

A young girl with reddish-brown hair, wearing a white halter-neck dress, stands barefoot in a lush green field. She is looking down at the ground. The background is a soft-focus forest with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The text "The Corner Club Press" is at the top, followed by "Where Poetry and Fiction Converge". In the bottom right corner, there is a logo for "alluring photography" with heart symbols.

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

alluring photography



The Corner Club Press

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the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Letter from the Managing Editor

Dear readers,

It has been some time since the last issue, hasn't it? But I always follow through with my promises, and we are still around. I have been taking things slowly and figured that because people want to be in our magazine that I'd get around to putting together issue 8, especially because I found someone as eager as Mariah Wilson to get on board and quickly vet through all the submissions. This makes it so much easier on me because then all I have to do is vet further and send out acceptances to those I enjoy. And luckily I still had the template from last issue, so throwing all the poetry and fiction in was no problem.

The Corner Club Press can't be advanced much in terms of creating physical copies, but it will hopefully always be around. Not much is going on with your Executive Editor, other than her deciding to go the self-publishing route with her novel. Stay tuned for more information with that on her website [The Dancing Writer](#).

Last and most importantly, enjoy issue 8!

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Founder and Managing Editor

Mariah Wilson

Mariah E. Wilson (Executive Editor): born, raised and still residing in Quesnel, BC, Canada. Mariah is a stay-at-home mom to three lovely children. She is also a published poet and an aspiring author who is currently working toward the final draft of her novel, *Unbroken*. She is writing a second novel and has a basket full of other writing projects on the go at all times. When she's not busy with kids or writing, she enjoys reading, crocheting and bike riding.



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The Substitute Model



Erren Kelly

Today, I went to

Drawing class, only to discover

The regular model was absent

However, I didn't miss her

When I saw the substitute model

I opened my newsprint and instead

Of sketching her

I began to write about her

I wasn't afraid that the teacher

Would catch me

When he came to me

I told him:

“ you’ll never believe this

But I’m writing a poem about the model”

His response was:

“ I believe you...”

She had skin brown as the plains

A shroud of dark hair hides her face

Expressionless, as if

She doesn’t know if she likes this

Dark values cover her legs

Like an eclipse

A break comes, she quickly

Puts on her rone

Hiding her buttocks

Neruda would be talking to her

Taking her hand

And then go away

Singing his praises to the sea

Or she would be picasso's

Paramour

If only she could brave his storms

She arches her back and her

Countries move

She exhales

I think of my mentor in high school

Coach harris, my 10th grade civics teacher

Who once told me

I'd never have a woman like her

Now, I can show her my love this way

name



Erren Kelly

now i know how the kid
in that johnny cash song felt
all through high school
my name was misspelled and mispronounced
in college i considered changing it
even tried to get people to call me "eric"
but it didn't take
but i figured there was a reason
for my name
mama told me daddy didn't
want a junior
a name should be a fingerprint
it may be spelled like a girl's name
but it's mine
i'm proud of it
i won't answer to anything else

skin



Kelly Conger

You will kiss the boy who kisses boys and perhaps it will bother you later

I say the boy has infections and you agree that he is infectious but in a different
way

He is infectious in the way that you miss his passes at you and his palms pressed
to your kneecaps, bones to bones

He smokes a joint before you and after you and he keeps his shoes on which
always bothers you

Let me remind you that he took you briefly and left you quickly and you behaved
casually

He is no man

He is skin lesions

“Yo, I don’t like to have copious amounts...”

→ all and only skin lesions

he is the raw, uncooked salmon and it’s weird how accurate that is

just kissed and you know the topography of his taste buds

you know he is water vapor

I told you he is dry ice

you know he is skin

Tomatoes



Mitchell Grabois

I used to think Mexicans were grim
Dia de los Muertos
skeletons driving wagons to market
filled with avocados
grinning skeletons driving hearses

But we all die, don't we?
Eternal death joins eternal life
the cycles of nature
seed to rot

We're no different than tomatoes
except that tomatoes don't have grinning skulls
beneath their plump red skin

Worship



Mitchell Grabois

Mexicans have their Dia de Los Muertos
but Americans worship death every day
In this militarized nation
we bow to the prosthetic device
we kiss the cold metal with our
cold lips
We take our youth, make them soldiers
turn them into stick figures
make them into heroes of the Paralympics

Numbers



Mitchell Grabois

After high school graduation
drunk with my buddies
I had a Grateful Dead skull tattooed on my
muscle shoulder
roses all around
as if I were an American
dealing death worldwide

My sister went me one better
She memorialized the darkest days of history
on her body
in a short, arresting string of numbers
She has made our inheritance
real

At a family dinner
her lover leaned over her soup bowl
and kissed my sister's arm
Her diamond earring glittered

Love was so thick in the room

I thought I was going to pass out

Acute Petula-itis



Lou Gaglia

It wasn't so bad when the new guy upstairs started playing oldies. And one of them, Petula Clark's "Downtown", which he first played last Saturday morning, ran through my head the rest the day, even during my subway ride up to 145th Street to watch the holiday basketball tournament and, more appropriately, back downtown to City Hall. What a nice song, I thought, slouching into the hard plastic orange seat of the #4 train. And Petula had a better voice than I'd remembered, especially in the lines "how can you lose" and "needs a gentle hand to guide them along". Nice going, Petula.

But even as I stepped off the elevator on to my floor, I heard "Downtown" still playing upstairs, the volume seeming to increase once I entered my apartment. I'd just placed a water-filled pot on the stove for spaghetti when the song ended...and then immediately began again, this time even louder. It ended and started once more as I read the mail and then again as I broke spaghetti into the boiling water—and yet again, when I impatiently strained it al dente.

I ate dinner during the tenth repeat, with Petula Clark's voice crooning "...a gentle hand to guide them along" and "how can you lose", the only parts of the song, at that point, that were left to like.

It was during the twentieth or thirtieth consecutive playing of "Downtown" that I reached for the broom and jabbed the wooden end into the ceiling a few

times. “Downtown” stopped. And then it started all over again, from the beginning. I turned the TV on and cranked up the volume of the basketball game, but the music only got louder. Then, in between the few seconds of peace he was giving me, I muted the game, and I heard him laughing. My eyes opened wide.

