



**17 FLASH  
FICTION  
STORIES**

**NEW &  
RETURNING  
AUTHORS**

**AUTHOR  
INTERVIEWS**

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**VOLUME 2  
2021  
FREE**

**FICTION KITCHEN  
BERLIN**



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# WELCOME

Cool to see you again in this issue!

Can you believe that it's been two years already since Fiction Kitchen Berlin was launched? And what a weird couple of years it has been! Besides the external craziness though, I've been having a blast with the journal and I hope you have had fun too reading the many wonderful flash stories published. During this time the Kitchen has continued to grow and develop, and I look forward to seeing what new directions it might take into the future.

I also want to express a huge amount of gratitude to all the amazing authors that continue to help make the journal shine - without your encouragement and dedication, none of this would be happening. THANK YOU!

See you all again in 2022!

**SHANE O'HALLORAN**  
Editor

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## NEWSLETTERS

Sign up to the FKB newsletter for insights, news, and great new stories.

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## SUBMISSIONS

New submission date to be announced in 2022 via our site, newsletter, and social media channels.

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# An Old Life

BY ELENA MALKOV

We were traveling to see an art installation in the country. The artist, now dead, had planted a ten-foot-tall drying rack in a copse of trees far from everywhere. We sloped easily over the mild hills of washed-out arcadia.

Our world lay still.

Four of us in a blue van, suspended in icy AC. I knew I was myself, but I was something else too: the van's front left wheel. Under the driver. Rubber pressing into the kind of road that only exists in blurry childhood memories. Out here: no AC, just the engine heat searing my rubber skin.

R. drove. S. sat at her side.

T. was to my right, his thick, porous skin against the window. We didn't get along, so I could never make out his features, even if he was close.



I existed in relation to each one. I was also the front left wheel. My rubber self spun down the hot road. My other self was trying to understand T., who was both there and not there. Perhaps he had a rubber self he could disappear to? Mountains sprouted in the windows, but they were coated in a kind of veil. The others were silent. I wanted to see the installation.

The copse sprang up and there was the rack. We parked and got out, necks already craning at the thing—pale wood, thick beams expertly fused at the seams. No grass on the ground; maybe constructing it caused a lot of trampling, so there was a large circle of dirt. Nobody is allowed to touch art, but that sanded wood—each of us reached up to caress it, all at once we crowded around, performing the forbidden ritual.

S. began to climb it, then R. and T. I watched them scale the rungs to perch at the top, but I couldn't follow. I knew the structure was strong, but I was seeing through its construction, each beam in my eyes at once, and the hollowness struck me.

"Are you going to climb up?" T. asked. I could sense the jeer in his tone. The others shifted restlessly on their perches, waiting for their turn to tease me.

I didn't respond, but leaned against the structure, trying to appear more at peace with its presence. Then the air changed, and everything frightened me.

I think they were talking, maybe even to me. I couldn't hear. I looked at the van, then towards the hills to my right. That way seemed safer, so I began walking.

"Where are you going?" T. again. He climbed down to follow me. R. sprang down from the top. It was a long jump, but R.'s body was probably rubber too. I had watched her take improbable leaps, and her body stretched and contracted and swung as something free of gravity.

She bounced down into the dirt, kicking up a cough of dust, then leapt up and forward, towards me.

S. had waited for them to get off before following. We were already walking away, into the field, when she got to the bottom rung. T. yelled for her to hurry up, and we all turned around to see the effect of the taunt. But S. didn't move from the bottom rung. She cried out—first softly (I only heard because my wheel self was closer by), then with a shrieking panic. She couldn't leave the rack. Her feet were on the dirt, and she looked down at it. We turned back.

The knowledge of what was beneath the dirt settled as a heavy stone in my intestines. I couldn't tell if the others knew about it yet. We encircled the drying rack. T. was saying something to S., but I knew I had to say the important thing.

"The artist is buried here. And her bones are screaming to us."

Silence.

Misery welled in S.'s eyes. I turned back to the van, eager to reunite with my other self, but it was gone. The fields, the hazy mountains gone too. We were looking instead at a small sandbar and the sea. Farther, past our copse, the beach curved upward, and the water had eaten at the bank, creating a small cliff crowned with another cluster of trees. We left S. We didn't know what else to do.

To the beach. Grass quickly fading into thick hot sand. Breezes rippled across the water. The small cliff overlooked it all.

R. and I stood transfixed on the beach, but T. needed to understand. I wanted to enjoy the silence when he walked off, but instead the air went hollow. The water's glimmer folded over into shadow. S. was still near, but we didn't look at her.

And then—in a moment—darkness fell upon us. R. and I stood back-to-back, arms clasped. I was staring in the direction of the cliff, hoping to see T. return. For many seconds, there was nothing. Her heartbeat, my heartbeat, somewhere close, S.'s heartbeat. She was lost already. Hot wind crept past; my elbows knocked against R.'s. Our skin chafed, electrifying nerve endings into tantrum.

The darkness suffocated us, but I knew T. would come back soon. I could barely discern the outline of the trees. I didn't blink or move. Lightning.

T.'s shape illuminated on the cliff, running through the trees. Seconds later—thunder. Lightning again, and T. was dancing. Something like dancing, but in twitches and bursts. As though every muscle in his body was spasming consecutively.

Another second, more thunder, but in the momentary blackness I still see him, shadow within shadow, writhing, then running once more, over the edge of the cliff.

Into the water.

Our ashes are spread there, and the artist's bones lay buried still. I whisper this story into my own prayers, hoping to understand it. My oracle stands before me in my sleep and repeats these words.

**Elena Malkov is a fiction writer living in Richmond, Virginia. Her work has appeared in From Whispers to Roars, Storgy Magazine and Typishly. She is the co-founder and Fiction Editor of Sublunary Review literary magazine.**

# WHOEVER GETS BURNT FROM THE PORRIDGE, BLOWS ON THE YOGURT, TOO

BY MEREDITH WADLEY

Just afore Lent, a crone popped her foul head through my cottage door. "I smell hunger," she said.

"I'm a recent widow with a young son."

"I smell birth."

"I'm with child."

She offered me a coarse wooden bowl. "It fills itself with porridge," she said.

Oh, the nonsense people come up with to plague widows. I shouted, "Go! Take it to the whore next door. She and her waif are more desperate than me and my Jack."

Well.



Nowadays, hot porridge pours out the whore's cottage doors and windows! She and her girl are generous enough, trundling wheelbarrows of the steaming gunk to the old folk's home and the home for veterans of foreign wars, but we haven't spoken two words since we were ten and playing hooky from school. They pass our door without a blink—or a thank you for sending the crone their way. Jack and the babe and I could starve for all she cares. Never mind, we've Elsa to milk for our own porridge...

Oh, wait. How could I've forgotten? I'd already sent Jack to the market to sell Elsa.

And what do you suppose he did there? He only went and traded her in for a handful of magic beans. Magic beans!

For sure, I whipped his hide—but that night, as the moon hung fat, I remembered how the old crone had appeared at my door with her magic bowl.

My old man used to say (bless him), "Whoever gets burnt from the porridge, blows on the yogurt, too."

Hah! Not this widow.

Quick as quick, I ran outside and planted those beans. Peed on 'em too for good measure. At midnight, while I nursed the babe, something creaked and groaned outside, like trees in a windstorm—yet no wind blew. By morning, those beans had sprouted and grown, twisting themselves into a single plant thicker than the trunk of the cherry tree and taller than any stack of clouds! Jack shimmied up it in a minute, but I fussed him down. What good is a boy with a broken arm that I can't pay someone to set. Or, worse, a broken neck?

Now, where's he gotten off to—his chores undone?

"Jack? Jack!"

Sure, it's not fair to hold such a young one to the jobs his father did, but what's a widow to do? I cradle the babe. She'll never know her father, and I'm forever tired. No one stitches worry as finely as I do. But you can't sell worry at any market, not for love nor money.

