

Sansanfrans

Literary Magazine

Issue 3



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Artwork:

Instagramming – by Miko Maciaszek

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Ghosts

Miko Maciaszek moved from Warsaw, Poland, to Canada as a child, escaping the post communism chaos. He is specializing in mixed media conceptual art, editorial and narrative illustration. His clients include The New York Times, Quill & Quire and The Globe & Mail. Prints can be found [here](#).

Find the original works at mikoillustrates.com and more at mikostudio.tumblr.com

October – by Mike Stanko

Mike Stanko's artistic style is described as 'New American' and can be recognized by the fields of bright and bold colors, the playfulness, and the signature black outlines. Find the original works at stankoart.com (full bio next to 'October').

L.S. Bassen

VIXEN

How other is the red fox like the transit of a planet
she steps across December grass before blizzard,
coming close to our glass storm door. Her pert face looks but does not see us,
house, nor season. She turns and dainty steps on garden border stones.
She squats and marks, then moves on toward the tricklebank,
where she drinks and digs and finds something she devours.
She continues along, not across, the rill down to the street
where she paces up its steep, her royal progress oblivious
to infrequent traffic. She is more at home upon these frozen hills
than are we inside our heated houses,
indifferent to us behind the glass storm door.



October

Low tide cove, off season.
Just saw a photo
of Truman Capote.
Everyone I see
looks like someone else
I once knew whose name
escape me now –
My face in the mirror.

Illustration - Mike Stanko - October (C) 2013 Stankoart

L.S. Bassen is the SAID half of the SCENE & SAID collaboration. She was a finalist for the 2011 Flannery O'Connor Award and is a fiction editor for [Prick of The Spindle](#). Her plays and poetry have won some prizes and she writes reviews for several journals and zines like The Brooklynier, The Rumpus, Cider Press Review, and Small Beer Press. You can hear her read two poems at [2river.org](#).

Mike Stanko creates the SCENE(s) of SCENE & SAID. He is a lifelong Long Islander (NY), with over 20 years of painting and exhibiting. He has showcased his work throughout the tri-state area, including shows at the Elaine Benson Gallery in Bridgehampton and the Empire State Building in New York. He has had numerous tv-interviews and donated his artwork to many causes over the years, such as Breast Cancer walks, Art for ALS, and The Waterkeeper Alliance. Find him at [stankoart.com](#)

Michael Brownstein

THE SOUND OF FEAR LATE IN THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

We talk about everything I don't want to talk about, and that is enough.

Quiet sings from beyond widowed walls
and earth does expose children gone to pieces.

It's just that machine-guns really are that loud
and there really is intrinsic value to pain.

My daughter asks if blood washes vegetation,
if words can come from soil when it rains.

I'm afraid I do not know if I will ever understand the answer.

WHEN YOU DIE, CAN YOU STILL SEE THE MOON?

You told me graveyards are that loud
and you were right. Noise skittles over crab grass
and dandelion greens, over locust stone and devil's claw
thick with spikes and wooden lures bloody for light.

Passageways of water flow beneath them,
and the voices flow with them gray and waterproof,
overcast and significantly silent. We are a people
of mourners. Hire us. We cry on cue.

like vultures at the edge of the Sinai frontier,
like elephants leaving their path to caress
the bones of a sister. We can scream like war planes,
rend our clothing into scars, draw tattoos of death
exactly as a battle begins. Remember it was us
who fire bombed the cafes of Jaffa
and it was us who people bombed
the villages near Jerusalem.

We are one hundred sixty pounds of manure,
blood, gravel, fog-not enough
to cover all of the newly dead, but enough
to ensure there will never be silence in the graveyard.

Michael H. Brownstein has been widely published. His latest works, *Firestorm: A Rendering of Torah* can be found at booksonblog35.blogspot.com. More at Camel Saloon Books on Blogs, and [The Katy Trail](#), *Mid-Missouri*, *100F Outside* and other poems (*Barometric Pressures--A Kind of Hurricane Press*). His work has appeared in *The Café Review*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *Xavier Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *The Pacific Review*, and others.

Wayne Burke

white lines

drove the last hour of my trip down
the Interstate at
80 mph
mesmerized by the flashing white lines
and the dark night beyond and behind
and pinpricks of lights ahead,
and I made it to my place in record time
but even as I slept
I kept moving
rushing forward, but to a destination
unknown.

rat

Gramp took me to the back room
of his bar where beer kegs and empties
were stored, and a little bowl of white
powder on the floor, and Gramp,
wearing a white apron and smoking,
said "look here m'boy," and held up
a big rat, beady-eyed, snake-tailed,
and I withered and crawled up into
myself and backed, on scratchy rodent's
feet, to the door, as Gramp, smiling and
smoking, swung the rat into a garbage
pail.

Wayne F. Burke's poetry has appeared in Boston Poetry Magazine, Industry Night, FORGE, The Commonline Journal, Northeast Corridor, and elsewhere. He lives in the central Vermont area.

Sam Caldwell

BELOW THE DOCK

She casts long shadows

and he sings to that form; the figure of a girl

Turn- her answer to a humble melody.

Where none have slept

they all dream at different times.

This man is still-

in spite of the wind,

and there it is again.

The girl is awake and searching for sound.

Sam Caldwell is currently working towards a degree at UBC Okanagan. She is an aspiring poet and hopes to one day memorize the dictionary. She also feels the word "effervescence" is taken for granted, and that poetry has the capacity for magic.