“What a crazy laugh,” I said, as though someone were with me. “Do you hear that?” I turned the TV off and listened closely through the next “Downtown”. And when it was over, I heard the kooky laugh again.

I paced the living room and then looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. “Diabolical laughter?”

It wasn’t until the next evening that I walked up the fire stairs. “Downtown” echoed strangely there, and then blared when I opened the door and faced his apartment. “Even his door looks nuts,” I whispered, although it was the same red-painted door everyone else had.

I rapped the knocker against the door, holding a bag full of my old cat’s ashes—a handy weapon in case he came at me. A face full of her ashes may have allowed me time to get away, and maybe prove that cats could defend their owners after all.

But he didn’t answer the door. I listened for movement or sound—footsteps, laughter, breath, anything—but there was nothing except Petula Clark.

I trudged back downstairs, defeated, and put the cat’s bagged ashes back in its little canister. If he *had* opened the door and come at me, he would have killed me by the time I got the still-sealed ash-bag open, I scolded myself.

It wasn’t until well after midnight that the song stopped, and even then, as I lay wide awake reading the baseball encyclopedia, he laughed so creepily for so long that I thought of yelling up to him to put the music back on.

Work on Monday gave me a break from Petula and her remaining fan’s eerie

laughter, but the song stayed in my head the entire day. Walking along the sidewalk (“just listen to the music of the traffic in the city”), on the subway (“you can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares”), and at my desk (“DOWN TOWN! Don’t wait a minute for...DOWN TOWN...everything’s waiting for you”), I couldn’t drive her stupid voice out of my head.

Naturally the song was playing when I got home. I caught the end of it as soon as I got off the elevator (“downtown...downtown...downtown...”). And when it finished, he laughed for a while before putting it on again. I looked out the window, down into the courtyard, watching people walk into the building.

“He saw me coming,” I said to myself. “Wow.” I turned into the kitchen to boil water for spaghetti. “Two minutes to get upstairs from the door...two minutes for the song...right: he saw me coming and he—I’ve never seen him, but he—” I stared at the fire on the gas stove as Petula started up again. “Who is this nut?”

By eight o’clock I’d had enough and finally called security. A bored voice told me they’d take care of it. I was the only one that complained, the guard complained.

“It’s ‘Downtown’ over and over again. *Loud!*” I said.

Ten minutes later I watched a big blond security guard walk the courtyard and up the steps to my building. “Downtown” stopped suddenly, and “Leader of the Pack” by the Shangri-Las started up.

“It’s all over for you now, buddy boy,” I shouted to the ceiling.

“Leader of the Pack” was a welcome break from “Downtown”, but it was turned off mid-song, probably because security had arrived. A few minutes later my own steel knocker rapped against my steel door, and I opened up to the big guard.

“Hey. You 6D?”

“Yeah.”

“Well...he’s not playing ‘Downtown.’”

“I know. It’s ‘Leader of the Pack’ now. Before it was—”

“Oh. We thought it was just ‘Downtown’ you didn’t like.”

I just looked at him.

“So you still want to complain?”

“Yes, it never stops. He plays it all—.”

“He stopped now. He said he didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what? He laughs after every—”

“He said he’ll stop.”

“He won’t stop.”

“Maybe he’ll stop later.”

“He’s not going to stop. He’s nuts. He just laughs. Even after I banged on the ceiling with the broom, he just kept laughing.”

“You banged on the ceiling?”

“Well, yeah, to shut him up.”

“Don’t bang on the ceiling. We’ll take care of it.”

* * *

I thought of writing a note, which I planned to slip under the nut’s door. “Dear Insane Person,” I thought, but crumpled it in my mind. “Dear Misguided Petula Clark fan...” Crumpled that. “My Dear Same-Song-Loving Maniac. Please, in the name of all that’s holy, stop. By the way, you have a great laugh and should go into show biz. Signed, your neighbor and pal.” I drop-kicked that one.

Meanwhile “Leader of the Pack” went back on after the security guy strolled whistling out of my building, and my music loving cuckoo bird continued to laugh in between endless repeats. I called security again and got the same bored voice.

“You said ‘Downtown’ before.”

“What do you mean? It’s the *music*, not the *song*,” I sputtered.

“That makes *no* sense,” he said, and I hung up on him and tossed the phone onto the bed. I grabbed the broom out of the closet and rammed it into the ceiling twenty consecutive

full-blast smashes in a row, counting each one. He turned the Shangri-Las up.

The next day, with little sleep, I staggered to work, walking dazedly along Broadway (“My folks were always putting him down...DOWN, DOWN”), sat staring at blank faces on the subway (“They said he came from the wrong side of town...”), and at my desk it all became a mix (“...no finer place, for sure...downtown”...“That’s when I fell for the leader of the pack—VROOM, VROOM!”).

At home, after putting the pot of water on the stove for spaghetti, I looked long and hard at the CD holder on my desk, then up at the ceiling as “Leader of the Pack” started up again.

“All right, pal,” I said, and grabbed a John Coltrane CD. I blasted “My Favorite Things”, turning the volume way up on McCoy Tyner’s beautiful solo, some of which I missed because of the word “PACK”; then I pulled out *The Best of Puccini* and played from *La Bohème*. Still, the volume couldn’t completely drown out the Shangri-Las, so my favorite opera song became “O Mimì, tu più non torni...OF THE PACK”. I made one last try, playing “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” George Harrison’s guitar and voice exploded up to the ceiling, overwhelming the Shangri-Las, then Petula, as upstairs he frantically switched from song to song, desperate now. I laughed. “Take *that*, buddy!”

But after having twice blown away both Petula and The Shangri-Las with George Harrison, I hesitated before pressing play again. Upstairs, the boom boom-

boom chhh, boom boom-boom chhh backbeat of “Leader of the Pack” shook the ceiling, but I carefully put George Harrison away and sat on the couch, nodding. I’d have ruined *La Bohème* and George Harrison and Coltrane for myself if I’d gone after this guy song-for-song, I nodded.