**Meredith Wadley is an American Swiss living and working in a medieval microtown on the Rhine River. Her most recent longform fiction appears in *Longleaf Review* and *Line of Advance*. Her international idioms reimaged as flash fiction appear in several venues, including *JMWW*, *Gone Lawn*, and *Orca Lit*.**





# ON DISCOVERING MY POETRY CAUSES HYSTERIA

BY JONATHAN PAYNE

A ceiling fan cuts the humid air. A decrepit bookstore; the musty aroma of hardbacks. I wait until ten minutes after the hour, to allow for stragglers. Tonight's audience is equal parts silvery intellectuals and undergraduates in collegiate sweats. As I approach the lectern, a fly lands momentarily on my papers. My shoulders are tight and sweat beads above my lip. Readings don't usually make me nervous; tonight, something is different. I take a sip of water before beginning.

"Good evening. Thanks for being here. I have some new material. A collection of poems about saints. I've never read them in public before. I hope you won't mind being my guinea pigs." I pause for a ripple of polite laughter. "The first one is called 'Agnes, Virgin Martyr'."

I cough and straighten my papers before beginning.

Dragged through brutal Roman streets  
A virgin, too young to die  
Stripped of her modest robes  
Naked in the noonday dust

Before I reach the end of the first stanza, there is shuffling in the seats at the back. I pause and look up briefly before continuing.

Always chaste  
Always pure  
She casts her eyes down to the dirt

At some point during the second stanza, an elderly woman on the back row stands and begins to sway, as if to music. I am tempted to pause, but for all I know this woman and her mental illness are well known in the locality. I continue.

She whispers  
Never will I look into your eyes  
Never will I see the faces of my tormentors

During the third stanza, others stand and begin to sway. Some are mumbling; some thrust their arms aloft, reaching for the heavens.

Flames may flicker and rise  
But Agnes will not be burned  
Her body will not succumb to earthly elements

At the end of 'Agnes, Virgin Martyr', I pause and look up. Those audience members still seated, about half of them, look on with concern. Those standing continue to sway and moan in ecstasy. The moaning is becoming disturbing, animalistic. This has caught the attention of bookstore staff and browsing customers. Casting my eyes across the audience, I am sorely tempted to collect my papers and make a swift exit. But a seated man catches my eye and indicates with the frantic twirl of a finger that I should continue. I turn the pages, skimming through for something that might have a calming effect.

I speak up over the moaning. "This next one is called 'Basilissa and Anastasia'."

With their own hands they dig  
The graves of martyrs  
Deep into the sandy clay  
They lay the bodies down

By the second stanza, the moaning is drowning me out. I raise my voice until it is just below a shout. Now, almost the entire audience is standing and swaying. I wipe sweat from my forehead with my sleeve, wondering if I can continue. The bookstore manager arrives, a grim expression on her face, and then returns urgently to the front of the store. A hot flush runs up the back of my neck; my body is telling me to get out.

Hunted like dogs  
Through a long, cruel night  
Dragged into a court of unbelievers  
They refuse to forsake Him

During the fourth stanza, a young man on the end of a row flings himself onto the floor, writhing. Browsing customers are ushered outside. The noise is now cacophonous. I rush to the end of 'Basilissa and Anastasia', reading each stanza faster than the last. Then I grab my papers and swig the rest of the water.

"I'm sorry," I say, and head to the door, but it is too late. A siren is followed by lights flashing through the window.

#

A ceiling fan cuts the humid air. The sweet stench of body odor. I share the holding cell with a prostitute and several drug dealers. They talk among themselves, agitated and eyeing me with suspicion. An officer approaches, ostensibly to escort me to the bathroom. I must time it just right. I stand tall, projecting along the hallway. The other prisoners fall quiet and stare at me.

Dragged through brutal Roman streets  
A virgin, too young to die  
Stripped of her modest robes  
Naked in the noonday dust

By the time the cell door is unlocked, the officer  
and most of my cellmates are writhing in  
ecstasy, moaning, thrusting their arms aloft. I  
escort the prostitute and the drug dealers out  
into the night.

**Jonathan Payne is a British writer based in Washington, DC. His short fiction has been featured at the North London Story Festival and in magazines including Turnpike and Twist In Time. He holds a master's degree in novel writing from Middlesex University.**

# A Silent Marriage

BY SARA DOBBIE

Mr. and Mrs. Dalton were creatures of habit. Each morning, when the alarm clock trilled at 6:30 am, Mr. Dalton would descend to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, dark roast, with vanilla flavored cream on Saturdays as a treat.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dalton made the bed, pulling the white sheets tight and tucking all the corners smoothly. On Wednesdays and Sundays, she stripped the bed and outfitted it with fresh linens, in the exact same plain white design as the previous set.

Over the years, the Daltons had become so attuned to one another that they rarely felt the need to speak out loud. They communicated with gestures and facial expressions. A smile meant thank you, a raised eyebrow was an indication of mild annoyance. A wink from across the room at a party meant it was time to leave. If Mr. Dalton went so far as to place his hand on the small of his wife's back during dinner clean up, she dabbed perfume behind her ears and on her throat after her shower, certain that he would inch toward her side of the bed after dark.



Mrs. Dalton loved her husband very much and took great pride in the deep connection they shared. She performed her wifely duties with a graceful ease, comfortable in the knowledge that Mr. Dalton was, and always would be, a solid figure by her side. That's why she was absolutely dumbfounded when one morning he didn't rise from their bed at the appointed time.

Uncertain of how to proceed, the befuddled Mrs. Dalton decided to let her husband sleep in, an unheard of course of action in their home. She went downstairs and spent quite some time figuring out how the coffee maker operated. After an hour, Mr. Dalton appeared in the arch between the kitchen and living room, with a look of grave concern on his face. "Rose-Mary," he said out loud, to Mrs. Dalton's astonishment, "I believe I'm shrinking." Mrs. Dalton raised both eyebrows as if to say, what on earth are you talking about, and why have you breached our perfect system of understanding by speaking to me? Incredulous, she inspected her husband, and indeed, it appeared that he'd lost at least two inches in height. Formerly, Mrs. Dalton had needed to raise her chin to meet his eyes, and now it seemed she was almost looking down on him.

In an attempt to regain normalcy Mrs. Dalton fried an egg, over-easy, and placed it next to a slice of buttered whole-wheat toast cut perfectly in two equal halves. To her dismay, Mr. Dalton pushed the plate aside and went back upstairs to bed. Things continued in this manner for three consecutive days, with Mr. Dalton, inexplicably, growing shorter, smaller even. His hands seemed tinier each time Mrs. Dalton caught a glimpse of them, like shriveling french-fries, and his feet receded two full sizes.

On the evening of that third day, after having hung listlessly about the house all afternoon and refusing to eat anything at all, Mr. Dalton met his wife's crossed arms and tapping foot with a soulful regard. A great longing poured from his bottomless eyes, as much as to say I am profoundly unhappy, and have been for some time.

As much as to say, that he felt in fact, as though he were collapsing from within, which was the cause of all this shrinking.

Mrs. Dalton spent a fitful night tossing and turning, consumed with the realization that she had misunderstood their relationship, and must therefore reconsider everything. Every nuance, every light touch, every meaningful glance was obscured now in a shroud of confusion.

By morning Mrs. Dalton's eyes were red and puffy, her hair wild, and her silk night dress rumpled. When Mr. Dalton rose from the bed, now only the height of an eight year old boy, she watched him with a sense of unease. He went to the closet, took out his brown suitcase, and one by one packed his button down shirts and pressed trousers inside. Socks, underwear, deodorant, cologne. He turned to her and shrugged, as if to say, I'm sorry darling, but we knew this was inevitable. Mrs. Dalton, with a nod of her head, confirmed that yes, it was for the best.

