."

"No man deserves the lash, but go on," he urged.

"I think they'd make good pirates."

Lowther laughed heartily and handed me the keys he'd taken from the mate. "Go free ten slaves lad, if they'll trade their chains for a cutlass." I continued down to the lower decks and unlocked Emeka first, then went down the line removing the fetters from his friends, eleven in all.

Emeka rubbed his wrists. "What is happening? We saw strangers taking cargo. They were drinking and cursing. Are they pirates?"

"Yes, and so are we now."

"We?"

"Yes, we," I nodded.

Emeka was so overjoyed at being delivered I thought he would cry. The man next to him, with watery eyes, put his hand on my shoulder and choked out, "Thank you."

We made our way past the other slaves, light from the open hatches illuminating their sorry state. Even with the ventilation, the stench nearly gagged me. I wanted to help them. Emeka and his tribesmen pointedly ignored them.

On deck, Lowther's eyes ran over the freed Africans, and I was glad he said nothing about the extra man.

Each recruit had to sign the Articles of Piracy before climbing into the longboat. A surgeon's mate, William Gibbons, and carpenter's mate, James Sedgwick, signed on unwillingly at pistol point, but Henry and I were anxious to be off to fortune and adventure.

"Those slaves are worth £500 each," complained Wickstead.

"Be glad we don't take the rest of them," retorted Lowther as he climbed over the rail.

I was the last pirate off the *Princess Galley*. I swung a leg over and stopped straddling the rail when Captain Wickstead said, "You'll hang, Robert Corp."

"Probably," I replied. "In the meantime, I'll live life to its fullest." Then, a thought occurred to me. I grinned widely. "You have no guns, no powder or provision, and you lost four of your scanty crew."

Wickstead scowled. "What of it?"

I pulled the keys from my belt and grinned even wider. I tossed them in a high arc, and they fell into the open hatch and down into the hold. Wickstead's gaze followed the keys like a cat tracking a bird. The keys clattered when they landed, and a moment later, chains rattled and excited voices issued from the hold.

Wickstead turned to me, clearly alarmed. "Why would you do such a thing?" he breathed.

I chortled my way down the rungs and into the boat. I manned an oar, and as we rowed to the *Ranger*, Lowther, from where he sat in the stern, said, "You're in high spirits. What did you do?"

I told him. His eyes went wide and then he slapped a knee, and we all laughed so hard we barely made it to the ship. By the time we were aboard the *Ranger* and underway, a full scale slave uprising was taking place aboard the *Princess Galley*.

A shout came from the tops. "Sail ho."

Captain Lowther ordered full sails, and we gave chase. He came over to me and handed me a cutlass and a pair of pistols. "Are you ready for riches and high adventure?"

I strapped on the hanger and tucked the pistols in my belt. "Aye, sir. It's a pirate's life for me now."

Lowther took his place on the quarterdeck, and I helped with the sails, singing with the crew as we worked.

Becky Bailey

Becky Bailey lives in Philadelphia, PA, where she writes, paints, and makes friends with strays. In the sixth grade, she wrote her first story. Her teacher said it was “really well done,” and Becky has wanted to be a writer ever since. She has stories published or forthcoming in Thickjam and Stone Crowns Magazine. Recently, she finished drafting a YA fantasy novel that is waiting to see the light of day. Becky can be reached at beckybailey89@gmail.com.

FICTION

“Hypnotized”

“Tell me what you see,” the magic man said to Isaac.

Isaac obeyed, bending over the cheap plastic goblet resting on the red-table-clothed table. One hundred—no, two hundred—sets of eyes were fixed on him. He did not volunteer to be part of this amusement. He was picked from the crowd at random and pushed up to the stage by the rough hands of his cohorts on the floor of the López’s barn-turned-gymnasium.

Looking into the bluish liquid inside the goblet, Isaac saw his reflection swimming on the surface. He had just a moment to take in his round, pale blue eyes and pasty skin before an image transposed itself onto his face: whiskers, a black nose, grey fur, and tiny pink ears. Isaac touched his fingers to his cheeks, feeling for the fur, but found only skin.

Isaac hesitated before answering the question. “I see me...”

“And?” the man pressed. He had that over-the-top, emphatic quality of a performer, or, in this case, a performer for an extravagant Quinceañera for Ariana López, the richest girl in the freshman class.

“I see me...as a mouse,” Isaac finished.