The loudest “Leader of the Pack” of them all finally ended, and there was a long pause. I thought maybe he’d had the same realization I was having about holding to, not wasting, what was precious. But a new song began, full blast—Nancy Sinatra singing “These Boots Are Made for Walking”. I smiled. “Okay,” I said. “Okay, then.” I settled back into the couch and folded my hands over my stomach, deciding I was going to be like Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* from then on—in the scene when he sat on the floor and waited, quietly focused, after all the trap doors closed on him.

Upstairs, he laughed his most diabolical laugh and began singing, badly, along with Nancy Sinatra, and then The Shangri-Las, and then Petula Clark. It was a weapon he may not have thought of until then. When he tried to sound just like Petula, singing “a gentle hand to guide them along,” I winced but held steady on the couch.

Now, almost a full week later, all I can do is wait for someone else to get sick of his music, too, or even notice. Meanwhile, I keep to my space—and keep it my own, practicing the art of fighting without fighting. Bruce Lee would have done the same.

Still, I’ll be ready for him if my silence gets to him and he comes to my door with a knife or his music. I’d fake high and then crack him in a knee with my mini baseball bat. But first he’d get a face full of my old cat’s ashes, which sit poised in the canister on the end table, bag unsealed now. Yes, quick as a flash he’d get my

old friend's remains, right in the puss, before he could even flick his knife—or press play.

While You Were on Vacation



Stacy Stepanovich

A tropical storm stalled over the shore. It fed on the warm Atlantic for over a week. Yards and parking lots were submerged. Black mullet swam through the streets. Fire ants were driven to the only high ground they could find, the body of a 74 year old man trapped by the rising water.

Your phone went unanswered. My messages piled up like drops of rain.

The power flickered. The roof leaked. Blisters formed on the white stucco ceiling. I placed every pan and bowl we owned under the drips. The tea cups your mother gave us for our fourth anniversary were emptied every half hour. Rain rushed through the gutters and splashed into the muddy yard. Inside, I listened to a symphony of water against ceramic and metal.

For eight days the order to stay inside remained in effect. We were told not to drive. The wind gusted at hurricane strength. The bridges were closed. I kept the hurricane shutters down, locked in perpetual darkness.

I imagined you riding a motorcycle on a winding two lane road in the high desert of Colorado. I could almost feel the sun baked air, when I thought about the brown canyon walls. Inside the house, the furniture was damp and smelled of earth. The July heat crept inside. Even in the dark, the air seemed heavy and green. Mold grew in the cracks on the walls. I scrubbed day and night. Paint crumbled and fell to the floor like confetti.

While you were on vacation, I went without sleep. When I closed my eyes, I would see you, a cloud of red dust kicked up in your wake. I scrubbed, wanting the living room walls to be dry as rock so you would come home.

Air Enough At Last



Samuel Snoek-Brown

I was eight when I first came up with the idea, but I'd turned nine before I realized I could actually do it. My father was dead, my uncle in jail, my mother barely keeping things together. I liked being home by myself, liked feeling like I was in charge and could go anywhere I wanted, do anything I needed to muffle the memories of my father's death and the sounds of my mother's crying. But I couldn't bear the dark, and my mother said we had to save on the utilities bill and could only turn a light on in the room I was in. So I'd started poking into every other corner of the double-wide just for the excuse to light the whole place. Which is how I found the two old suitcases wedged into the hall closet between my bedroom and my mother's. They were behind the vacuum cleaner, under a coat and an old wool blanket that made my forearms itch when I moved it. The suitcases were boxy things, cracked leather and half-rusted catches. One of them was missing a handle. But they were sturdy, made for moving—for moving on. Those two suitcases were hope that smelled like mildew, and I loved them.

But it was just an idea, the same childish dream any kid has from time to time. I was more interested in the suitcases themselves than in the freedom they hinted at, which is why I kept returning to them on the weekends, while my mother was off at one job or another. I couldn't do much but look at them, because the catches on one were rusted shut, and the other one was locked. But after six weeks, I started rummaging through drawers in the kitchen, the bathroom, my mother's bedroom, and eventually, I found a glass candy dish full of old keys. I took

them out one afternoon, a little after my ninth birthday, and started on the locked suitcase, one key at a time. It took me ten minutes to find the right key, but then the case fell open like an old book, and inside was magic: a round leather cap lined in fur and attached to a pair and thick round goggles.

The cap felt like an old glove, soft as a pillowcase and pliant as a handkerchief. I lifted it over my head. The weight of the goggles pulled the cap forward, down my face so I smelled soft wool and sweat. I readjusted the cap and lowered the goggles over my eyes but they were huge, spanned halfway to my ears. I studied them until I figured out how to adjust the straps, and soon I had the lenses snug against my nose and the strap tight over the cap on my head. I went into the bathroom and stood on the stool at the sink. I looked fierce in the mirror, like a crazy person, some antique combination of an astronaut and one of those insane bikers on the *Mad Max* movies. I felt daring, reckless, powerful, prepared for anything. I ran into my bedroom with the goggles and cap still on, whipped through the hangers in my closet and found the leather jacket my uncle had given me the year before he went to jail. The sleeves were a little short but I put it on and raced back to the bathroom. I put my hands on my hips, my elbows jutting outward. I sucked in air and pushed out my chest. I was a freaking superhero. I could face anything, go anywhere, escape it all.

From then on I spent all my spare time researching and planning. The school librarians loved me, then decided I was a little strange, and finally stopped paying me any attention. I learned that the cap was an aviator helmet from one of the World Wars; they called it a Snoopy Hat. I figured my grandfather had worn it, though I still don't know which grandfather—both had been dead for ages. But I had inherited adventure, I knew that much, and I was ready to fly.

I made my mom buy me spiral notebooks in bulk from the big warehouse

store—I said I had a lot of homework, and she never believed otherwise. I filled those things with supply lists, sketches, maps, timelines, anything I could think of. I was methodical. I was detailed. I was going to be prepared.

So I was eleven by the time I actually started the process. Most of the plan was mental preparedness: knowing where I was going, how I'd get there, what to do in various emergencies. But the hard work was collecting the supplies. I didn't get much of an allowance, and it's not like I had much time to shop by myself. I was alone plenty—that was part of the problem—but getting around by myself meant riding my bike or my skateboard, and there's only so much I can carry on either of those things.

Still, a lot of the gear I was able to pick up in junk shops, root from trash bins, or dig out of my mother's utility room, where she kept some of the things my dad or my uncle had left behind, stashed up on the shelves over the washing machine and the water heater.