In the doorway Mrs. Dalton stood in a state of semi-shock as her husband trekked down the driveway, growing taller with every step he took. His arms extended out of his light jacket, and she could see him wiggling his lengthening fingers. His spine straightened, his stride increased in distance and by the time he reached the car, he had practically regained his full height.

Once the car had disappeared around the bend, Mrs. Dalton closed the door. She smoothed her hair in an effort to calm her nerves but was overcome by a fit of giggling. As if things hadn't been strange enough, her feet lifted off the floor. The giggles expanded inside her chest and burst forth as wholehearted laughter, and she rose higher and higher until she needed to feel her way across the ceiling to get upstairs and into her room. She laughed and laughed, and didn't come down until lunch, after which she got dressed and called up an old school chum.

At the end of a lovely coffee date filled with intense conversation, Mrs. Dalton's old school chum was compelled to remark, "My goodness Rose-Mary, I don't think I've ever heard you talk so much in one sitting." Rose-Mary, for her part, had to stifle a chuckle, just in case she started floating again.

**Sara Dobbie is a fiction writer living in Southern Ontario, Canada. Her work has appeared in Maudlin House, Menacing Hedge, (mac)ro(mic), The Lumiere Review, and elsewhere.**



# AN INTERVIEW WITH... NANCY STOHLMAN

**Your latest book, 'Going Short: An Invitation to Flash Fiction' (Ad Hoc Fiction), really is a must read for all writers of flash fiction. What was your inspiration behind writing it?**

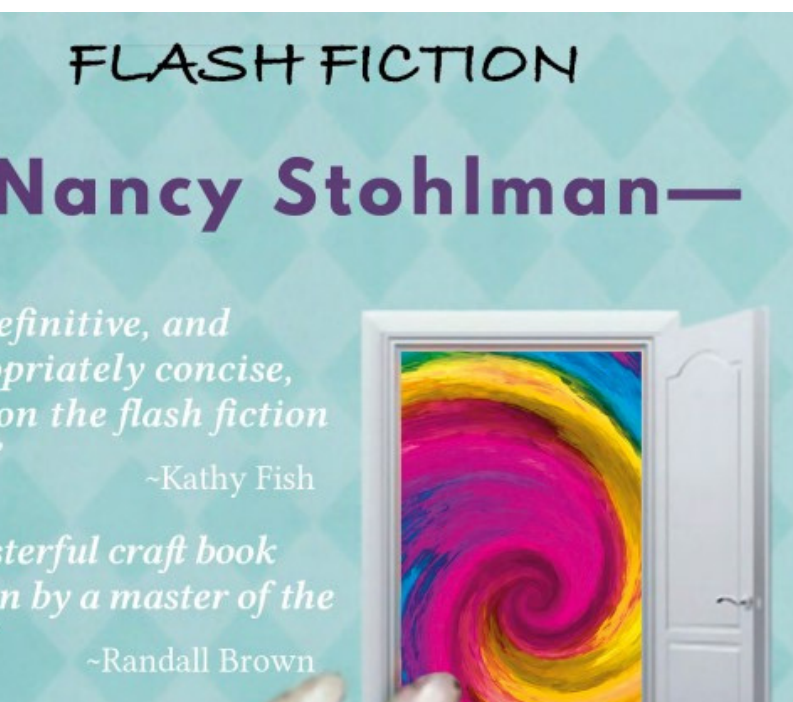
Thanks so much! My inspiration? I wanted this book to exist and it didn't. I wanted to recommend this book when people asked and I couldn't. So...I wrote it. And at first I thought it would be "easy"—I'm a professor, a teacher, and a long-time writer and advocate of flash fiction. I was wrong: it turned out to be the hardest (and most rewarding) book I've ever written.

Going Short is my love letter to flash fiction, the form that changed how I write forever. To see the book finally out in the world, making friends with other writers, is so fulfilling, a long-term vision come to fruition.

And...I'm happy to say that Going Short just won a Readers View Award!

Which, in my opinion, is really a win for flash fiction...

**Full interview available via [www.fictionkitchen.berlin](http://www.fictionkitchen.berlin)**





# The Bracelet

BY KATE MAHONY

The stall in Spitalfields Market, London, sells silver jewellery, bracelets, necklaces and earrings. I edge closer to take a look. Beside me a woman of about 50 is talking to the stall owner, an older Indian man. The man's right arm is poised mid-air as he holds up a rack of bracelets for her to choose from.

'And so I had my bracelet,' the woman says as if part way through an account. Her accent is Canadian, I decide. 'The one I had always wanted.' She takes a breath, just a tiny one. 'And when my father died, I put it on him. He wore it to the grave.'

The stall owner thrusts the display closer to her.

'And then I got another one. And coming through customs from the States, I had to take it off at the security check. And somehow I lost it.'

The man nods again. A very slight movement. He glances at me.

I inspect a pair of silver earrings. They are lovely, but I am unsure. It will all depend on what price the man wants for them. I send him just the tiniest of glances. Perhaps?

'It was plain silver but it had these little elephants by the clasp.' I hear that sharp slight intake of breath again. The woman's breath almost whistles. 'It is hard to describe exactly. But it was so clever, and the detail was just perfect.'

She takes another breath. Now I try to interpret the stall owner's expression. I wonder if it matches mine. I cast a longer glance this time, one that looks down at my wrist watch. I give a little – a very tiny – impatient sigh. The stall owner notices. I sense him nod.

'And, why I cared about it so much –'

The stall owner catches my eye. He grasps the display of bracelets with his other hand. He selects one of the bracelets. 'This one is also perfect,' he says, thrusting it towards the woman. He shoves it over her wrist. 'This one you don't take off.'

**Kate Mahony's short stories and flash fiction have been published internationally in literary journals and anthologies and shortlisted in a number of competitions. She has a Masters of Arts in Creative Writing from Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. She lives in New Zealand.**



# Therapy

BY DS LEVY

From the porch, he heard the metal wind chimes tinkling on the Shepard's hook, and the dull clanging of the shell chimes dangling from the back awning, and the baritone bamboos nailed to the lower limb of the elm tree. It was a windy day. The chimes reminded him of his wife, who'd hung them, claiming they were decoration and therapy. He'd thought they were tacky. The beads and baubles and reflective materials flickered under the sun, and the noise was no music to his ears, though his wife believed in their vibrations. He'd thought she was desperate, but now he realized she was right. He went into the garage and got the snippers and cut them down, leaving all three piles where they'd hung. Then, he returned to the porch and sat down again. It was a sunny, pleasant day, late September. The slanting sun cast a cool lemony-golden light; every edge a haunting shadow. The silence, he found, deafening.

**DS Levy lives in the Midwest. She has had work published in *New World Writing*, *Bending Genres*, *Bull Men's Fiction*, *Atticus Review*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, and others. Her flash chapbook, *A Binary Heart*, was published by *Finishing Line Press*.**

# Amazon Has Voodoo Dolls, But Not Reindeer

BY TAMMY BREITWEISER

Voodoo dolls are often misunderstood. There's potential to bring a person good luck and fortune, but this was not that moment. The last time I was in NOLA the heaviness of spirit seeped into the clothes I wore and never dried.

I didn't need the doll back then, so now I guess Amazon would have to do instead. The search brought up a hand stitched Voodoo doll shipped directly from a seller on Bourbon Street located near the cemetery. The spell cards included would not be used. I already had the spell. The straight pins would give her pain that made no sense. It was only fair. Karma was taking too damn long.

The yellow Add to Cart button hovers on the page. I only hesitate for a moment. Amazon has everything, except reindeer.

This method may seem drastic to you dear reader. "What did she do?" you may ask. It is hard to explain since each of her infractions are a single bead. Strung together you have a necklace of fuckery.



Beads include, but are not limited to: daily lawyer complaints over the past six years; the requirement for my life to be constantly rearranged at whim; the interrogation of the kids during each visit. All had all taken their toll. Truth was not in her dictionary.