Valentina Cano

The Wait

I keep listening,
ears sharpened into tuning forks.
Waiting for the voice that will
thrum through my bones,
multiplying through
every morrow coated canal.
An unseen transportation system,
a miniature London or Paris under skin.
Waiting for a tone,
a voice like gaslight,
to sing it awake.

Missing an Ocean

She thinks of his eyes,
seashell blue,
drained of fins and dancing tentacles.
His voice husked,
torn, branch by branch,
a whole coral reef disappearing
from her ears.
It grips her,
the knowledge that his presence
will dry away
and become nothing more than
a rim of salt under her nails.

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends any free time reading or writing. She watches over a veritable army of pets, including her five, very spoiled, snakes. Her works have appeared in numerous publications and her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web. She lives in Miami, Florida.

Rose– Anne Chabot

For Jeanne

I sit inside the open doorway
of your cramped bedroom,
just handbreadths away
from where you kneel,
fingers splayed on the wooden floor,
womb heavy and distended,
breath ebbing and flowing
like waves washing up
from a vast and distant space
more powerful
than the bones and skin
we wander around in,
an in-between space that belongs
to the dying
and to the child
who bursts suddenly from you,
umbilical cord for an instant
the blue of cornflowers;
and in the suspended moment
before your son opens his lungs,
I think of these other pauses,
the ones we wrap ourselves in
on early winter mornings
while sipping burning coffee
from oversized travel mugs
and leaning against a kitchen counter
covered with stamps and stickers,
severed Barbie doll limbs,
empty milk bags and the rusting hearts
of abandoned apples—discarded artifacts
your children leave behind daily,
like careless mementos;
these pauses that,
not unlike the child pushed

from your womb,
also emerge from some in-between space,
one that belongs to you and me,
where silence is filled with things that are
whole and seamless
in the moments before language
breaks meaning down into small
absorbable sounds
we can push past throats and lips.
Sister. Friend.

Rose-Anne Chabot, raised in Moose Factory, Ontario, currently lives in Quebec City, where she works as a translator (French to English). In addition to writing poetry and the occasional short story, she is learning to play the Celtic harp.

Sara Flemington

my palm

is more pallid when wet, while hovering over the surface of a river,
when circulation slows to a crawl – bare feet, glass skin, numb mauve toes and
levitating minnows
circling my ankles. show me the symmetry in the blue of their schools and my
single stalk of shin.
show me how the tide can lift these oval breasts, weighted, graying like rocks;
how this wind
can re-align them, tint them champagne again beneath an unconditional moon.
for death is a moment of time passing along with others, a moment
where a body is no more than silt, at best. Miss Edna, Miss V.,
what became of you could become of me, otters swinging beneath a deluged
torso
from which beavers may salvage limbs, fingers, toes.
on the beach lies a trail of papers i wish to reinvent themselves as trees. may the
ink sweeten to sap,
my paroxysms burst into peculiar red leaves,
so when I join you, finally, amongst the Ouse, the sea, the current coursing
perpetually
beneath a single glowing stone, my words will fall from their pin-thin branches
to lie on the groove of the green waters, stuck
in a reflection of the heavens forever.

Sara Flemington completed her Honors BA in English and Creative Writing from York University, where she received the Sorbara Award for Creative Writing, the Judith Eve Gewurtz Memorial Prize for Poetry, and an honorable mention for the President's Prize for Short Fiction. She has featured at numerous reading series around Toronto, including CIUT Radio, and her work is forthcoming in Paper Darts. Sara lives in Toronto.

Gabriella M. Geisinger

Exit 13

Last night we drove along
a one a.m. expressway.

Unfamiliar hands

a four door
american made
sedan.

And we, In the back seat like children,
without seatbelts — a folly —
but your arm
draped
loosely
around my shoulders.

In the face of such expedient danger —
eighty miles per hour —
safety.

Set Adrift

I have never seen someone
control a car
so well
away
from touching.

Touching is good – most people
like
touching.

Like the tentative touch of our elbows
on that first “date”
when we saw World War Z
and you laughed at me
because I didn’t know
it was a zombie movie.

I thought “Z” — the last letter!
the last war!
the war! to end all wars!

"No. Z for Zombies."

Or the touch of a bear hug.
Like the one I get
from the guys at work
who don’t know
we’re fucking.
Or who do know we’re fucking
and just don’t give a fuck.

I wouldn’t.

Or the feeling of your hips
grinding
against mine.
Even the rugburn
on my back
from your brother’s basement floor.
And the faint memory
of your fingers
deftly
unhooking my bra
like a safe cracker,
and sliding my favourite pair
of underwear
down my legs.

Not the touch of tons of steel
upon tons of steel
at eighty
fucking
miles per hour.

Even my better judgement
which said
"Don't cuddle closer to him,
you fucking idiot.
Put on your god damned seat belt
because even though
it might be
a giant
mesh (mesh?)
cock block
it'll save your life"
was no match

for my recently sated self

was somehow
magnetized
to yours
at the faintest memory
of the tiniest touches
and the ghosts of
whispers
we shared.

Gabriella Geisinger is a 24-year-old New Yorker, relocated to London to pursue her masters in Creative Writing at City University London. She has eclectic tastes in music and poetry, favouring Dylan Thomas. She has contributed to SPIN.com and iCrates.org, amongst others. A former competitive swimmer, Gabriella doesn't enjoy long walks on the beach – she would much rather be in the water.

Christopher Hivner

Extra Credit

Compare and contrast
the feeble attempts
you made at an apology
with the devastation
you caused, paying
particular attention to
the vows you made,
promises you decreed sacrosanct
and the misdeeds that
led you to your current station.
This portion of the test
is worth more than you know.
You have the rest of your life.
Begin.