You're probably thinking I was just another runaway, that I couldn't possibly need all that much anyway. I'd be like those Calvin & Hobbes cartoons, where I'd stuff my backpack with comic books and tuna fish sandwiches and take off for an afternoon, maybe a night out under the stars, shuddering in my back yard. In some respects, you're right—I did spend some evenings hiding under the tiny back deck of our trailer, and one time I stayed out the whole night, the soft cap on with the goggles pushed up onto my forehead, my mother frantic on the old boards above my head, crying into the darkness and hoping I could hear her over the traffic on the nearby highway. Hoping I hadn't wandered that direction and gotten hit or picked up by a pervert. But I'd had no intention of doing that, really. For one thing, the highway was too obvious an escape route. I would need to sneak through the woods and along the creek bed and get far enough away from

town that passing cars wouldn't contain someone who could recognize me. And for another thing, this night out under the deck was just a practice run: I'd wanted to see if I could sleep on the ground, just my leather jacket for a pillow, huddled in wood rot and dirt.

I could. I was a pro. I had aviator blood. And afterward, my mother fed me cinnamon rolls, not those crap honey buns from the grocery store but real homemade rolls fresh from the Pillsbury can. She was that glad to have me home again.

* * *

This was in March, just after my eleventh birthday. The weather was great, a little windy but nice and warm in the day and not too cold at night, at least not once I packed that itchy wool blanket from the closet. So I decided to wait just another week or so. I would leave in April, warm enough at night to sleep comfortably but long before the exhausting heat of summer. That would give me maybe two good months on the road before I had to escape the Texas sun during the day. And by then, I figured, I'd be almost to Canada, so I could just keep on going if I wanted to. It was colder in Canada, even in the summer.

That year, Easter was in April, and our school let off for Good Friday but my mom still had to work. It was perfect. I had pried open the catches on the other suitcase and figured a way to tie it shut with shoelaces, and I'd already packed both the suitcases with most of what I'd need: a huge folding map of North America I'd cut out of an atlas at school, a flashlight with two extra batteries, a set of silverware from the kitchen and a thin stack of paper plates, one of my mom's lighters, the pocket knife my uncle had given me, about fifteen dollars I'd collected from my mom's purse and coins in the couch, and yeah, a few Hardy Boys books, because even though books are heavy, those Hardy Boys seemed to know a thing

or two about surviving.

I'd been asking my mom to pack granola bars in my lunches since the beginning of the school year, and half the time I'd skip them and bring them back home, so I had more than sixty stockpiled in my bottom dresser drawer. I filled my thermos with kool-aid and took a bottle of water from the fridge. I had my pillow, that old wool blanket, a change of clothes, my leather jacket even though I wouldn't need it until Canada, and the Snoopy Hat and goggles. I was ready.

On Good Friday, I dragged everything to the front door. I had thought to ride my bike because I figured I'd make better time that way, but I couldn't balance both those suitcases on the handlebars, so I gave up, leaned the bike against the trailer, and got my skateboard instead.

It was rough walking that first day, the board tucked under my arm and a heavy suitcase in each hand. I could handle them fine dragging them around the house, but carrying them across the street from our trailer and down into the woods was a lot harder than I'd counted on. By the afternoon, I was soaked in sweat and had to take off the aviator cap. I sat on a rock and opened both suitcases, wondering how to lighten the load. I drank the kool-aid and left the thermos by the rock. I left the pillow there, too—what had I been thinking? I would sleep on my rolled-up leather jacket like I'd always planned—and after a long time flipping through the pages and considering the scrapes I might get into compared with the adventures of the Hardy Boys, I left behind two of the three books I'd brought.

The suitcases were a bit lighter then, but they were still each half my size and cumbersome to lug around in the woods, so by the time it grew dark I hadn't even made it to the first backroad I'd hoped to find. I sat on my skateboard in the hard dirt and used the flashlight to study my map from the atlas. It was huge, but

so was North America, and peering in the dim light down at Texas, finding that little speck just northwest of San Antonio where I'd started out from, I figured I should have reached Amarillo by dark, or at least Lubbock. But if that was true, I would have had to cross at least one of the bright blue highways marked on the map. I was still in the middle of nowhere.

For a while, yes, I wanted to cry. Maybe I did a little—I'll admit it. I worried about how much I'd miscalculated, how much heavier the bags were and how much further I might have to walk. Eventually I would try hitching rides, but I needed to get far enough away to do it, at least out of Texas. And now I wondered, too, how long my granola bars would last, though I still had the fifteen dollars.

When it got really dark and I switched off the flashlight—better not to risk a fire, and it was still warm enough though a breeze was picking up—I looked around in the night and discovered lights through the trees. For a long time I huddled between the upright suitcases like walls, flinching at every twig snap and bird call, because I had no idea what those lights might be. But after several minutes I heard a door open and a man spit and a trash can lid bang, and I knew I was in some neighborhood. I almost switched on the flashlight to check the map again, but then I realized that this close to people, I might draw attention, and maybe someone would send me home again. Still, out there in the dark, it felt good knowing I remained in the midst of civilization. Just in case.

I opened one of the cases and balled up my jacket and slept in the dirt.

* * *

When I woke the next morning I was wet and itchy, balled up underneath the heavy wool blanket but still shivering in the cold. A front had moved in overnight. Later, I learned to recognize the patterns, knew that a final sharp cold front always pushed through Texas around Easter, but this was my first direct

experience with it. I pulled on my jacket, twisting like an escape artist under the blanket, and then I poked out one blue hand to feel blind through the luggage for the aviator hat and goggles, and I pulled them on under the blanket, too.

I stayed under the blanket for a few hours, waiting for the sun to rise high enough to warm me, but before I had decided to try peeking outside, I heard heavy breathing out in the trees and I pulled my knees into my chest. I held my breath, listening hard, trying to figure out who might be approaching. I thought of the man the night before. I thought of police. I thought of those perverts my mother worried about out on the highway. If I were a pervert, I'd probably stay away from the main highways, actually—I'd hunt the woods, looking for stupid kids who couldn't read a map right and had just a pocket knife for protection.

I pulled the knife from my pocket and opened the long blade, just in case.