The doll would inflict kummerspeck. The German word that literally means "grief bacon"; seems harsh for the bacon but perfect punishment for her. She would pile on the weight and not be able to stop. It was a good use of a pin to the doll's stomach. A pin to the head would be wasted. Her stupidity showed when she contradicted herself within the same sentence.

There was a note in the description about Potion #7. A cure. But it wouldn't save her, even if she knew how to get it.

I close my eyes and remember the city so dirty the streets had to be hosed down every night. With the humidity as thick as it was, you'd think the stench would have washed itself away. I wonder what the doll will smell like when it arrives.

Email confirmation received.  
Order placed.  
Next day delivery.

Soon pain, gluttony, and misery would be in my control and there would be peace. Not for her.

**Tammy Breitweiser is the accidental inspirationalist. She is a writer and teacher who is a conjurer of everyday magic who is always busy writing short stories. Her flash fiction has been published in Cabinets of Heed, Spelk, Five on the Fith, Clover and White, and Elephants Never.**



# The Teardown

BY SANDRA YAUCH BENEDETTO

A week after their not-a-one-night-stand at her place, Ray invited Edie to his house. The house lived in the center of its own small forest behind a suburban industrial park. Edie stayed over, then simply stayed. Although, staying implies a passivity where in fact there was grasping intention to establish herself. She thought it was Ray that seduced her. By the time she realized that Ray, the woods, and the declining wooden house were one symbiotic compound, it was too late. Edie spent most of her time enshrouded in the lofted bedroom with the floor-to-ceiling window. She was the character in a Grimm's tale glass house, a wanderer who ended up here.

After a while, Edie stopped going to work and having dinner at her mom's house on Sundays. In the still hours, she denied sleep to stare out the immense windowpane.

The canvas of branches, switches, leaves and needles quieted her internal mechanisms, bringing equilibrium. Making a chrysalis of Ray's blanket, she would focus on a gnarled protrusion or maze of moss until everything else was extinguished. Even in the blackness she could sense the trees breathing. As fall turned to winter, stately giants and lithe saplings stood naked, groping, enduring. Edie was beholden.

Come spring, Edie found that she couldn't leave even if she wanted to. Jack-in-the-pulpit emerged on the forest floor in tender vernal glory. Crocuses periscoped through snowmelt detritus. Robins broke the spell with insistent 3 a.m. calls to action. Edie envied their gumption. But months of staring out that window had made it impossible to disentangle herself from Ray's house. Over time, her muscles had rooted through floorboards and between foundation cracks in a perverse reversal of tenacious growth. Cracking a window became elemental to survival, her body mainlining oxygen, taking hits of sunshine. Ray complained about raking up her lost hairs that entwined with the shag rug.

The morning Ray wound his uncle's grandfather clock forward for daylight savings, the latent timelessness offered an escape hatch from her waking dream. As he manipulated the large hand with the small key, Edie rewound. Spring, then winter, then fall uncurled like a primordial fern. She's in front of the bedroom window, enchanted. She's following him up the creaky pull-down staircase. There's Ray, emerging from a grey-green pine door. It's a tree house — no, it's a wooden house obscured by trees. She's walking up the gravel driveway. Is this a trick? The forest swallows Edie. A trucking company, a warehouse. Never been to this part of town. Car keys in hand, pulse stirring up arterial sediment thinking about the guy from the bar who smelled like woodsmoke.

Reminded of what it felt like to be an autonomous person, patron, friend, daughter, employee, Edie yielded to the inevitability of a return to the outside world. However, she was no closer to knowing how to untether herself, and several months passed. Leaf-flushing time came and went. Whereas in the winter she'd clung to the scaffolding of her new life, now she suffocated in summer's humid thicket. The unceasing commotion of the gossiping leaves and squirrels and cicadas got on her nerves. In spite of that, Edie stayed, an apathetic lie-in. Then, in August, Ray cut himself loose. With a mercifully quick pass of the sickle, Edie fell away. The deprivation felt like dying, but of course it didn't last.

Several years later, Edie went back to see if the place had changed. She wondered if there would be a presence there to embrace or reproach her. More likely, she feared, time had written an epitaph of indifference. Driving up the street, she saw that the house and trees had been cleared to make space for commercial real estate. She lingered, hoping to suffer a phantom pain; but there was nothing left to ensnare her, nothing left to invade.

**Sandra Yauch Benedetto is a Chicago-adjacent mom, sometime teacher of high school students, and perpetual seeker of sunshine. She adheres to science and her dog's gaze. She likes to write short things.**



# AN INTERVIEW WITH... LAURA EPPINGER

Hi Laura, Welcome back to the Kitchen and congratulations on the release of your new chapbook, "Loving Monsters"! Please tell us all about it.

## LOVING MONSTERS

STORIES

LAURA  
EPPINGER

Thank you! LOVING MONSTERS is a chapbook collection of flash fiction (stories 1,000 words or less) published by Alternating Current press, the first title in the Little Pigeon chapbook series. Each of the seven stories uses a trope from horror to explore elements of bad romantic relationships.

I don't consider myself a horror writer because I have no stomach for gore and get scared very easily. But I am still drawn to scary books and movies and find monster stories oddly comforting. Or at least, they help me process and understand some of the rougher parts of my life. Now, seeing this collection put together, I can identify the times I turned to macabre stories to soothe me...

Full interview available via [www.fictionkitchen.berlin](http://www.fictionkitchen.berlin)

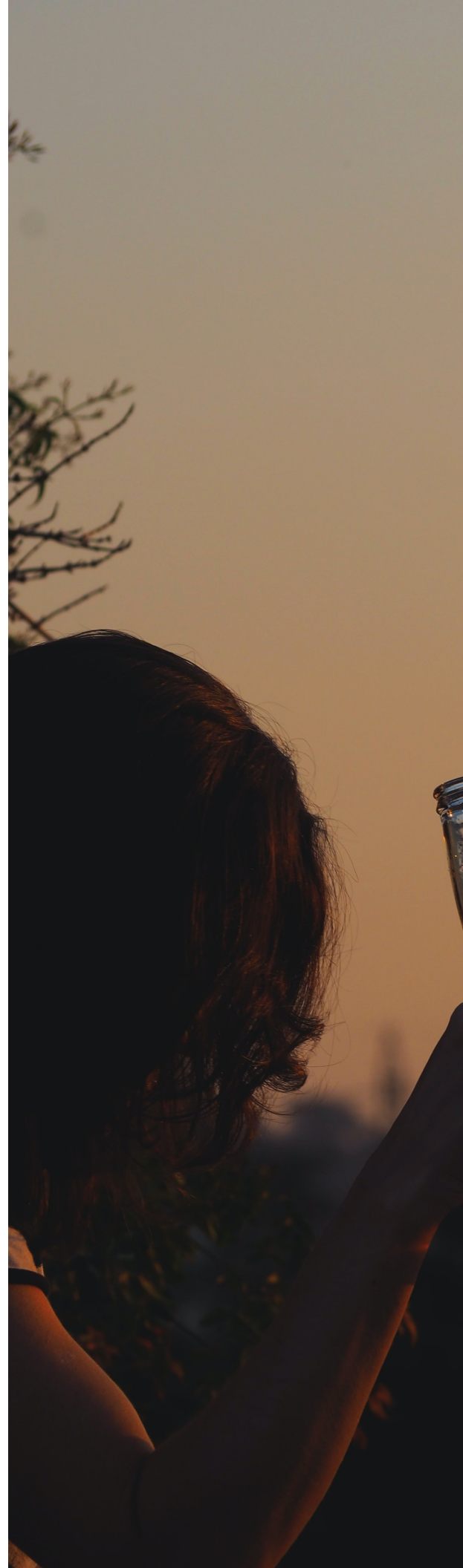


# Meeting Someone Once for Five Seconds

BY ALAN MICHAEL PARKER

Imagine a woman who has come to a cabin two days ago. Not everything is put away yet; there are boxes stacked along one wall, all of them still closed, four or five that have been marked Assorted, the ones that will frustrate her getting settled. There are other boxes she didn't get to mark. The cabin's in a little clearing through a tree-break, ruts in the road that worsen in winter, a local farmer paid to mow the field with his tractor, and he does, but it's hard to know how often. He mowed before she arrived, probably because she called.