Raucous laughter burst from the kids who had been drinking all night, sneaking alcohol in bathrooms and closets. A few minutes ago, Isaac, egged on by Brad’s jeering, took a couple of burning swigs from a Poland Springs bottle being passed around a circle of guys he almost never hung out with. Isaac, already slightly pink from the booze, flushed red from the laughter.

“Ah, the mouse! Called forth by shy, timid personas,” the performer said, bellowing over the unruly crowd.

“It’s so *true*!” Brad’s voice rang out, painfully carrying around the entire barn.

Isaac knew it was some kind of trick, but still, he couldn’t deny his own mouse-like demeanor. He was small, meek, scared. Too scared to sneak a peek at where he knew Fernanda was sitting, leaning up against the basketball pole, surrounded by all her friends.

“Thank you,” the man hissed. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Isaac.”

“I-zaaack. Thank you, Isaac,” the man crooned like a talk show host.

Isaac shuffled back through the crowd of his classmates to where Brad and the

other guys sat, not far from Fernanda. Isaac could almost feel her presence, as if she were broadcasting invisible radio waves that only he could sense. Earlier in the night, when Isaac voiced a carefully crafted offhand comment about Fernanda to Brad, Brad had seen right through it, bluntly telling Isaac, "Forget it. She's way out of your league, man." Isaac knew it was probably true, but still, it couldn't hurt to steal a few glances.

"Way to go, *mouse man*," Brad said, elbowing Isaac's side. The others laughed. The group smelled like vodka, and Isaac saw that the Poland Springs bottle was open next to Brad's hip. Brad picked it up and held it under Isaac's chin. Isaac winced and took a swig.

"You shouldn't drink that, you know."

Isaac jolted, sticky alcohol dribbling down the front of his shirt.

"Huh?" Isaac turned his head and found dark eyes peering out at him from behind curtains of bright orange hair.

"Do you know what a cancerous liver looks like?"

"Um, no."

"Well, I do," the girl said, brushing her tangerine hair behind one ear. "Lumpy white tumors all over it like poison mushrooms. Not a good way to go. You should stick to pot if you want to do drugs. It won't kill you. Might make you dumber, though. Studies are inconclusive."

Isaac blinked, mouth half-open and words stuck in his throat. The girl was clad in all black, and her mouth moved at lightning speed; Isaac's mind conjured the image of a chatty vampire.

"I'll keep that in mind," Isaac said and then turned away from the strange girl to face the front of the barn again, but not before finally catching a glimpse of the olive-skinned Fernanda and her shiny, brown hair. The light from overhead bounced off of it, and she seemed to be glowing.

The man on stage straightened up and opened his arms wide. "Now, for the reason you have all been so *patiently* waiting. Is everyone ready to be hypnotized?!"

There was a smattering of applause and a few half-hearted *yeahs*. Isaac got the feeling that no one had really been waiting for the hypnotism, but that everyone was waiting for it all to be over so that the real fun could begin, whatever that would be.

"Or, you know," the voice of the orange-haired girl slithered out again, "you could just do whatever it is *you* actually want to do. Not be a mind-controlled zombie going along with whatever your buddies over there are doing."

Isaac turned his head around slowly.

"What's your issue? I don't even know you."

At this, the girl stuck out her hand and said, "Ivy."

Isaac eyed her small, thin fingers like they were snakes in the grass. Then, he grasped her hand and shook once. "Isaac."

"I gathered that."

"Do you insult everyone you meet, or am I just the lucky winner for tonight?"

"Only people who need to wake up."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Before Isaac could hear the answer, laughter rippled through the crowd. Up on the stage, a boy with an orb-like afro from Isaac’s math class was closing his eyes and holding an inflatable guitar, crying out high-pitched lyrics.

“Now *he’s* not afraid to show his true colors,” Ivy said. “Not many guys would sing ‘Call Me Maybe’ in front of the entire freshman class.”

“Don’t give him too much credit,” Isaac scoffed. “He’s hypnotized.”

Ivy wriggled a wormlike eyebrow. “Is he, though?”

Isaac turned back to the boy warbling on stage and peered harder at his face. It was scrunched up in passionate song, but for a millisecond, Isaac saw the boy open one eye, just a crack, to see who was watching.

“Huh,” Isaac said to himself.

“Told ya.”

Isaac narrowed his eyes at Ivy. Who was she, anyway, butting into his business? When he was clearly here to be with his own friends? But when Isaac turned once again toward the group, he was met by the back of Brad’s head. Brad shoved one of the other guys, then took a swig from the plastic bottle. Pointing and laughing at the people on stage, he made a joke about it to all the guys near him but not to Isaac. Isaac’s insides squirmed.