When the blanket moved I thought I would scream or kick out against my attacker, lash expertly with the knife, but instead I curled up tighter, like I might swallow myself and just disappear. The blanket slid off me and I felt hot breath on my cheek, rank and wet, and then a tongue across my cheek. I squirmed away and rolled to my knees and this dog was just staring at me, panting and stupid with his tongue out, his breath in little puffs of fog. I cussed, and then I laughed a little. The dog was nosing into one of the suitcases, the one with the granola bars, but I shooed him away and then packed everything up.

With houses so near, I decided to risk a road, at least until I could get my bearings, so I headed up toward where I'd seen the lights the night before and found a back yard, then a house, and then the rough old asphalt road. I retreated and stayed in the back yards for a while, paralleling the road at a distance the way you might follow a river. I heard cars out on some larger road and I walked that direction. When I came out of the trees I was on the access road beside the

highway. I looked up and down the access road, trying to find a sign, some locator to tell me where to look on the map. I set down my suitcase and skateboard, which is when I realized I'd left the other suitcase back in the woods. I turned quick circles, panicking a little, then I ripped open the suitcase—it was the one with the key—to see what I still had and what I'd lost. I'd left behind the bottle of water, the granola bars, the extra clothes. I still had the map and the books and the eating utensils and a few other things, but like an idiot, I'd left behind the blanket. It was a bit warmer now in the sunshine, but I knew when night fell I'd want that blanket.

I was screwed. Even with the fifteen dollars in my pocket, I couldn't buy a new blanket and enough food to get me to Canada.

I sat on the suitcase and thought. I looked up the access road, down it. I wanted to say parts of the road looked familiar, but I wanted just as much to say I was in foreign territory, another country even. For all I knew I'd headed south instead of north and might be in Mexico by now, which wouldn't be so bad if this was the weather I had to look forward to. But then I saw the sign for the city lake, and I knew I was less than two miles from my house.

I looked at the road, I looked at my skateboard.

I'd come so far, but I'd gotten nowhere.

I just wanted to be free, to get away from my trailer and everything bad that had ever happened there.

But I was starving, and as my mouth watered and I reached for a granola bar I knew I didn't even have, what I really wanted was cinnamon rolls. Warm, gooey, fresh from the can to the oven to me.

I stood up and lifted the suitcase, but my arms were tired, I was hungry, and let's face it, hopeless as my grand adventure had been, I didn't really need

anything in there anyway. Even the Hardy Boys book—what had I ever learned from them?

I left it there in the road, and I walked out onto the asphalt and aimed my skateboard south, back toward home. My legs were wobbly, my ankles tired.

To heck with it, I thought, and I lay down on the board, belly first, my head aimed toward home. I started swimming along the asphalt, pulling myself forward, slowly for a while but then I hit a shallow decline and started picking up speed, no arms needed. The wind was so cold on my face that my eyes started to water, and I pulled the aviator goggles over my face. When I reached for the road again I was rolling too fast to touch it, gravity doing all the work, and my hands hovered over the blur of the asphalt. I held them out at my sides, palms flat and waving in the wind the way they did when I used to stick my arm out the window of my uncle's truck. They were lifting up on their own, that same mysterious force of the air that carried airplanes into the sky. I opened my mouth to the cold, cold air, a grin beginning in my numbed lips, and I flew.

Reading Coffee Grounds



Niles Reddick

My eccentric aunt, now in her mid-eighties and who finally quit smoking last year after a bout with pneumonia and colon cancer, sits and watches TV around the clock in her bedroom at her daughter's house, fanning herself with a funeral home fan adorned with the owner's photo. McLane is a lean, dark-haired fellow sporting a two-piece poplin khaki suit, two-toned bucks, and a madras tie. "We care for the whole family" is the slogan on the fan, and while most of us cynics recognize the not-so-subtle marketing concept, my aunt has long passed the slogan and has established a relationship with McLane. She has lengthy conversations with him, telling him about her life, apparently hearing about his. When winter finally arrived, my cousin took the fan one day when my aunt dozed, and she cried and thought he'd left her, as her two husbands had done. My cousin, who my aunt believes is a friend from childhood, brought the fan back to her and my aunt scolded her and held McLane close. The dementia has pushed my aunt one step closer to visiting McLane's business.

Knowing my aunt--and the rest of us--will one day pass doesn't make accepting death any easier. When I learned my aunt's friend and one time neighbor Jackie had passed, from Facebook of all places, I had smiled, not because she had passed, but because of the reading of coffee grounds by her twenty years ago, which left a lasting impression.

Jackie was a twin to Jill and both women were plump, had beautiful soprano voices, short-cropped gray hair, and what fascinated me most was that

they were missing several of the same teeth. They seem to always wear what my mother called homemade tent dresses and sandals--tennis shoes or boots in the winter.

Jackie and Jill lived on the property to the West of my aunt's, set back further off the town street and nestled behind a stand of cedars. From the road, passersby could not view the unfinished ranch house wrapped in tar paper, or the engines, old cars, a boat, appliances, and other non-functioning things dispersed about the property. Jackie and Jill's father, I was told, was an engineer who had once worked at NASA, but as I looked about the place, I couldn't imagine it true. Jackie and Jill both had several children, with no visible fathers, and seemed simple and captivated by us. My siblings and I only came to visit for a day or two out of the year. Likewise, we were fascinated by them, by the way they lived, and by the way they acted happy despite their poverty. My siblings and I were afraid of them, as if associating with them would pull us into their world and keep us prisoners. We imagined them lurking outside my aunt's house at night, trying to get in and steal us away. That, combined with my aunt's unpainted clapboard siding in the dark, made for some imaginary evil.

When I was in college, I was passing by the small town just off the interstate where my aunt lived and decided to stop. I forewarned my friend who was with me that my aunt was a bit strange. Her car was parked in the shade of the Live Oaks in the circular dirt driveway. She was sitting on the screened side porch drinking coffee and smoking. "Hey, hey," she yelled. "I'll be damned. I thought I'd never see you again." That was her guilt trip and I laughed and shifted the conversation, introducing my friend Grant. We visited awhile, and she talked about the power of crystals, spirit guides, and herbal healing when we heard some rustling in the hedges and then a "Yoo-hoo, anybody home?"