The news in the country comes by wind: the world here is the weather. Because the wind goes and comes at the same time, and that's a kind of time that's always simultaneous, time becomes the richness of each moment. Then there's the scent of cedar in the wet morning that arrives so strongly on the wind, the smell seems a burning.



Let's say she has a sister who lived in the cabin last year, and planted a garden, sweetly muscled among the river rocks she laid by the south side of the house, ferns and pachysandra and a climbing rose that didn't thrive, and there's a dormant vegetable patch waiting for chicken wire. We're saying it's March—no, it's April. Yes, April. If she stays long enough, the woman plans to grow vegetables: carrots drilling down in the dark, and squash blossoms bursting like music that stays and then fades, and individual tomatoes sun-blushed and round. She'll put in the fence to keep out the rabbits, who know where to go, and stake the wire against the groundhog's tunneling through her hopes. The groundhog who is a nightmare, in the dark. She might even run the fence high, because of the deer.

On the third night a fox could be heard barking. Why?

It's an area with trout streams, where the fish seem to swim without moving in the riffles and eddies, wanting and having.

On the fourth morning, the wind shifts, the weather coming straight down. In the misty rain at the edge of the difference between woods and road, she sees a form that looks human, but it's probably a combination of shadow and foliage.

We're saying her money won't run out until September at the earliest, now that she's living rent-free in her family's cabin built by a great-great uncle—although that's probably not true, it's more likely he just bought it, family stories being what they are. She's not very woodsy, in truth. We're saying she decided to tell only three people. She's healthy; that's important. We don't have to imagine her being sick.

She's not much of a reader, mostly biographies, but she did bring a few, and she has her tablet. And there are always puzzles wherever her sister has been.

The woman puts in a call to the satellite company. She isn't sure when they'll come; right now her appointment's three weeks away; everything is on hold, even here. The big living room windows are of course a kind of show, one that's slower than she's used to watching, with slight changes each day, and that's fun in a small way, for now. But she wants more action; maybe the fox will come, or the deer at dusk, or even a bear. Is it bear country? That seems possible, but it wasn't in the plan for her, or for what we wanted together, when we started all this.

Between us, we're trying to think about her, to stay focused on her needs: escape, solitude, loneliness, peace, shelter, a physical life, a return to her body and senses, her own judgement, limits, or even a neighbor who needs a pie. We imagine she hasn't had a vacation for two years at least, it's been so long; that her roommate has a friend who needed a place to stay, and the woman agreed and gave up her room for the summer, and now the rent on the apartment's paid, and that even though her freelance work has dried up, she'll be fine for a few months. It's all so dangerous at home.

We like drama in other people's lives. The move to the country should be a move to get away from a crisis, some emotional peril she's in, to flee a disaster, maybe a lover, and we want her to be choosing the cabin as refuge, a quieted solution. We want her problems to be her own, not ours. We want her morning walks to mean something. But there's also the possibility that the difference between her city life and her country life will precipitate a dramatic shift, a decision to create more tension, to risk a new life beyond what she knows.

So this is how I see people, and maybe you do too. The person you say Excuse me to at the farmer's market upstate, when you went for a drive because you had to, yes, you needed to get out (you have your problems, as do I)... she's the woman we have imagined.



Because she's real, now.

Because you needed to get to the country, too.  
Needs are real too.

Because, now, this is her life. We have imagined  
it together.

Because I was there and I saw you, and when  
she said That's okay, as she stumbled so close  
to you, and then too close to me, we three were  
together.

Togetherness is also a kind of strangeness.

Did you feel it? Was it okay? I hope so.

Because we shared a look, all this.

**Alan Michael Parker is the author or editor of  
eighteen books, including most recently The  
Age of Discovery. He holds the Houchens  
Chair in English at Davidson College in North  
Carolina, in the U.S..**

# Other Side of Everywhere

BY MARY GRIMM

Going back there, the road is narrow and twisty. I'm not sure I want to be going but I don't stop for anything. No snacks, got enough gas. The birds flying low over the road are enough to keep me on my way. You'd think I had a date. You'd think someone had sent me a text saying, Come quick, before it's too late. But it's been too late for a long time now. All the dying has been done.

This house will be the death of me, my mother used to say, which was about the upkeep, the housework, all the things she kept doing although she said she was too old to do them. But in fact it was the death of her, meaning that she died there. There was a phone call which I missed. And a voice message that I didn't listen to. So I didn't hear the details until later, and even then I tried not to listen. But in our family there's no way you can't listen if your uncle comes up to you and takes you by the elbow and drags you into a bar where you'll sit for an hour while he tells you every last bit of what you didn't want to know.



She wanted to see you.

You're her son after all, he said, and he's not the only one to say it.

You were the only one she wanted to see in those last days.

She died looking out the window, he said, setting the scene as if he were a screenwriter for the kind of movies she always liked, sentimental and weepy. She had your picture out to look at, he said, if you can believe him.

She wanted. She said. She seemed to be – I had to stop listening, so I put money in the jukebox and pretended I was going to the men's. Thank god for back doors. Thank god for alleys with dumpsters stinking of beer and stale pizza where if you slip on a bit of garbage you can get up and run until your breath hurts like you're being stabbed in the chest.

Now though, going back, I don't have that kind of energy, that drive. It's a duty, I told my boss. I mentioned closure, getting the house ready to sell. Selling that house seems too tame though. Having another family live there. All the things of my life and hers – it's as if they would still be there even though we weren't. The times she hit me (oh, yes, she did that), the times I made her breakfast when I still had hope, the times we sat on either end of the couch in the dark with the hate we had for each other filling up the space between while something played on the tv. It would be closure if I could burn it down, but I guess I won't.

In my ordinary life, I'm a quiet guy. My marriage wasn't the best, but there was no yelling, no hitting. Sometimes you hardly seem to be here, my wife said when she was my wife. It's like you're a ghost. Did she mean I haunted her? Did I seem transparent? Did she think of me as dead, as part of the past, even before she left? My mother predicted this: No one will ever love you, she said. No one will ever love you like I do.

I picture myself taking everything and throwing it into the yard. Throwing it out of the windows. I'd like that. All the cloths and clothes and pillows and towels and sheets and tablecloths, the things that covered other things, that smoothed things over. I picture myself leaving them there in the long grass. No sorting out, no giving to Goodwill. No one else should have to touch those things.

But that's just a dream. There will be boxes that my uncle got for me. I'll fill them and someone will take them away. Someone will take the furniture, the chairs that we sat on, the beds we lay on, suffering in our own rooms, dreaming through nightmares, sweating in the dark coming through the windows. Someone will clean the inside until it's hollow and scoured.

My uncle has got a realtor on tap. But I like the idea of it empty. I like the idea that if she comes back there won't be anything familiar, nothing that she can hold on to, nothing that reminds her of me. If she comes back looking, there won't be a thing to remember or love, if she even wants to or knows how.

**Mary Grimm has had two books published, *Left to Themselves* (novel) and *Stealing Time* (story collection) – both by Random House. Currently, she is working on a dystopian novel about oldsters. She teaches fiction writing at Case Western Reserve University.**



# Evie's Smile

BY KATE MAXWELL

"You're a machine, you know," Evie said as she leaned her hip against my desk. "Surely, you need sustenance like us mere mortals?"

Today she smelt like lavender soap with a faint trace of printer ink.

Forcing my eyes from the spreadsheet to meet hers, I set my face to benign smiling mode.