Manifesto

Now I don't hear anything
except the hum of cicadas.
The other sound,
the foreign sound,
is gone and I'm alone
with a million insects
all commencing their diatribes
over top of each other,
soapboxes planted,
grievances aired,
the summer humidity filled
with nature's commotion
and it all sounds better
to me

than the thoughts in my head.

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books and the echoes of music. He has recently been published in The Camel Saloon, Bigger Stones and Napalm and Novacain. The chapbook of poetry, "The Silence Brushes My Cheek Like Glass" is published by Scars Publications and can be read for free at scars.tv website chrishivner.com

Alex Rieser

Everything's the Cause Nowadays

But in all important ways
I had come to it to ask,
if I had not come to it?
Nighttime in the landscape of affliction,
no mortuary on the plot
of land adjacent to our house
no pig farm or slaughterhouse—
just a vacant field which makes us...uncomfortable?
Something like going hungry—the presence of
absence, its properties of—what?—isolation?

Who among us wouldn't recite the prayers
stored in memory? The gestation
of some worry, looking at the rock-plot, if I had
opened my mouth, having carried home all this
I would've had a wife that lost it on me,
lost it all on me I thought as the cracking
ice in my glass, following the condensation
down a line of ants off the plate,
usually she's too kind to notice but who among us
wouldn't feel the need to call this
to attention. Holding our tongues is not the same
as being baffled into silence. It's not
that food stays fresh in the cold
it's that it's kept so well in the dark.

At what cost do we feed
each other? To come to
the one we do as waxed axis
flocculating on the table cloth,
clothes, skin, the mortuary,
slaughterhouse and pig-farms up the road.

Forget the open plot, she has these beautiful,
long fingernails she's using to pick the wax,
to keep me from keeping out,
to clear the plate. You've got

to be something not to feel
this way. Got to be something else

to let it keep you out, a bird perhaps from
some kind of winter, and if not that,
an insurance salesman predicting a triggering incident,
a box with cryptic nutritional facts, or another
box with a pre-printed shipping label, god
to be able to walk through those
back rooms of the warehouse toward something
more to eat, toward that it
intersecting axis of the moment
I told her.

The Thing That Saying Nothing Says

Mutual ownership doesn't seem right, you
never have money, never say what you want
for dinner you'll notice we've grown so
thin lingering in the kitchen, holding the eye-lock,
neither taking even a box of rice down. Because
we won't decide I'm keeping the painting
we bought in Venice where it is
though it fit the way the room was.

Took us nine nights walking to and from
restaurants arguing how to talk
the dealer down. Early to sleep meeting
some gravityless center where we grapple
each other into inarticulation. Into
the thing that saying nothing says.

That lingering doesn't make us tougher it
makes this more severe and what doesn't
end us only skims the fibers until there's nothing
left of the spinning bed. But remnants
remnants because I won't say either
is why you leave and why you come back.

Mantes that Summer

The first came as a stain on the air

the humming birds misread for sky

removing a post-it note from the mirror

diamond eye on the sticklike end

the wife of the doctor found

there were live intruders in that woman's house

From stone eggs the second emerged

the starving end of a fingernail

and this soft tune played to its eating

so that heat pure heat would be the nest

and her children's chants

to the third sandrock abdomen

Maybe months before the fourth sighting

no longer anyone's wife

under the button of a sleeve to touch

now forbidden to speak of it more so

the fifth between pages in tucking

bladed edge's underneathly twinkle

The children make her in

her hands and ache is un-lived yet

quickly, say what you'll take up

Alex Rieser is the author of *Emancipator* ([New Fraktur Press](#), 2011), and has internationally published poetry, fiction, interviews, and criticism. He holds an MFA from The University of San Francisco, where he worked as the Chief Art, & Poetry editor for [Switchback](#). His works have appeared in, or are forthcoming from: *Ploughshares*, *Transfer*, *Idiolexicon*, *Quiet Lightning*, *NoD*, *Leveler*, *The Ignatian*, *Switchback*, *Esque*, *Corium*, *Sprung Formal*, *Shady Side Review*, *Foothill*, *Great Weather for Media*, *The Prague Review*, *Fat City*, *The Portland Review*, and *Feathertale*. He currently lives in San Diego with his wife and two dogs.

Dylan Wagman

Ice

Feeling the cold approaching, water's molecules bundle together like penguins in a rookery, bracing against the wind, becoming ice, white sapphire expanding in the frigid air. But just because water changes to ice, its motives are not subdued. It is still an animal, hungry for its prey. It now uses its flashy form to hypnotize the eye, lure us in its glassy wonder, and then rip our feet from under us, our bodies plummeting to the cold.

Shape shifter. A planet of ice hurtles towards the earth in the shade of the sun; a film of ice nudges weary drivers to feel a moment of helplessness and of life, their tires locking as they skid on the laminated pavement.

Like Vesuvius' lava hardened over Pompeii, ice too can stop time. It can make a photograph that slowly melts, dripping like water from negatives off a clothesline in a darkroom.

Ice is nocturnal. It opens its eyes under the coolness of the moon and its pupils sparkle. Armies of glaciers march across oceans at night, clearing their path to the military beat of the waves. Meanwhile, icicle stalactites sharpen the tip of their steel with every drop. Ribbons of ice swallow too much air and form butterfly wings.

But ice, like any animal, is transient and easily domesticated. Everything puddles sometime. We lock it in trays, then drown it in bubbling brown syrup and burning booze. Skaters shave ice rinks like a back scratched with long fingernails. In Montreal, men accustomed to the cold, filet ice blocks like butchers, while others, shovels hoisted, tap the crème brulee of a February lake.