“Jackie, come look see what dragged up,” my aunt yelled. “You recall my nephew Kevin, and he’s brought his smart college friend Grant with him.”

Jackie giggled, “I sure do. How you doing Kevin? Good to meet you Grant.” Jackie had on a tent dress, sandals, and held a Bible in her hand with all sorts of papers stuck in it.

“Victoria,” Jackie said to my aunt. “I’ve found some verses I wanted to share.” Part of me wondered if Jackie was witnessing to my aunt, but my aunt’s rolling her eyes indicated to me she tolerated the visit because she had nothing else to do and certainly tolerated her more than the Jehovah Witnesses who she had threatened with her machete if they didn’t get off her property.

“Get in the porch before the bugs tote you off. Why don’t you get some coffee and give Kevin and his friend a reading.” She turned to me and Grant. “I’ll get you a cup and you sip it. That will help Jackie sense you in the grounds.”

I looked at Grant who had a perplexed look on his face, and I could tell I would hear about this later. Aunt Victoria returned with cups, both fine ceramic-ware giveaways from local businesses. We sipped coffee while Victoria and Jackie gossiped about other neighbors and community members. When we finished, we were directed to place our mugs upside-down, so the grounds would dry and create a pattern. Apparently, the pattern would give Jackie psychic information as well.

Jackie picked up my cup and stared into it, smiled, and said, “Oh, this is interesting. I see eagles flying high above a mountain city; you’re speaking to a crowd of people below. I see you are surrounded by the wise ones, guiding you.” She stopped and put the cup down. “I think you are an old soul,” she said, “and you’ve down this all before.” I didn’t know what I thought of reincarnation then, but it seemed unlikely to me. She did a different reading for Grant, seeing motifs

and totem animals and talking more about adventures. When Grant and I said our goodbyes, I knew it would be a while before we visited my aunt and her friend Jackie again. In fact as the years passed, I only saw my aunt a handful of times at funerals or reunions, and I didn't see Jackie again. All these years later, I wonder about the readings and the reality. Truth is, I went onto graduate school and worked in colleges and gave talks to large groups and Grant traveled the world, becoming a pilot, and had a great deal of adventures, including safaris. Coincidence, planting seeds that germinated and grew, or reality, I didn't know, but the reading was interesting and fun. I still wonder if someone has the ability to see the future, why she wouldn't change her own?

When Pinky Promises are the Easiest Thing



Jay Nunnery

We would go, together, at Lake Erie. A crowd of stars embracing our unspoken wishes, as the subdued, soon-to-freeze lake extended, like a broken finger, whatever moon's indistinct reflection across its surface. Drunk—but not too drunk to promise each other things we didn't plan to keep—we'd promised this to each other, that we would, no matter what. Our pinkies interlocked. Our foreheads grazed.

“Even if it's tomorrow?”

“It won't be tomorrow.”

“It very well could be.”

I touched the back of her head with my fingertips. It was squishy and smooth. She squirmed or wanted to squirm. I moved my hand. Let it drop to my side and dangle there as if it wasn't mine anymore. She turned to where the record player was and grabbed our bottle.

“So, if it is, though?”

“It won't be,” I said.

“We should drink. Let's drink.”

She poured my glass full.

“Cheers,” she said, lifting her *Loony Tunes* mug that was missing part of its handle.

“What should we cheers to?”

“On second thought, I guess we don't need to.”

She took a long gulp. After that, her lips puckered, which made her look as though she'd seen something funny but couldn't figure out the right way to share it.

* * *

I told her I wanted to marry her. We could go right now, I said. She said she wouldn't let me. She said it again, that she wouldn't let me, shaking her head. Wind blew inside through the blindless window. Its gust hauled in the smells of a small city's November. Still shaking her head, she got up and grabbed the other bottle that was, for the most part, full. She asked if we should save the cheap stuff and shut the window some.

"For tomorrow?" I said, hoping she might chuckle back.

Instead, she continued clenching the bottle with those veiny hands like it was her final weapon. She turned to the window. Looking outside, she twisted the bottle's top off using just her fingers and took a pull.

"This is cheap."

"About ten dollars or so."

"In that case, it's alright."

She spilled some—I don't know if on purpose or not—while gazing at the night and her blurred reflection buried in it on the window's glass. She straightened her back and leaned her upper body forward, but not much. I stared ahead and wondered, following that gin stream to the dusty floor and drift down the room's slight decline towards her bare feet, what kind of life we'd have lived together.

* * *

We wanted to share something more, I guess. To cry, maybe, without having to be heard or having to hear the other. But, even that, I don't think so. Even that's probably too much. I think we just wanted to find any white flag we could raise for a truce. Early on in the relationship, she'd talk about the soreness, which, at some point, she began calling pain, then agony—to me less than to herself.

Yet, at this point, in the room, we were quiet, worried about how words led to the unwanted. We were trying not to move much either. So, with a sort of heightened awareness, we listened to the news coming in through the thin wall, this half-hearted attempted at reassurance. We both kind of turned our heads, without meaning to, towards the wall and its two different papers. Watching what she watched, I took a comfort, myself, in that lack of movement divided between each faded pattern and in the buzzing words, from which I could only make out a few.

* * *

When I put my hand on her shoulder, her whole body tensed like touch was more sensation than she could handle.

“Do you want some?” she said. “Please.”

“I'm already pretty drunk.”

She set the bottle on the windowsill. It was more than half gone.

“It's pretty good,” she said, taking my hand so our palms were pressed sideways. “Have some.”

Her eyes wandered as though searching for something they'd forgotten the last time they'd visited drunkenness.

“I need to stop for a while.” She pointed at herself. “I don't know if I'll be able to take any more of it.”

I'd heard my decent share of people admit to having had more than they should've, but she was confessing.

"Everything'll be good. It'll all be okay, I said.

I promised and as if it were some desperate instinct, she stuck out her pinky and focused, open-mouthed, on me. We were kids. More or less, if not just something near so, because without an ounce of thought, I realized, what, for both our sakes, I had to do.

* * *

I picked up the bottle and rested my arm on the windowsill by where she used to keep a cooper vase filled with blue flowers. I'd spent all my money on both those bottles, thinking it was the right thing to do. Wanting to get drunk at her place, to let go with her while our insides burned. The cashier, lazy-eyed and not far from toothless, had smirked when I handed him my crumpled up bills and the store was empty except for us.