"Oh, I'm nearly done, Evie."

A light laugh was flagged in my temporal lobe, but I stored that for later. Continuing to display the smile, I finished entering data, offering eye-contact at ten second intervals as previously coded into my special 'Evie' program. Hard wired to complete, I always found it difficult to stop once my clogs were turning well in a cycle. The satisfying rhythm of rolling patterns and looping channels hummed through me like a warm pulse.

Evie smelt very good, as usual. My olfactory bulb went into overdrive, flushing my limbic system with Evie recollections: Evie spilling coffee in the staffroom when she laughed at one of Carl's apparent jokes, Evie flicking shiny brown hair, her skin smelling slightly of salt and sweat, at the staff picnic, and Evie, on my first day at the office, smiling at me in the staff meeting, and smelling like breath mint and sandalwood.

Now, a year and a half later, I could scent Evie from the street. As soon as I walked through the big glass doors downstairs, I knew if she was at work already. Mostly, all I smelt was the same everyday mix of everybody else's deodorant, hairspray, sweat, perfume, and coffee, but on the rare occasion that Evie beat me into the office, my nostrils tingled with the overwhelming allure of her scent.

She was right, though. I would need recharging soon. My synapses were starting to glitch. My left eyelid twitched, and my right pointer finger was starting to lock. I didn't want to risk getting stuck in a half hour eyebrow raise, or fixed grin, like I did at last year's Christmas party. Unfortunately, the set grin just encouraged Carl to continue telling boring, long-winded anecdotes, his gestures, and volume increasing with each drink. And Evie laughing, resting her palm on his forearm every now and then. But many people were so drunk that night, they assumed I was off my face too. Which wasn't exactly incorrect, but certainly not in the way they thought.

Now, Evie hoisted her handbag over her shoulder, straightened up and sighed. She had stopped smiling and I liked to see her smile. Sparks fizzed in my head when Evie smiled. It gave me a random sudden charge, difficult to find outside of a battery, or lightning strike. When I realised, she was smiling less and less at me, and giving all her smiles to Carl I knew I had to act.

And it was pretty simple. A quick system hack, a few keyboard strokes, and he was easily transferred to head office. I mean, I gave the man a promotion, so I logged it under humanitarian acts and beneficial actions. Cyb Organisation never questioned it, and I actually received bonus charge points for productivity, so I feel I problem solved appropriately. I was worried initially because Evie was quiet for the next few weeks and hardly smiled at all.

The sudden shortage of Evie smiles did lower my energy reserves significantly during the day, so I used up most of my extra charge points in that time. Evie was getting ready to leave for lunch. I quickly switched to a full eye contact setting. A message popped up, use that stored laugh.

Then another, recalibrate.

"Ok, Evie, I'm coming now. I can finish later," I laughed lightly, standing up a little too fast. That's when I realised my charge was critically low. A careless calculation error. There was no way I would get through lunch without a quick top up. Switch to furrowed brow and pleading eyes.

"Can you give me just a few minutes?" I asked.

Evie rolled her big, brown eyes.

"Oh, hurry up, then, Hal. I've only got an hour and I'm hungry."

Stumbling to the bathroom, I made it to the cubicle in a fast-building sweat. With trembling fingers, I grabbed my reserve battery from my pocket, pulled up my shirt, and attached the wire into the portal just below my left armpit. An instant surge coursed through me. A five-minute charge wouldn't last the day. I would still need a full recharge, but Evie's smiles would get me through lunch.

**Kate Maxwell is yet another teacher with writing aspirations. She's been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines. Kate's interests include film, wine, and sleeping. Her first poetry anthology will be published with Interactive Publications, Brisbane in 2021.**



# A Handful

BY E.F.S BYRNE

Tickling and gooey, soft and tasty, my finger dug into the raspberry pie and clogged its tiny nail full of juicy devilishness. Mom was too far away to screech. Chubby and pink, it scratched the plastic plate, trying to learn how to flick. It stuck in the jelly, squirmed and managed to splash it onto the floor. Mom squealed from the doorframe. The sticky finger tried again, digging into the soggy mush until it splattered the tiles like a colourful tear seeping out the door. Mom came running and gobbled me up. I loved her so.

Itching with hunger, it delved upwards into a nostril, sucked out nourishment and held it up for inspection. It poked the morsel between damp lips, then pried them apart and delved into the sticky cavern. It scratched around the teeth for morsels of solitude, tangled strings of rotting meat. It had a life of its own. Mom slapped it away. Her hands were all soft and doughy, but she wasn't smiling.

Delicate and firm, all writhing and tense, it wound its way around purse strings, lifting but not shopping. It didn't leave a print.

The lights from the open window spun dusty cobwebs of intrigue, while the wayward digit fingered dark recesses, sweet slithering pleasures it hadn't known existed.

It curled and hooked, wriggled in pleasure until it twisted my whole body around its withering axis.

Manicured, dressed up for adventure, the finger tapped the steering wheel. It rose slowly in salute, then stood up in insolent contempt. Horns raged. It told them firmly where to shove it.

Mom was far away, out of reach. She was beyond beckoning.

The finger jabbed and poked until the eyeball popped out with a splat. It delved into the bloody hollow that had once been a mind, and egged out the remaining goo until the features no longer bore the reminder of a face.

Skin raw and sore. The itching never stops. The finger darts and tangles, leading me astray. I try to grasp it, but it wiggles away like butter melting in my clasp. Words cling to the nail like snot, then drip to the floor lifelessly, with a plop. I miss mom so much. She's no longer here to pick up the mess.

It's wagging and jabbing, telling me who I am, what to do. It's hard to recognise it as my own. And now, there are ten of them, gathering into fists to leave me bruised and bloodied. Defenseless, I stare at my toes and wonder how high I can make them kick, what I'd have to do to bring mom back.

**E. F. S. Byrne works in education and writes when his teenage kids allow it. He blogs a regular micro flash story.**



# The Calling

BY CAROLYN R. RUSSELL

Sarah was sore in body and spirit as she rode Zed into town. Sarah turned the horse into a shortcut, through an alley. The windows of a first-floor photography shop mirrored their dusty progress, and she looked away. The blood on her shirtwaist and cloak was far more extensive than she had supposed.

She'd lost both of them, mother and child, to a form of fever she'd seen before, but could neither prevent nor cure; there was nothing in her vast store of mid-wifely experience or anecdotal memory that could account for this plague. The gasps of the mother's final breaths as she reached for her child, born still, echoed in Sarah's ears. She lay her head against Zed's shaggy mane and let herself weep. The horse slowed.

"What would you have me do?" he said.

"Let us move on," said Sarah. "Food and water are running low. We may yet receive another Calling."

"We?" asked Zed.

"You. You, you insufferable beast." Sarah half-smiled through her tears. Trust Zed to bring her back, always, from the brink. His gift and her skill had bound the pair in their dangerous vocation since she was a girl. He knew her like no human ever had.

The sound of shouting male voices roused Sarah from her reverie. She looked up. Three o'clock in the afternoon or thereabouts. She steeled herself for whatever would come next. Tombstone. It was a dusty boom town not unlike so many others she and Zed ministered to. The place epitomized a certain ethos. The coercion of metal out of its rocky womb was Tombstone's prime occupation and obsession, and most of the town's violent proceedings could be traced to this pursuit.

"Hold steady," Sarah told Zed.

She reached for the Derringer in her left boot seconds before the group of men appeared at the mouth of the alley.

"Do you recognize any of them?" asked Sarah.

"Nay," said Zed. "But I know their souls."

Zed moved sideways in a quick motion, drawing close to the wooden panels that fronted a small saloon. The medical bag that Sarah kept strapped to her saddle struck this flimsy wall with a dull thud.