“So.” A soft breath tickled Isaac’s cheek, and he almost jumped out of his skin as Ivy’s voice travelled down his ear canal.

“Jesus, you almost gave me a—”

Ivy waved his words away with a hand and kept going. “What is it you *really* want to be doing, Isaac? It can’t actually be this.” She gestured around her, a lazy hand indicating the whole room and also, *somehow*, Isaac’s place just outside of the group of guys, not quite part of their camaraderie. But how could Ivy know he felt that way? Isaac hadn’t said anything. They’d just met five minutes ago. *No*, Isaac thought. *It’s all in my head.*

“Maybe it’s what I want, maybe it isn’t,” Isaac hissed. “What’s it to you?”

Ivy shrugged. “Just seems a little lame, that’s all.”

Something inside Isaac started to bubble, and his hands shook a little at his sides. “All right, Ms. Too Cool For School, what is it *you* want to do? Last time I checked, we’re both at the same lame party. What makes you so high and mighty?”

Ivy’s eyebrows shot up and disappeared beneath her orange hair. Then, she let out a high-pitched squeal. Snickering surrounded them, and a few awkward glances were flung their way.

“Who’s the freak?” Brad muttered to Isaac.

Isaac’s cheeks flushed, and a hot liquid swirled inside his gut. He didn’t want Brad to think he was associated with Ivy, so Isaac just lifted his shoulders and then dropped them back down, not saying a word. Brad snorted and turned back to watch the people on stage. A girl and a guy were being woken up by the hypnotist after being made to believe they had turned into various farm animals.

Ivy wheezed in and out, trying to control the fit of laughter. Then, all expression was wiped off her face and she looked Isaac dead in the eye. "What I want to do is this." Ivy leapt to her feet, jumping up and down and waving her arms.

"Ah, a volunteer! Excellent!" The hypnotist cried.

Isaac, a look on his face as if he were just slapped with a dead fish, watched as Ivy bounded up to the front of the barn, orange hair bouncing.

"Daaaad?" Isaac heard the little whine carry from the front of the room and instantly knew it had come from the birthday girl, Ariana. Standing off to the side of the stage, Mr. López, a tall man with dark eyes and a mustache like a push broom, responded by putting up his hands and closing his eyes as if to say, "Let's just wait and see."

"Now," the hypnotist said. Isaac snapped his eyes to the stage again. "What's your name?"

"Ivy."

"All right, Ivy. Before we begin, I have to tell you that I'm going to be asking you some questions while you're under hypnosis. Your answers to these questions might be things you don't want this whole room knowing, but you won't be able to lie whilst hypnotized, so I need to know now if you truly want to do this."

"Oh, yes," Ivy replied, eyebrows wriggling. "I'm ready."

Brad's voice carried around the little group Isaac was in. "Delving into the depths of *that* girl's brain? This should be good. Wonder if she's murdered someone."

A few of the guys chuckled, but the others just gave little shrugs. Isaac almost jumped in with a snide retort, almost said to Brad that that was a stupid joke, almost told Brad to just shut up, but Isaac froze instead, clenching his teeth tight together.

"Have a seat," the hypnotist told Ivy.

As soon as Ivy lowered herself onto the stool, the man made a sweeping, circular motion over her head with his hand and muttered a stream of words too soft for anyone to hear. The next moment, he placed his palm on Ivy's orange crown and her chin dropped down to her chest.

"You are now asleep," the performer said, "and you will not wake up until you hear the sound of a bell. Do you understand?"

"Yes." A robotic voice came from Ivy's lips. Isaac wondered how it was possible. The hypnotist had barely done anything. Could she really be asleep?

"Now," the man continued, "you are swimming in the peaceful lake of your mind, and silence engulfs you. You are surrounded by nothing but truthfulness. As I ask you questions, you will have only honest answers at your fingertips, and you will speak them aloud to me. Do you agree to this?"

"Yes."

"We'll start off with a few simple questions. First, what is your favorite color?"

"Orange," the robot Ivy responded. Isaac glanced at Ivy's citrus hair. No surprises there.

"What is your favorite food?"

"Orange."

Chuckles escaped from a few mouths in the crowd.

"What is your favorite TV show?"

"Orange."

Louder laughs carried around the room. Even Isaac emitted a little snort before he could stop himself. The hypnotist frowned slightly.

"Well, I'll have to take your word for it on that one. Now, onto some deeper questions. What was your most embarrassing moment?"