Dylan Wagman is a Toronto based poet and a graduate from York University's Creative Writing program. These three poems are part of a manuscript in progress that explores life and death from the recent past to the modern world. Dylan was the recipient of the 2013 bp nichol Award and won second prize in the Robbie Burns Poetry Contest in 2011. Dylan has been published in The Steel Chisel ("Infuse"), The Fieldstone Review ("The Skyline Circus"), and Deadbeats (forthcoming) ("Gathering Darkness").

Tom Sheehan

Born to Wear the Rags of War (a Poem in a Prose Body)

The day had gone over hill, but that still, blue light remained, cut with a gray edge, catching corners rice paddies lean out of. In the serious blue brilliance of battle they'd become comrades becoming friends, just Walko and Williamson and Sheehan sitting in the night drinking beer cooled by Imjin River waters in August of '51 in Korea. Three men drably clad, but clad in the rags of war. Stars hung pensive neon. Mountain-cool silences were being earned, hungers absolved, a ponderous god talked to. Above silences, the ponderous god's weighty as clouds, elusive as soot on wind, yields promises. They used church keys to tap cans, lapped up silence rich as missing salt, fused their backbones to good earth in a ritual old as labor itself, these men clad in the rags of war. Such an August night gives itself away, tells tales, slays the rose in reeling carnage, murders sleep, sucks moisture out of Mother Earth, fires hardpan, sometimes does not die itself just before dawn, makes strangers in one's selves, those who wear the rags of war. They had been strangers beside each other, caught in the crush of tranced night and starred flanks, accidents of men drinking beer cooled in the bloody waters where brothers roam forever, warriors come to that place by fantastic voyages, carried by generations of the persecuted or the adventurous, carried in sperm body, dropped in the spawning, fruiting womb of America, and born to wear the rags of war.

Walko, reincarnate of the Central European, come of land lovers and those who scatter grain seed, bones like logs, wrists strong as axle trees, fair and blue-eyed, prankster, ventriloquist who talked off mountainside, rumormonger for fun, heart of the hunter, hide of the herd, apt killer, born to wear the rags of war.

Williamson, faceless in the night, black set on black, only teeth like high piano keys, eyes that captured stars, fine nose got from Rome through rape or slave bed unknown generations back, was cornerback tough, graceful as ballet dancer (Walko's opposite), hands that touched his rifle the way a woman's touched, or a doll, or one's fitful child caught in fever clutch, came sperm-tossed across the cold Atlantic, some elder Virginia-bound bound in chains, the Congo Kid come home, the Congo Kid, alas, alas, born to wear the rags of war.

Sheehan, reluctant at trigger-pull, dreamer, told deep lies with dramatic ease, entertainer who wore shining inward a sum of ghosts forever from the cairns had fled; heard myths and the promises in earth and words of songs he knew he never knew, carried scars vaguely known as his own, shared his self with saint and sinner, proved pregnable to body force, but born to wear the rags of war -----

Walko: We lost the farm. Someone stole it. My father loved the fields, sweating. He watched grass grow by starlight, the moon slice at new leaves. The mill's where he went for work, in the crucible, drawing on the green vapor, right in the heat of it, the miserable heat. My mother said he started dying the first day. It wasn't the heat or green vapor did it, just going off to the mill, grassless, tight in. The system took him. He wanted to help. It took him, killed him a little each day, just smothered him. I kill easy. Memory does it. I was born for this, to wear these rags. The system gives, then takes away. I'll never go piecemeal like my father. These rags are my last home. -----

Williamson: Know why I'm here' I'm from North Carolina mountains, sixteen and big and wear size fifteen shoes and my town drafted me 'stead of a white boy. Chaplain says he git me home. Shit! Be dead before then. Used to hunt home, had to eat what was fun runnin' down. Brother shot my sister and a white boy in the woods. Caught them skinnin' it up against a tree, run home and kissed Momma goodbye, give me his gun. Ten years, no word. Momma cries about both them all night. Can't remember my brother's face. Even my sister's. Can feel his gun, though, right here in my hands, long and smooth and all honey touch. Squirrel's left eye never too far away for that good old gun. Them white men back home know how good I am, and send me here, put these rags on me. Two wrongs! Send me too young and don't send my gun with me. I'm goin' to fix it all up, gettin' home too. They don't think I'm coming back, them white men. They be nervous when I get back, me and that good old gun my brother give me, and my rags of war. -----

Sheehan: Stories are my food. I live and lust on them. Spirits abound in the family, indelible eidolons; the O'Siodhachain and the O'Sheehaughn carved a myth. I wear their scars in my soul, know the music that ran over them in lifetimes, songs' words, and strangers that are not strangers: Muse Devon abides with me, moves in the blood and bag of my heart, whispers tonight: Corimin is in my root cell, oh bright beauty of all that has come upon me, chariot of cheer, carriage of Cork where the graves are, where my visit found the root of the root cell---Johnny Igoe at ten running ahead of the famine that took brothers and sisters, lay father down;

sick in the hold of ghostly ship I have seen from high rock on Cork's coast, in the hold heard the myths and music he would spell all his life, remembering hunger and being alone and brothers and sisters and father gone and mother praying for him as he knelt beside her bed that hard morning when Ireland went away to the stern. I know that terror of hers last touching his face. Pandalcon's grace comes on us all at the end.