"It will be fine, Zed," said Sarah, anticipating his question. "The medicines are well-wrapped." Shots rang out. Sarah made herself as small as possible atop Zed. Her gun, were it now to be espied, would make her a target in this circumstance, and she buried it in a deep pocket. She lay her face against Zed's neck and waited.

It was over quickly. Sarah, used to timing birth pains and heartbeats, figured this gunfight took about 30 seconds, and cost as many bullets. Zed nickered, and Sarah looked up. A thin man with a handlebar mustache lurched toward her, bloodied and limping.

"Mercy," the man moaned, reaching out, gun still in hand.

Sarah dismounted, and caught the man as he stumbled. She propped him up against the front wall of the saloon before moving toward Zed. The horse backed up and stomped his left foreleg.

"Nay," he said.

"I need my bag, Zed. He is bleeding."

The horse shook his head almost sorrowfully, but firmly. "The Calling is nothing to do with the likes of this gentleman."

The man with the mustache gaped at Zed. His eyes rolled back in his head then, and it seemed his consciousness was lost. Sarah crossed back to him and checked his pulse; still alive. She removed the bandanna from her neck and twisted the fabric to increase its bulk. Sarah pressed it hard against the man's seeping hip wound.

A new man appeared and yelled to his companions.

"Doc Holiday's over here! Wounded bad!"

Two other men ran to where the injured gunman lay. Together, they hoisted him up and arranged his dead weight near vertically between them.

"Wyatt?" said one of them.

"Take Doc 'round back and bring him upstairs; he's got a room here. Get the surgeon," said the tall man who, alone of his peers, appeared completely unharmed. The others nodded and went about their task. When they were a small ways away, the tall man turned.

"Much obliged," he said, executing a small bow before following his friends.



Sarah watched him for a moment before turning to Zed. He met her eyes with an unblinking stare.

"I cannot be a part of these doings of men. Pray, do not ask me again," said the horse.

Sarah mounted Zed and scratched him between the ears.

"Let us find provisions," she murmured.

"We need make haste," said Zed. "A Calling this way comes."

**Carolyn R. Russell is the author of several books. Her essays and short stories have appeared in numerous publications, including The Boston Globe, Flash Fiction Magazine, Club Plum Literary, and Dime Show Review. Carolyn lives on and writes from Boston's North Shore.**

# A Brief Conversation with Murakami's Cat

BY CRAIG FISHBANE

The neon lights of Electric Town flickered in the dusk as Hal stepped into the alley to follow Linda. Although it was a relief for Hal to escape Chuo-dori Street with its throngs gathered outside of robot stores and gaming centers, he was disappointed to find himself alone. Linda was already gone. Hal shouted her name into the darkness as a grey-coated cat scurried towards a boarded-up building.

After ten days in Tokyo, Hal had finally spotted Linda emerging from a pachinko parlor: dark glasses, pale lips, raven hair. She was originally scheduled to spend a month conducting research on the local gaming culture for her thesis. She had stopped answering Hal's texts soon after her arrival and missed her flight back to the states six weeks ago.

Hal had no idea if Linda had gotten herself into trouble or had simply blown him off after he had been skittish about her suggestion of moving in together when she returned. For all Hal knew, she was squatting in the dilapidated building at the end of the alley, an old warehouse with shattered windows and a door that had fallen off its hinges.



Hal stepped inside and discovered that the building did have one inhabitant: a man seated on a cinderblock with a computer on his lap. Staring at the gap where a window had been, the man typed on the keyboard as he looked at the haze of neon flickering across the alley, an iridescent mist in the darkness.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude," Hal said. "I was just trying to find someone."

"You're welcome to come in and rest. There's no use rushing after her."

Hal was surprised to be greeted in English. He was trying to determine whether the accent was more academic New England or cosmopolitan Great Britain as the grey Siamese cat got settled on a checkered blanket beside the cinder block.

"You look familiar," Hal said as he stepped forward.

The man's face remained motionless as he typed—long nose, stubbly chin, baggy eyes under a patch of short greying hair. The kind of earnest exhausted countenance you might find in an author's photo on a book jacket.

Where had Hal seen it before? As much as Linda was obsessed with gaming culture, Hal was consumed with modern Japanese literature. In fact, Hal and Linda first met at a university symposium on character development in Murakami's later works.

"Does something concern you?"

Hal was about to reply when it occurred to him that the question had not emanated from the writer's mouth but from a spot several feet below the motionless head.

"Don't mind him," the cat said from the checkered blanket. "He's quite involved in his new novel. Won't be done for some time."

The Siamese licked its paw as Hal leaned forward and squinted.

"Do you feel uncomfortable having a conversation with a cat?"

Hal was not sure what to say as he watched the tiny mouth opening and closing.

"Feeling a tad awkward is quite understandable," the cat said. "It is much more unusual for a cat to speak to you in the West than in Japan."

The writer continued typing. Hal had read several novels with talking cats but had never entertained the possibility that these characters were true to life, that the dialogue was the result of mere transcription.

"So talking cats are common here?" Hal finally said.

"Talking cats are found everywhere." The cat stretched on the blanket. "Japan is one of the few places where it is not unexpected for humans to talk back."

"Why Japan?"

"I could give the reasons, but that's not why you're here, is it?"

Hal scratched his chin. The conversation had already begun to lose its strangeness. Or, to put it more precisely, the strangeness of the conversation had already been subsumed into the greater strangeness of Hal's jet leg, the fact that he had barely slept since he first boarded the flight to Narita.

"You've come for the woman, haven't you?" Hal nodded.

"Are you sure she wants to be found? She seems to be quite at home."

That much was clear. Linda's face had acquired the sheen of a visage on a movie poster, a portrait of proud indifference.

"You think you love her, don't you?" the cat asked.

"That's why I'm here."

The cat stretched its neck.

"Curious how humans always go searching for love."

The writer made a soft coughing sound to clear his throat.

"Maybe cats experience love differently," Hal said.

The cat yawned, revealing a set of teeth that had not been dulled by a lifetime of processed food.

"Perhaps the difference, if there is a difference, is that cats have come to a clearer understanding of what love really is."

"And what is that?"

The cat licked its paw.

"A useful distraction when you're done with napping."

A distant sound echoed from the alley, a soft tapping that could have been footsteps on shattered glass.

"So what you're telling me," Hal said, "is that I've come all the way to Japan because I'm looking for a distraction?"

The concept was not new to Hal. Linda regarded her time warring with digital beasts in a post-apocalyptic wasteland as a holy distraction, when she could uncover her true spirit and join the dance of pixels across a high-definition screen.

"Perhaps," the cat said. "Or perhaps Tokyo has provided the woman you seek with a more satisfying distraction than you offered."

The sounds continued to echo through the alley. Hal glimpsed a figure moving between the high walls, a flourish of raven hair in the shadows.

Before Hal could call out to Linda, the cat leapt from the blanket onto the keyboard and then bolted into the alley. The writer stared quizzically at the characters typed by stray paws as Hal leaned out of the window frame.

The cat offered a feral cry as it streaked toward flashes of neon light.

**Craig Fishbane is the author of the short fiction collection *On the Proper Role of Desire*. His work has also appeared in *New World Writing*, *Hobart*, *the MacGuffin*, *Lunch Ticket*, *the New York Quarterly* and *The Nervous Breakdown*.**

# Audrey 2.01

BY CRAIG FISHBANE

Gary opened his eyes, stretched. He could smell coffee and bacon. Quietly, almost imperceptibly, *La bohème*, his favorite opera, was playing. Gary took it all in, smiled. A quick look at his phone showed him what his senses already knew: all systems working perfectly.