Ivy's forehead wrinkled as her hypnotized consciousness attempted to recall a memory. Then, she spoke loud, so that each syllable rang out like a bell, "When my sister, Ariana, farted during silent prayer in church. I was so embarrassed for her."

The room erupted in laughter. Isaac put the pieces together in his mind. He glanced toward the front of the crowd to the big, curly-haired head of Ariana, the birthday girl. She was motionless, as if trapped in a block of ice. Then, Isaac moved his gaze to the tall, dark Mr. López. The corners of his mouth were turned down, and his broomstick mustache twitched.

"Well," the hypnotist scratched his head, "that's not exactly what I meant by *your* most embarrassing moment, but let's move on. Ivy, what is your deepest, darkest desire?"

A hush fell over the room. Isaac leaned forward in his seat. It was almost wrong, he thought, the fascination everyone has with deep, dark, dirty secrets.

"My deepest desire," Ivy started in the same drone-like voice. "I desire to...to...to put an end to this whole lame performance."

Then, Ivy rose from the stool, slow but resolute, eyes half closed. The hypnotist jumped back a little, eyes darting from Ivy to Mr. López and then back to Ivy again.

"Woah, woah, woah," the hypnotist started. The crowd shifted and muttered as Ivy walked toward the end of the stage. The hypnotist shook himself and fixed a placid look on his face, then tried again. "You will stop walking. You will return to your seat."

But Ivy just kept going. "Must...end...farce. Must...save...all...from...lameness."

Isaac's eyes followed Ivy as she stepped off of the stage and walked to the corner of the room where the DJ booth stood unattended. The muttering of the crowd grew into commotion.

"What is this chick *doing*?" Brad asked no one in particular.

Isaac watched Ivy's slow march and then saw one of her eyes squint open just a hair. One corner of Isaac's mouth twisted up and he turned to Brad. "She's going to put an end to this hypnotic crap."

A tinny, ringing sound rebounded around the room as the hypnotist shook a bell with such force that his whole body quaked. Still, Ivy walked on, calling out louder, "Cannot...wake...up. Must...stop...this...terrible...show."

Then, Ivy slipped behind the records in the DJ booth and dawned giant earphones that dwarfed her head. Mr. López started crossing the room with long strides. Ivy flicked a few switches. The records turned and a strong beat thumped from the speakers in all four corners of the barn. Heads started bobbing of their own accord, and bod-

ies swayed in the crowd like bees buzzing around in a hive. Ivy leaned forward into a microphone and, still speaking in her robot voice, droned out, "Everybody, dance."

Kids jumped up from their seats like their pants had caught fire. Mr. López stopped in his tracks, thwarted by swiveling hips and bumping bodies. Ariana's piercing voice carried over the crowd, and she cried out between hysterical sobs, "Dad-dyyyy! This is why I didn't want her to come!"

Mr. López curled his fists into balls, and since he couldn't make his way past the electrified crowd of freshmen to Ivy, he leapt onto the stage and turned his fury on the hypnotist.

"What have you done to my daughter?!" Mr. López shouted over the booming baseline of the music, which was shaking the whole barn. His face was an inch away from the performer, who shrunk down with each word. "Make her stop! Put her right!"

"I can't! It's complicated! I never guaranteed perfect hypnotisms. It's all in the contract."

"Get the hell out of here!"

The hypnotist didn't need another word. He sprinted to the barn door and called out before disappearing, "I'll send you a bill!"

Isaac looked back to the DJ booth, but instead of Ivy standing there, he found her father, his dark, bushy brows knitted together, playing with different switches but achieving nothing. The whole crowd was jumping up and down, moving as if in a trance to the beat of the music. The next moment, the lights switched off and a strobe turned on, and the figures near Isaac skipped around him in a psychedelic dance. Then, hands closed around his arms and spun him in a circle. Ivy's face appeared before him with every flash of light.

"You're Ariana's sister?" Isaac screamed over the music as they twirled, bumping into bodies around them.

"The one and only!"

"She's going to kill you!"

"Why? What did I do?!" Ivy screamed back, and with the next flash of light, Isaac saw that she had one eyebrow raised.

Isaac couldn't help letting out a burst of laughter. "You weren't actually hypnotized, were you?!"

Ivy's eyebrows wriggled on her forehead. "I'll never tell."

From behind them, a voice boomed out, "IVANNA!"

Ivy's expression was wiped clean as she released Isaac's forearms and they spun away from one another.