Johnny Igoe came alone at ten and made his way across Columbia, got my mother who got me and told me when I was twelve that one day Columbia would need my hand and I must give. And tonight I say, 'Columbia, I am here with my hands and with my rags of war.' I came home alone. And they are my brothers. Walko is my brother. Williamson is my brother. Muse Devon is my brother. Corimin is my brother. Pandalcon is my brother. God is my brother. I am a brother to all who are dead, we all wear the rags of war.

(from Press 53)

TOM SHEEHAN is the author of *Brief Cases, Short Spans* (Press 53, 2008) and *Epic Cures* ([Press 53](#), 2005). He has been nominated for the illustrious Million Writers Award twice and the Pushcart Prize twelve times. He has received a Silver Rose Award from American Renaissance for the Twenty-First Century (ART) and the Georges Simenon Award for Excellence in Fiction. His first short story collection, [Epic Cures](#) (Press 53), received a 2006 IPPY Award Honorable Mention. Sheehan served in the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea in 1951, an experience that forever changed his life and serves to inform his writing. In addition to short story collections, Tom Sheehan has published three novels, five books of poetry, and three books of memoir and nonfiction. He lives in Saugus, MA.

Tom Darin Liskey

Watershed

When I was about twelve the kids on my block got the grand idea of sticking playing cards in the wheel-spokes of our bikes. They made a pretty cool clickety-clack sound with each turn of the wheel.

If there were enough of us when we raced down the street, our wheel spokes sounded like a battalion of machine gunners going at it full blast on D- Day.

We soon copped this cocky attitude about having the cards in our wheel-spokes. It almost made it seem like we were riding honest-to-God motorcycles.

The first day we put the cards in our wheels we rode along the riverfront and peddled our way up to the trace road that ran along the heights of the town. Then we raced back down to the bottom where we put out our kick-stands and hung our arms over the handlebars, all sweaty and exhausted.

There was about seven of us. We were winded out but ribbed each other about how fast - or slow - we were in the downhill race.

We gave each other nicknames like Bottle Rocket, Midnight Racer, Downhill Don and Slingshot. They called me Riverboat because I liked to coast down the hill with my legs stretched out and the wind in my hair.

They also called me that because my old man liked to gamble. Hell, he was a perv when it came to Lady Luck. He'd place a wager on his own dying day if he could.

I bent my playing cards through the spoke of my front wheel in the fashion of a royal flush: Ten of diamonds, Jack, Queen, King and Ace. I put the rest of the cards in the back wheel. I thought it might impress my dad or make him a little proud of me.

I'd gotten the cards from the top drawer of the chester-drawer set in his bedroom. I chose the most worn out pack among the others still in their cellophane wrappers. My dad had about ten packs stacked atop some dirty magazines and the cigar box where he kept an old .22 caliber pistol that he called his peashooter.

I honestly didn't think he would mind. I'd always seen him play poker with his friends at the kitchen table with a new pack anyway. He'd never sit down to a game with a secondhand set of cards.

We lived in a wretched little trailer park near the Missouri River. It was just me and him by that summer. My mom had already left us to go live with her new boyfriend on the Pacific Coast.

By the time I was sticking his playing cards in the spokes of my bicycle wheels we had been so flat busted for such a long time that he stopped going to the horse tracks or playing back-room card games altogether.

My mom taking off the way she did was a big blow to him. When the old man wasn't working he hung around with his low-life friends. They were a bunch of divorced-can't-pay-child-support-losers just like him. They'd come over on Saturday afternoon with bottles of cheap gin, jugs of wine and beer to entertain the women they met the night before down at the Wagon Wheel, or some other dive in the county.

What always got me was how my dad and his pals acted around these women. For Chrissake, these women already had plenty of mileage on them but they treated them like Hollywood starlets. Maybe that's why the women came around. They liked being treated like beauty queens, even if it was by a bunch of half-ass deadbeats.

My dad liked music at these cookouts. He grilled hot dogs and burgers for the ladies on this rinky-dink grill he kept chained to the porch. The old man and his friends would put on nice slacks and clean short-sleeve dress shirts open at the neck and josh each other like they were some sort of trailer trash version of Sinatra's Rat Pack sizzling twenty-dollar steaks at a pool party for a bunch of pretty girls.

Some of the women who came to the cook outs had this sad look on their face that the layers of cheap rouge and eye shadow couldn't hide. It was like you just knew they were waiting for someone to get out of jail.

The day I took the old man's cards from his room I came home late in the afternoon when he was having one of those BBQs. He was at the grill wincing in the billowing smoke, a spatula in one hand and a sweaty gin-and-tonic in the other.

When he saw the bike with the cards in the wheels, he threw the drink down on the ground and ran over to me. He pushed me out of the way and yanked the mud-splattered cards out of the spokes.

He was mad as hell and dragged me into the living-room by my ear, smacking me on the back of the head with the greasy spatula.

One of his friends was sitting on the couch with his arm around a fat woman. She was in a tank top and tight-fitting miniskirt. Her swollen ankles spilled out of her cheap white high heels.

The woman's lipstick was smudged from kissing the guy. But when we barged in she acted like her and the man were only watching TV. She had this embarrassed look on her face as she gently tried to put her hair back in place.

He pushed me onto the couch next to them. They were nursing beers and the impact made them spill their drinks. My dad's friend leapt from the couch, pulling at his wet shirts and licking the spilled beer from his hand.

The old man's eyes were red with rage. He turned to me. He looked like something from a horror movie with the flickering TV screen behind him, spitting out things like you stupid bastard and little shit.

Then he started shuffling the cards. He threw them at my face one-by-one like some pissed off sleight of hand. Every time I tried to swat a flying card away from my face he'd kick my legs and tell me to sit still.