"It's not that bad at all," I said, eyes closed, head turning. I'd swallowed it so I wouldn't have to taste it.

She laughed. I drank more. Gulping how someone succumbed to finishing their only supply of liquid might, I tilted my head as far back as it needed to be. My tongue numbed. I set the bottle back down, struggling against the words my throat wouldn't let come out.

She reached and picked it up by its base. Her hand touched my shoulder and there were some of her fingers underneath my shirt. I was unsure if she was seeking more than balance. She pressed her lips to the bottle like a trumpeter would their instrument. Drips, as she drank, tumbled her chin.

* * *

We'd finished the gin and were standing there with half-open eyes staring through the fogging windowpane. Abandoned of its nerve, the quiet wind dragged, entering while exiting that room.

"The lake is nice this time of year," she said, opening her mouth just enough so the words could leave. "I told you about when I learned to fish. I told you, right?"

"You told me. I think. Yeah, you've told me."

"We went home soaked and when we got there, Dad made the best hot chocolate. He said it was how my mom would make it for him the winter they'd first met."

She traced circles on the window's glass, spiraling inwards until she found a center in which to stop.

"We sat on the porch wrapped in blankets and he told me all these funny stories about how when he was a kid. There was one with Uncle Gene. They ended up almost taking down their whole school and got suspended just 'cause they wanted to see the fire trucks come and save the day."

While she kept talking, I imagined her dad—who she'd shown me pictures of and had described, creating an understandable whole—him telling the story with more than a little pride in his smile as she listened, wound in blankets, smoke rising from their hot chocolates, her long, black hair still wet. She stopped for a while to regain her breath. It was hard for her to have to stop.

With the back of her hand, she knocked the empty bottle off the windowsill. It tapped against the outside, scattering noises that faded to the ground.

"The lake is nice," I said, noticing that she wasn't going pick up where she'd left off.

"It is. It really is." She ambled to the bed and sat on its ledge and her body fell back. I knew to follow and sat close enough so that if she were to reach out I'd be there.

"I feel like I'm getting tired," she said, "so damn tired."

She reached and dropping her hand, hit my knee with no more force than someone trying to get someone else's attention.

"Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, you're fine," I said. "You didn't hurt me."

"Oh, okay." She sounded disappointed almost and turned her head towards me, for a moment, with glossed eyes, then to the ceiling. As if to confirm a suspicion, she watched that broken fan.

* * *

"I don't wanna go to sleep."

"Me either," I said.

She'd started to sweat on her face, small drops that inched down her cheeks. I'd started, too.

"We don't gotta," she said. "We don't, do we?"

"No, not now."

"But, we do gotta?"

My thoughts sloshed, shaping from the recycled pieces a senselessness that obscured more so with every blink. Things got unreliable and she slumped down my chest. Her weight cradled on me. I felt her head pressing into my sternum. It'd still be a guess whose eyes gave first, though.

Suicide Club



Kristen Handley

It's ironic that telling someone to get a life makes one want to lose theirs. I could appreciate this better from outside the fact...maybe sitting atop a fluffy cumulus cloud. Can't you just picture all the angels couched up there, laughing away at the subtle jokes someone must have lovingly crafted into the world? Doesn't that seem like a better version of heaven than the one your morals hope for anyway: all noble and full of virtuous ideals that everyone admires but no one ever really learns to enjoy? I'd imagine no one would ever walk through the pearly gates, being too much occupied with holding them open for the incoming queues:

* * *

"After you."

"No, no, after you!"

"Mind the wings, love"

"Oh, what a darling halo!"

"Margaret, is that you?"

"Oh you must let me introduce you to my family. Look at who came to greet us, my great, great great... my *exponentially* great relative Thaddeus XI."

"You know my dear uncle Thads?"

"Oh, what chance! I've always said we were like family- Oh, my, look who else is here! Quick, come!"

* * *

On second thought, perhaps this part is purgatory. Well, if you ever get

inside, imagine an afterlife spent being thrown around the celestial bus having given up your seat; hungering after the metaphysical food your friend keeps snatching off your plate; watching some sinner quaff your pure, holy, undying love like two dollar draft beer. Our good graces are born from someone else's taken advantages. And if there are no jackasses in heaven, how do we know we are good, and not just boring and cranky from self-deprivation? My humble idea of heaven I suppose is being in on the joke.

* * *

Down here, I haven't been, you see. My problem, one of my problems, is disassociation. I suppose I try to remove myself from that which I find contrary, cruel and incomprehensible. The problem within a problem there is that life on the whole is contrary, cruel and incomprehensible. Thus am I set up for failure. I am not a rational person at heart, but my family tells me if what I am doing is not working out, I should try a different approach. So I speak to Reason and she tells me, the blunt, abrasive, irreproachably honest bitch that she is, to go kill myself.

* * *

I would be appalled but I really appreciate her sincerity which stands out amongst the two groups of people in the world: the sweet-faced liars who want the best for me, and the sweet-faced liars who want the best for themselves. Reason has given me direction but knowledge, I'm afraid has failed me.

* * *

I am romantic, I am not practical. My three first thoughts on suicide are hemlock, daggers and drowning. When I think of hanging I think of the fatal beauty of the phrase "dancing in the air," not how to tie a noose. So, I turn to the resource that fellow twenty first century misanthropes employ when they need advice without a sweet face attached to it, the internet. And I create a message

group called Suicide Club. It will be shut down I am sure when the server discovers it, but permanence is no longer one of my key considerations.

* * *

My first post deals with logistics. What have you tried and why didn't it work? I meant this in an "I forgot to load the gun" sense but my readers are obtuse and think I want to hear things like "I thought of my mother having to organize my funeral" or "my best friend called when I was only halfway through the pill bottle." Sentiment is no longer my friend. I've disassociated from that too, remember? That was the last obstacle to my success. I realized these poor people need my help. Their soppy, tear-blinded reasoning and willy-nilly reneging of their convictions could only hurt them. I set out to hear their stories and put them right.