"Gotta run!" Ivy said, and as she skipped around Isaac, she took hold of his shoulders and turned his body to face the basketball pole. In the flashing lights, Isaac caught a glimpse of olive skin. Instinctively, he took a step back. The sight of Fernanda dancing around ten other girls with equally shiny hair paralyzed him from the neck down. Then, Ivy's breath tickled Isaac's cheek again, and her voice floated into his ear, "Do *your* thing, Isaac."

Ivy shot off and disappeared into the crowd. Isaac was alone amidst sweaty teenagers. The pounding music sank into his skin, and Isaac couldn't stop himself from moving to the beat. Even Brad, Isaac saw, was grinning like an idiot, expression devoid of all pretension, like it had been before they'd all gotten to high school.

Isaac watched Fernanda's hair swish as she swayed and bounced to the rhythm of the music. He wanted to move closer to her, but his feet were glued to the floor. Then, a voice inside Isaac's head whispered, *Do your thing*.

Slowly, painfully, Isaac put one foot in front of the other, and as he closed the distance between himself and Fernanda, he lengthened his stride. Isaac's heart felt like a hundred tribal drums. Her back was facing him. He tapped her olive-skinned shoulder.

Fernanda spun around, and Isaac watched as her round brown eyes deliberated. Then, Isaac spoke.

"Wanna dance?"

Sabrina Li

Sabrina is a junior at The Lawrenceville School and is from Princeton, NJ. She thinks that one of the greatest ways to publish is with three staples and construction paper. From the age of five, Sabrina has always aspired to be an author and has marveled at the manipulation of words and language. When she is not writing, she is reading stories by Steinbeck or Murakami. One of her greatest goals as a writer is to make her words accessible to others and touch others through text.

FICTION

“Backstage”

When we arrived in America, Momma said we had no choice. We had to lose our voices. Her brown eyes cradled in a nest of wrinkles, Momma stared at me until she thought I understood. So, in the winter when I was six years old, the birds of my voice migrated across the Pacific Ocean.

In kindergarten that year, I spoke to nobody and covered all of my school paintings in thick black acrylic paint. I painted black over houses, black over flowers, and black over suns. My teacher called Momma in. Her name was Mrs. Goldsmith, and she wore too many shades of orange with necklaces made of marbles much too big for her neck. She pulled my pictures, cracked and indistinguishable, out of a cardboard box. Mrs. Goldsmith only spoke in English. Momma had no choice but to be silent and not understand.

Back at home, I pulled the pictures from the box and laid them out on our rickety table. I smiled. Each of my pictures showed the dark backstage behind closed curtains. Beneath the inky paint, fingers danced at the edges of the velvet, waiting for the right moment. And when the time came, the curtains would spring open, flying up to reveal sunlight and resounding operas. I would hear zithers humming and *konghous* sighing as day broke over Chinese cobblestones. And somehow, I passed kindergarten without talking. I think it was because Mrs. Goldsmith was sick of paying for the extra black paint.

It was the first day of first grade, and I was slapping black over a field of daisies.

“Daisies aren’t supposed to be black,” a voice came from behind me.

I responded with silence.

A chubby boy in a too-tight shirt with red stripes pressing on his stomach hovered over my painting.

“They’re supposed to be yellow,” he sneered, paintbrush in hand.

I just stared at him.

“Don’t you understand me? Y-E-L-O-E. *Yellow*,” the boy said with a frown.

I swirled the brush until I could no longer see his reflection. I found a way to paint over him too.

“If you’re not going to do it right, then give me it!” He grabbed the brush from my hand, flicked paint on my face, and then ripped the picture.

I looked at the torn black paper. At its edges I could see tiny bits of white peeking through. The boy had opened the curtain too soon. The show was starting now, but the scene wasn't right—cracked city pavement stood where cobblestones should be. My hand shook as I stared at the paper's bright white edges.

"No," I said softly.

The boy had his back towards me now. He was starting to rip the other half of the painting.

"No," I said slightly louder.

I watched his hand stop mid-rip.

"No, no, no, no, no!"

The boy pushed the scraps of paper towards me.

"Next time, know how to paint right," he said as he walked back to his desk.

No. With that word, the stage broke. Down came the lights, the curtains, the cables. The brick walls of the theater crumbled. All that was left was rubble and white pavement. Then from a crack in the sidewalk, a little bird emerged. Alone amid the wreckage, it opened its beak and let out its first note.

No, I said once more, this time to myself.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

with Chelsea M. Campbell

by Sebastian Starcevic

When did you first decide to write a superhero story? Were you always a fan of the superhero genre?