He had a lot of rude things to say about me and my mother that day. He said I had ruined his luck by putting those cards – for Chrissake those cards, he whined – in the spokes of my wheels.

The old man said he had those cards since Parchman where he did time. The fat lady stood up and tried to get him to calm down. Dad was drunk and there were no words to soothe when he got in a state like that. But the woman kept on trying to talk to him in a low sweet voice, like he was a spoiled child having a tantrum in a store.

He finally blurted out that he didn't need any lonely old bitches coming around and telling him how to raise an ungrateful kid. The women got pissed off at that. Righteously so. She started waving her hands around shouting at him. She threatened to call the police for child abuse.

The woman acted like she was trying to defend me but I just wanted her to shut up too. Dad ignored her and she finally stormed out, slamming the aluminum screen door behind her. My dad's friend murmured something about calling him later to see if everything was okay before he followed her out to her car.

Some other people came inside trying to get him to stop his ranting, but he just shrugged them off. He made me pick up the scattered cards from the floor so he could flick them at me again. It didn't matter I was crying. The other partygoers left because of his crazy ruckus.

The old man beat me so bad with the belt that night that he had to keep me home from school for three days. Even when I went back to classes, he had to send a note to the gym teacher excusing me from exercising and showering with the other kids. The handwritten note said I had a rash or something like that. It took a week for the green-blue bruises on my ass and lower back to fade.

For once the old man felt bad for knocking the snot out of me. The next Saturday he tossed me an unwrapped pack of cards from the drawer. He said they were for my bike.

I nodded, took the cars and rode down the old portage road to a river station where the Missouri emptied out with great force into the Mississippi River. There were towering bluffs on the opposite bank overlooking the white swirling caps atop the sediment-rich waters. It was freaking' loud. The rivers crashed into each other like two armies.

Sometimes when my dad was on one of his benders my mom would bring me here. We'd sit for hours looking at the rushing river with the sun and clouds and swirling birds casting shadows on the waters with their outstretched wings. But she was gone.

I sat there that day with a brand new pack of cards in my sweaty hands and for the first time since she had left I realized how much I missed my mother. I undid the cellophane wrapper on the pack and took the cards out. They were stiff and glistening in the sunlight and had that new smell to them. I shuffled them slowly – just like I had seen the old man do before he dealt out a hand. I flicked each one of those cards into the tumultuous waters before me and watched them disappear downstream. The cards jerked and tossed on the turbulent waters. Sometimes the wind picked one or two of them up just for a second before they pirouetted back down onto the rushing river where the rapids swallowed them altogether.

Tom Darin Liskey lives in Texas, but spent nearly a decade working in Latin America.

Tom Sheehan

Searching for Mushrooms and Trolley Cars

(Amanita Colyptraderma and Electric Street Cars)

They came out of West Lynn or East Saugus years ago, dark mushroom seekers, with their long-pieced poles, their own language whose word for amanita, to the initiate, would tell where their roots began, whether they were Florentine, Roman, or islander, Piana di Cartania. They might say Cocoli, Coconi or Coccori, the delicacies growing thirty or forty feet up on the great elms in the circled green of Cliftdale Square, those huge sky-reaching elms that fell to the hurricanes of '38, or Carol in the '50s, finally to the toll of traffic demanding the green circle be cut down to size.

Once, in a thick fog, on my third floor porch, the mist yet memorable, I remember thinking the elms were Gardens in the Clouds. I felt a bloom rise in me, a taste fill my mouth. They don't come for amanita anymore because the elms have all gone, those lofty gardens, those mighty furrowed limbs; now shrubs and bushes stand in their place you can almost see over.

Nor do the street cars come anymore from Lynn into Cliftdale Square. They say the old yellow and orange ones, high black-banded ones, red-roofed ones, real noisy ones, ones long-electric-armed at each end, the ones off the Lynn-Saugus run, are in Brazil or Argentina or the street car museum in Kennebunkport, Maine, quiet now forever as far as we are concerned, those clanging, rollicking machines that flattened pennies on the tracks so that good Old Abe became a complete mystery, or the Indian Chief, him and his background, became as flat and as charmless as his reservation.

From my porch high on the square, I'd watch thin long poles extending men's arms, needles of poles they'd fit together, as they reached for the white-gray knobs growing in cloudy limbs. They wore red or blue kerchiefs around thick necks, like Saturday's movie cowboys if you could believe it, as if any moment they could slip them over their faces and hide out in such bright disguises. They'd cut or tap loose the amanita, see it fall slowly end over end, like a field goal or a touchdown's point-after, down out of the upper limbs, cutting a slowest curve and halved orbit, and they'd swish butterfly nets to catch the aerial amanita, or Cocoli, as it might be; or their women, in kerchiefs and drawn in and almost

hidden away, faces almost invisible, with an upward sweep of gay aprons would catch the somersaulting fungi, the amanita colyptraderma, or being from Piana di Cartania, calling out its name Coconi or Coccori,

Oh, Mediterranean's rich song airing itself across the green grass of Cliftondale Square, Brahminville being braced, uplifted.

I was never privy to know their roots, their harsh voyages, to know where they landed and why, and now their sounds are lost forever, their voices across the square, the gay and high-pitched yells setting a brazen mist on Cliftondale, their glee as a soft white clump of fungi went loose from its roost, coming down to net, swung apron, or quick hat as if a magician worked on stage in the square, heading for Russula Delica, Cocoli Trippati, Veal Scaloppine, Mushroom Trifolati, Risotto Milanaise or plain old Brodo dei Funghi.