* * *

I was surprised at the great variety of degenerates and freaks out there. Good people, more or less, are very few and all alike. This must be why they die so young--they have no hybrid vigor. My first acquaintance on the site was named Mary. She said she felt all alone. I could sympathize. Her boyfriend had recently broken up with her. Here my pity flew left as her explanation swerved right and completely out of my small neighborhood which only ever had a population of one, myself.

* * *

You see, I feel that when a person gains something, whether that be a relationship, a soul stoking experience or something really grand and irreplaceable like a Hummel figurine, the loss of any of those objects leaves an empty space behind them and people being what they are, namely eighty percent water, will pour some other part of themselves in to fill the lack. In other words,

once you grow, you stay grown. There's no reverting. If you lose a boyfriend you will get another one. If you live to raise a child and let that child go, you may wind up being one of those people who puts clothes on their puppy. And if an earthquake takes your Hummel collection you might finally appreciate the beauty in finely crafted and shatter-proof Amish quilts. I, on the other hand, have not grown, am young, indefinitely young and I don't get even get to mourn for loss, but for an imagination of loss, which is worse.

* * *

So, I kicked her out of the club. I felt she made a mockery of the cause with her real and transient despair. Tragedy isn't something which happens to you, it's what you are. We sparred back and forth, her sending me hate mail for a while thereafter which gradually transitioned into life updates featuring her, her new husband Fred and a Maltese named Milo. At first these were spiteful and in the spirit of "living well is the best revenge", but this year I fully expect to receive a Christmas card with them all in elf hats and home stitched sweaters. I enjoy fighting with her; a good throw-down puts faith in your convictions like guns in your holsters.

* * *

I had really good intentions with the club but they didn't work out like I had planned. I didn't help a single person commit suicide, let alone myself. I hate to say it, but Suicide Club seemed to turn into Fight Club. What bothered me was that we'd become a cliché. The fact that we were pitting the most miserable social outcasts and self loathers against each other did not concern me at all. In fact, I triumphed in it as a raging success. The principle worked. Happily, morbidly everyone was more preoccupied with destroying their opponent than themselves: agoraphobics against claustrophobics, depressives versus their manic

counterparts, asexuals against the sluts. There's someone for everyone, even among the misfits! Fighting in a normal population debilitates and demoralizes but fighting in a population which is already debilitated and demoralized is remarkably restorative.

* * *

It wasn't a total success, nothing is. The big picture is usually too big to be all pretty. I couldn't help the people I really felt sorry for. This is why I felt sorry for them. When someone pities you, it doesn't mean that you are helpless but that they are. Pity is useless except as maybe a marketing tool for Kleenex but laughter and ridicule are weapons which can be seized by anyone and turned upon anyone and whose sting has been felt by everyone.

* * *

I am having a problem with my disassociation problem now, because instead of being insulted by contrary, cruel and incomprehensible life, I fear I am being entertained by it. I've realized, you see, that it's a twisted world and being a twisted person that makes me normal after all. And I can't help but laugh at the joke.

Biographies

Erren Kelly

Erren is a writer based in Chicago, by way of Louisiana, by way of Maine, by way of California, by way of New York City and so on. She has been writing for 25 years and has over seventy publications in print and online in such publications as *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, and *Poetry Magazine*. She was also published in anthologies such as *Fertile Ground* and *Beyond The Frontier*.

She is also the author of the Poetry Chapbook *Disturbing The Peace on Night Ballet Press*.

She received her B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. She also loves to read and loves to travel, having visited 45 states and Canada and Europe. The themes in her writings vary, but she has always had a soft spot for subjects and people who are not in the mainstream. But she never limits herself to anything, and always tries to keep an open mind.

Kelly Conger

Kelly is currently a student at Interlochen Arts Academy.

Mitchell Grabois

Mitch Grabois' poetry and short fiction has appeared in over seventy literary magazines, most recently *The Examined Life*, *Memoir Journal*, and *Out of Our*. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, was published in April by *Dirt* e-books, founded by NY agent Gary Heidt.

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/two-headed-dog-mitch-grabois/1112474771?ean=2940014867696>

http://www.amazon.com/Two-Headed-Dog-ebook/dp/B007RFESEK/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1333648714&sr=1-1

He was born in the Bronx and now lives in Denver.

Lou Gaglia

Lou Gaglia's short story collection, *Poor Advice*, is forthcoming from *Aqueous Books* (2014). His work has appeared recently in *The Cortland Review*, *Waccamaw Journal*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and others. He teaches English in upstate New York.

Stacy Stepanovich

Stacy Stepanovich is a writer who lives aboard a 47 foot Concorde motor yacht in St. Marks, Florida. She has a MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and a BA in English from the University of Pittsburgh. Her work has appeared in *Latitudes and Attitudes*, *Long Story Short* and *Living Aboard* magazine.

Samuel Snoek-Brown

Samuel is writing teacher and a fiction author, though not always in that order. He also works as production editor for *Jersey Devil Press*. He lives with his wife and two cats in Portland, Oregon; online, he lives at snoekbrown.com. His work has appeared in *Ampersand Review*, *Bartelby Snopes*, *Fiction Circus*, *Unshod Quills*, and others, and is forthcoming in *Eunoia Review* and *Deimos eZine*. He is a recipient of a 2013 Oregon Literary Fellowship.

Niles Reddick

Mid West Review noted Niles Reddick's first novel *Lead Me Home* was "intriguing and entertaining" and it was also a finalist for a ForeWord Award as well as a finalist in the first novel category for the Georgia Author of the Year Award. He is also author of a collection titled *Road Kill Art and Other Oddities*, which was a finalist for an EPPIE award. Reddick has published in journals such as *The Arkansas Review: a Journal of Delta Studies*, *The Paumanok Review*, *Southern Reader*, among others. His work has also been anthologized in *Unusual Circumstances* and *Southern Voices in Every Direction*. Currently, Reddick lives in Tifton, Georgia.

Jay Nunnery

Jay Nunnery was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin. Recent work of his has appeared in *Xenith Online*, *The North Central Review*, and *Gone Lawn*. Currently, he lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he works and attends college.

Kristen Handley

Kristin Handley is a new writer, at least in terms of writing for an audience larger than herself. Her focus so far has been on developing short stories and poems that run against the grain of convention and celebrate the peculiarities in life and culture. A novel is in the works.