I really love superhero movies and TV shows, but writing about superheroes just sort of happened. I got this idea where I wanted to write about someone who understood that everybody needs saving in some way, and that it would be cool if this person was also a bad guy. The idea quickly turned into a supervillain who has to save people, which became a comedy about a supervillain who discovers his long lost father is actually a superhero, and his life goes downhill from there.

What research did you do on the superhero genre? Comics, video games, books, movies?

I didn't do any specific research for the book (I really hate research), but that doesn't mean I wasn't influenced by the superhero movies and shows I'd already seen. I first wrote *The Rise of Renegade X* back in the summer of 2007, and back then I'd never read any superhero comics or books or played Arkham Asylum or anything. So I'd say my main influences, whether I realized they were influencing me at the time or not, were *Smallville*, the Spider-Man movies with Toby Maguire, and *Batman Begins*.

What was getting a publishing deal like? I understand you've self-published the second book in the Renegade X series. What made you decide to do this?

Get a publishing deal was awesome and honestly one of the best things that ever happened to me. I really needed it at the time, both financially and emotionally. But there are a lot of things wrong with the publishing industry that I didn't know about then, especially if you're a midlister. Which is pretty much everybody. Authors are the last to know anything about what's happening with their books, as if the teensiest bit of knowledge will crack their supposedly fragile minds; publishers do very little marketing other than sending out their catalog, and the fate of a book is often determined long before it even hits the shelves. For instance, Barnes & Noble decided no stores would carry my book. At all. Because the one guy who decides whether or not a book will be stocked had a "personal reaction" to it and refused to let it be in their stores. (I like to think his mother was a supervillain and it brought back bad memories.) By the time *The Rise of Renegade X* was out, it was clear that the publisher was never going to buy a sequel (or anything else from me), though they didn't actually tell me that, they just never got back to me and my agent about it. (They did tell a fan on Twitter, though.)

Sales were not great. I think they sold about 4,000 copies. But readers loved it and asked me for years about a sequel. For a long time, I thought I could only write one if sales magically picked up enough for the publisher to buy a second one. But that was obviously never going to happen. Then I met a local author, Kevin Emerson, whose *Oliver Nocturne* series was supposed to be six books, but his publisher only bought five. So he self-published the sixth one. And I thought, “Whoa, I could do that!” So I wrote the sequel, hired the same artist who did the cover for book one, and ran a Kickstarter to pay for it. The whole experience was amazing. And while all this was going on, I was also getting the rights back to book one. I had a clause in my contract that basically said that if sales got low enough, the rights would revert back to me. All I had to do was ask for them. (Be warned that there are contracts out there that essentially make it so you can never get your rights back, short of the publisher burning to the ground, and even some that say you can’t write anything else set in the same world. I was lucky that my contract allowed me to get the rights back so easily and to publish a sequel.)

And at that point, the book was out of print except for the ebook, which wasn’t selling very well. It was priced too high and wasn’t even in the “superheroes” category on Amazon. So I got the rights back as soon as I could, licensed the same cover art, and republished it. I honestly thought I might sell, like, twenty copies a month if I was lucky, and I was okay with that, because at least the books would be available and I’d be making something from writing again. But I priced it at \$3.99, put it in the right categories, and sales took off. In three months, I’d sold twice as many copies as my publisher had in three years. People were buying it, and the sequel, and asking for more.

All this took about six years, from when I first wrote book one in 2007 to when I republished it in 2013.

Is there anything different about writing in the superhero genre as opposed to, say, supernatural?

Honestly, I think good storytelling is good storytelling. The tropes might change between genres, but what makes good characters, good voice, and a story that keeps you turning pages has nothing to do with genre.

When writing, do you try to avoid superhero clichés, or incorporate them?

I make fun of them. Damien is living in a world of superhero clichés that he hates since he grew up as a supervillain, so there are plenty of opportunities for comedy there.

How do you create unique superpowers for your characters?

I give them whatever power causes them the most problems. I don’t know if the powers themselves are that unique, but giving Damien a flying power when that’s the last thing he wants makes for some good conflict.

Who's your favorite superhero?

Batman.

Do you have any strange or super writing habits?

Not sure this counts as super or strange, but when I get really into a book, I get completely obsessed with it, and all I want to do is work on it. So I'll end up writing 3k - 5k a day until it's done. I did that with both books in the *Renegade X* series.

If you could have one superpower, what would it be?

Teleportation. Or maybe the power to heal since I could really use a working thyroid.

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