All these years later I know the heavens of their kitchens, the sweet blast front hallways could loose, how sauce pots fired up your nose, how hunger could begin on a full stomach when Mrs. Forti cooked or Mrs. Tedeschi or Mrs. Tura way over there at the foot of Vinegar Hill feeding her gang of seven and their guests.

And I grasp for the clang-clang of the trolley cars, the all-metallic timpani of their short existence, the clash of rods and bars stretching to the nth degree, of iron wheel on iron rail echoing to where we ear-waited up the line with fire crackers' or torpedoes' quick explosions, and the whole jangling car shaking like a vital Liberty Ship I'd come to know intimately years later on a dreadful change of tide.

How comfortable now would be those hard wooden seats whose thick enamel paint peeled off by a fingernail as I left her initials and mine on the back of a seat, wondering if today someone in Buenos Aires or Brasilia rubs an index finger across the pair of us that has not been together for more than sixty years. But somehow, in the gray air today, in a vault of lost music carrying itself from the other end of town, that pairing continues, and the amanita, with its dark song-rich gardeners, though I taste it rarely these days, and the shaky ride the streetcars, for all of a nickel on an often-early evening, softest yet in late May, give away the iron cries and, oh, that rich Italiana.

Once a sheer edge of moonlight, a reflection hung in my mind of a whole night's vision, the smell and the sound of it all, the touch of things as they were.

Jeroen van Honk

Something in the Air

Bring a red balloon, he had said, and I'll find you. It seems to me like a bad practical joke by now. Here we are, in the busy Saturday shopping crowds, and the sky is brimming with the damned things.

He had said that it'd probably be the only two.

At best, there'd be five of us.

Now there are at least fifty people clutching heavenward strings. Other people look at us warily. Grown men are not supposed to hold balloons, their eyebrows are telling me. Their curled upper lips denounce me, make me uncomfortable. What I understood to be a convenient way to meet up with a stranger has turned into a statement, part of a rebellious movement. I get all fidgety and flee into a side street.

In the evening he contacts me again. Tomorrow, he says, bring two red balloons. Naturally, I query after that blood-red sky of the afternoon. He says he doesn't know what happened. Perhaps just bad luck. It's a ridiculous explanation, and I know he knows it too. I decide not to press the matter.

The next day I do as asked and show up with two red balloons and, again, the sky is charred with paired balloons, tangoing fire-hot around each other, never quite touching, in eternal dance. We are all in sync, somehow: when I pull the two strings apart, stretching out, one left, one right, all the other balloonists mirror this move. Or is that just a megalomane vision of mine? Again, I ponder letting go of the strings, or just one of them, but can't. It would somehow feel like betrayal. Threads both visible and invisible link all of our faiths together. It is as if we are a puppet show conducted by the balloons, instead of the other way around.

Again, at the end of the day, I ask him what happened. Someone must be tapping our phone, he says. As a manner of speaking of course, he adds (we don't even use a phone to communicate). He suggests adding another balloon for tomorrow.

I linger, weary of the process, and try to come up with another method to meet up.

He tells me three's a charm, all things come in threes, etc.

Fine, then.

But at night I come up with another plan. I'll add a few more, go for broke. If the pattern continues, if they are tapping our phone, I will at least stand out.

I stroll into the streets with seven balloons. The city is painted red. The warning effect of the color, its murderous connotations, frightens me now. I can't even trace the balloons back to their sources anymore. They are all huddled together, each belonging to everyone. I trace the strings back down, look at people's hands. They all seem to be holding on to seven lines. Incredible.

I walk around for a bit, dazed. I feel like I'm in this perpetual nightmare I can't get out of. When I try to think it all through, I can't even remember anymore what or why we're supposed to meet for. With whom for that matter. I can't remember there being anything else in this world but a sky of red balloons. Somewhere far, far away this strikes me as insanity.

Meanwhile, I keep scanning people's hands. Seven, seven, zero, seven, zero, seven, seven. It's all or nothing. People not belonging to the balloon brigade, not caring for whatever symbolism, whatever protest we are into here, seem oblivious to the crimson-clouded ceiling we create. Are they used to it, already? They were still eyeing me with some concern two days ago.

Zero, zero, seven, seven, three. Three! I stop. People glide around me all robotic. My free hand searches for Mr. Three's free hand.

It's you, he says. He's not surprised. You disobeyed my orders, he says.

I ask him what is going on. I explain how, completely on my own, I came up with the number seven. I ask him how they do it.

Don't you think they'd wonder the same thing, he says.

I didn't.

Triggered, I look around, try to look these other people in the eye. They do seem bewildered, they do seem to be searching for something, too.

Let go of one balloon, he finally says. The penny might just drop.

I do as he says. My eyes follow the balloon in the air, slowly, certainly. My eyes follow many more balloons in the air, slowly, certainly. Many eyes are following many balloons in the air, slowly, certainly.

I stare waiting for them to fade away, but they never do. They just keep getting smaller, infinitely, yet somehow my eyes keep discerning them. I marvel at the polka-dotted veil we've drawn over the sky.

Somewhere far, far away this strikes me as insanity.

It's just something in the air, he says.

Jeroen van Honk is a 24-year-old writer and student living in Leiden, The Netherlands. His work has been published in The Quotable and will be published in the coming months in Paper Tape Magazine and Myths of the Near Future. In his stories he is often concerned with the influence of technology on our society and the diminishing role of spirituality in our modern lives.

John Brantingham

Graham Greene Saved Me That Year

The first year of teaching is hard. If you do it right, every year of teaching is hard, but the first is the most difficult. I was a year out of an MFA and part-time teaching all over Los Angeles. Part-time teaching is badly named. When people start teaching at the college level, they teach part-time at three or four colleges or universities. I was teaching eight classes that semester, twice as many as full-timers were supposed to teach, and I was a bit burned out.

So I picked up Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* during finals week. We'd read a lot of Greene in grad school of course. I'd admired his work without ever loving it, but this one hit me in just the right direction at just the right time.

Good books can do that to you. They don't always do that, but they certainly can. I started reading the night before finals started. I had a stack of research papers to return to students, and I used the novel as my break, snatching six or ten pages between the volumes the students had poured themselves into. I wasn't used to the heartbreak that students go through or the triumph either. I wasn't used to seeing college from this side of the chalkboard.

It had been a year of firsts.

And in that year of firsts, I had decided to stop being a writer without knowing I had. I was in love with teaching. I still am. And that love for watching students adapting to the college lifestyle had pushed too many things out of my life. I'd lost friends. I'd stopped going to family functions. I had stopped writing and worse, stopped reading for pleasure.

The End of the Affair brought me back.

It's probably not Greene's best book, but it's up there. A narcissistic writer makes claims like "Anyone who loves is jealous" and "I hate you, God. I hate you as though you actually exist." By the end, we see our hero's slow conversion to Catholicism, see that he's a bad person, but that we like him. We admire and hate

him. It's a fantastically complex book in writing and idea as all Greene's work is, as Greene was complex himself.

So I read it during lunch and dinner and to my wife, and I read it after they filed out of the finals, and I realized that yes, I was a teacher, but I was a reader too, and that I still truly did still want to be a writer.

And when I finished his novel, I still had papers to grade, but between them and during meals and whenever I could, I started to put together a poem that had occurred to me while reading *The End of the Affair*.

This blog post was published on September 16th, 2013 at johnbrantingham.se

John Brantingham have been featured in Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac* and have had hundreds of poems published in magazines in the United States and England. His books include the short story collection, *Let Us All Pray Now to Our Own Strange Gods* and the crime novel *Mann of War*.

Optimism One

Five Photos, Nine Lives

My grandfather sits on the cement in my parents' garage taking the training wheels off my bike. I stand above him with my arms at my side, shaggy hair shielding my eyes and fear.

"Okay, Craig, you ready?" he asks.

"I think so."

I started drinking when I was 8 years old.

"When I let go, just keep pedaling. You're going to be okay."

Window blinds shut tight, doors locked, phone unanswered, answering machine turned down, car parked in the backyard. Drunk and spun again, a CD case, driver's license, and hollowed out pen on the table next to me.

I remember watching M*A*S*H every day after school, fascinated by the breaking and repairing of relationships and bodies.

I am sitting on the bike, each hand gripping the handlebars and my feet resting on the pedals, my butt at the closest tip of the long banana seat, and my grandfather is running beside me, his right hand on the back of the seat and his left hand on the edge of the left grip of the handlebars.

When I got to the top of the stairs, my mom was already on the phone. She had walked out of the bathroom and not zipped up her jeans. Her hand on her mouth, her head dropped.

Passport #: 477646535. It says my birth date, 17 April 1970, but it doesn't say my sobriety date, 5 March 2002. It also doesn't say my birth name, but it does say the name I gave myself.

My grandfather walks into the garage and asks, "Why do you still have training wheels on that bicycle?"

"I can't ride without them," I respond.

"The hell you can't. You're too old to be riding around like that. Gimme a wrench."

At the end of the last episode, from the sky and zooming out, color-faded rocks spell out 'G-O-O-D-B-Y-E' on the clean dirt.

I am obsessed with (addicted to) fear, Korea, addiction, China, escape, Japan, booze, Vietnam, pills, Laos, powder, Cambodia, needles, Thailand, health, Burma, exercise, Indonesia, guitar, England, meditation, Ireland, recovery, Italy, service, Guatemala, friendship, Belize, family, Costa Rica, reading, Nicaragua, writing, Mexico. I am obsessed with (addicted to) kissing love and life on the mouth. And running from it. I am obsessed with (addicted to) riding my bike.

My grandmother told my mom that my grandfather had called the sheriff to report finding a dead body in his field, then walked out into that field and shot himself in the chest with his shotgun.

"Okay," my grandpa yells, "one...two...three!" He pushes me even harder than he had been running, launching me forward into a speed and freedom I have never known, my tiny legs like pistons, my hair pushed back by the wind, and a grin on my face that I have never grinned.

I never wanted to stop.

I am on the beach on an island in the Gulf of Siam, having taken several planes, buses, tuk-tuks, songthaews, and boats to get here, and am staying at a remote resort called The Sanctuary.

I never want to stop.

Optimism One is an MFA student in Creative Nonfiction at Sierra Nevada College who also teaches writing full-time at Modesto Junior College in California. Aside from academic writing, his more creative work has been published by The Matador Network, I-Magazine, In the Grove: California Poets and Writers, and June Jordan's Poetry for the People in a Season of Love.



CONTRIBUTORS ISSUE 3

**ALEX RIESER
CHRISTOPHER HIVNER
DYLAN WAGMAN
GABRIELLA M GEISINGER
JEROEN VAN HONK**

**JOHN BRANTINGHAM
L.S BASSEN
MICHAEL BROWNSTEIN
OPTIMISM ONE
ROSE - ANNE CHABOT
SAM CALDWELL**

**SARA FLEMINGTON
TOM DARIN LISKEY
TOM SHEEHAN
VALENTINA CANO
WAYNE F BURKE**

**MIKO MACIASZEK
MIKE STANKO**





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