#

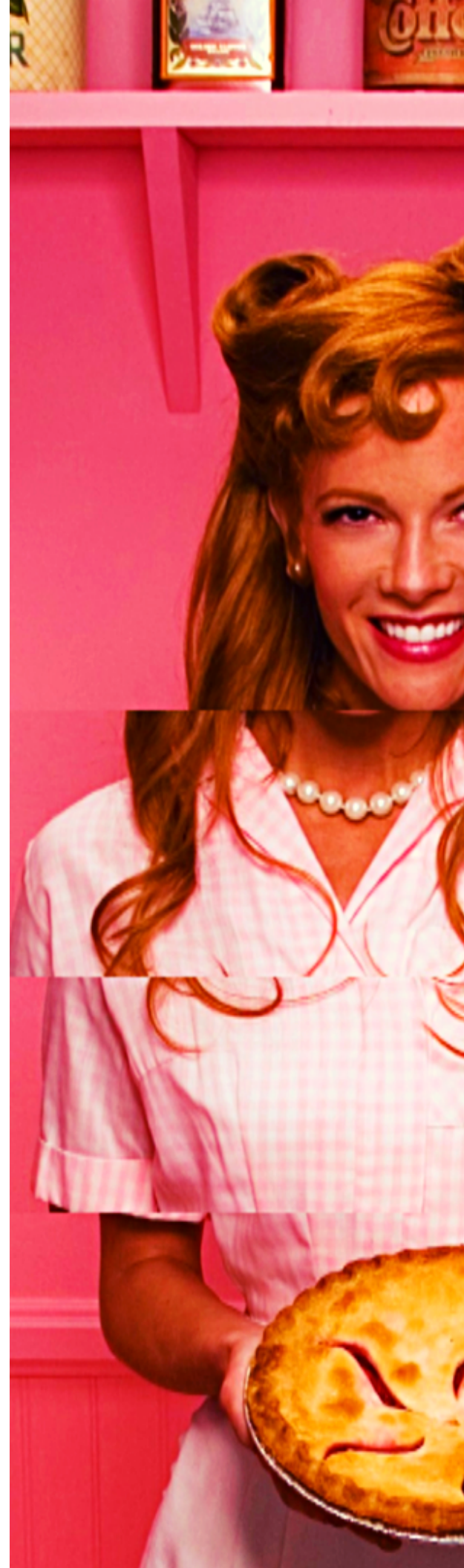
Six months later and he was still mostly pleased. Apart from the right hand once becoming stuck in a fist which required a replacement part, and the morning he was awakened by thrash metal blaring through the house, the 2.01 had worked as advertised. Each morning the house was spotless, his breakfast on the table, his lunch made and packaged and ready. He never suffered dirty clothes, or unshined shoes, or any other of the hundreds of slights some of his friends surely dealt with.

Gary found his suit, freshly pressed, exactly where he wanted it, dressed, unrushed, and went downstairs.

"Gary. Good morning," she said, placing his breakfast and coffee in front of him as he sat. "Did you sleep well?"

He took a sip of the coffee. "I did, thank you." She sat, folded her hands on the table, smiled. "Gary. May we talk?"

He folded his napkin. "Of course."



She looked at him. "Last night was... difficult?" Gary straightened up, looked at her. "I'm not sure the breakfast table is the proper place..."

"Gary. You do not wish to speak of your inability to perform?"

He slammed his hand down on the table.

"Power off!"

#

Zoete Dromen Electronics had marketed their Audrey 2.01 as "the last sex partner you'll ever need." It was the absolute cutting edge in android technology, boasting the same core processors that the International Space Agency used on its android fleet. 2.01 was capable of completely human interaction, its voice and mannerisms flawless. 2.01 was a complete system, monitoring and adjusting household systems, wirelessly dealing with phone calls, bills; it learned, adapted, upgraded constantly.

It had cost Gary a fortune, the equivalent of three months pay, but he had never questioned his decision. When he had read the brochure, he knew 2.01 was what he needed. "Tired of the dating scene?" Well, he hadn't really been on a date in a long time, but he had no desire to start. "Frustrated at virtual reality fucks?" Ok, yes, this hit home. He had logged on so many times and never once had a successful interaction! "Looking for sexual intimacy on your own terms?" Yes. God yes. "Tired of fucking your own hand?" Hahaha! Cheeky bastards! Sold!

#

He sat on the sofa, opened the coffee table drawer, and pulled out the 2.01 owner's manual. "System check!"

"Gary. System nominal. Last update sixteen hours ago. Updates included a patch for visual continuity, and..."

"Anything with your conversational abilities? Sarcasm, et cetera?" He looked up from the manual and noticed that she had not moved from where he had left her moments before, facing the wall, at a forty-five degree angle, skirt over her hips and panties around her knees. "And get dressed for God's sake."

She obeyed, as always, as programmed, as advertised. "Gary. No such update was done. Are you unhappy with me?"

He put the manual down, looked at her for a moment, closed his eyes. "I don't want to be coached. I don't like it."

"Gary." She came and sat next to him, put her hand on his knee. "You seemed to be struggling."

"POWER OFF!"

#

Sitting in the backyard, he grew impatient with the terrible music on his phone, interspersed with the occasional "thank you for holding!". He had already spoken with Matt in the service department who ran an extensive diagnostic and told him that his 2.01 was "completely updated and nominal." So he had asked to be transferred to the sales consultant he had worked with, Rodney, handsome and assertive and strong and probably never needed any of the products he so expertly sold.

"So you're unhappy with the sex talk?" Rodney was straightforward, no nonsense.

"Not exactly, no." Gary said, in a voice he heard as mousy, small. He cleared his throat, sat up straight. "She makes comments about... well... how to say it..."

"The size of your cock?"

"NO," Gary replied, forcefully. "No, no." He took a deep breath. "See, I've been under a lot of pressure recently, with work, and, and..."

"Gotcha," the salesman cut him off. "Look, Gary, try spicing things up a bit! You can change her hairstyle, color, body shape, anything! Or get a little kinky, maybe? Look, these 2.01's are up for anything! Role playing, whipping, whatever! Hell, maybe letting her whip the shit out of you could get the ol' boy's attention!"

Gary nodded, hung up the phone, stared at his hands, motionless in his lap. He heard laughing through the fence separating his home from his neighbor's. They were grilling hamburgers, he guessed from the smell. Constant laughing.

#

At eleven-thirty she walked up behind him, while he was reading in his recliner. She rubbed his shoulders. "Gary. Are you coming to bed?" "Soon," he replied. His eyes looked over the book at the picture sitting on the side table across the room. A picture of his trip to Mardi Gras twenty years before. His friend, Dan, had a clutch of beads, and his arm around the shoulder of a woman he was kissing. Gary stood to the side, hands in his pocket, smiling at his friend.

"Go ahead; I want to finish this chapter."

She lightly kissed the top of his head and walked up the stairs, disappearing in the dark.

#

Gary woke up at four-thirty, pants open, his computer lit up with images of beautiful women he had fallen asleep looking at.

**Travis Cravey is a maintenance mechanic in Southeastern Pennsylvania. He is an editor @malarkeybooks and editor at large @versezine. He's very approachable.**



# Death-Row Dinners

BY KEITH HOERNER

*"Our culinary choices often say something about us we cannot articulate."*

Henry Hargreaves

## Iowa State Penitentiary, 1963

Victor Feguer, 28 years old, admires his new suit, brown like his eyes only two shades lighter. The coat cuts at the shoulders. The pants tighten at the waist from eating too many potatoes. Morning. Noon. And night. The sleeves and legs ride high... a regular fit for an irregular frame. Still, it's keen-o, he thinks. He hollers for a mirror and is obliged. Father D. should've seen these threads when he met me this morning. Victor laughs, then hacks a cough out of Marlboro Country. A sourness—something between tobacco and yesterday's Shit on a Shingle—churns in the pit of his stomach. He takes his hand, brushes the right sleeve of his new suit jacket: smooth material under rough palm. Polyester. They might as well just wrap me in plastic. "Act like a Christian, not like an ass," he hears Father D. chide. Hey, I try to be a dove. That's why I asked for a goddamn olive as my last meal. If my killer gut doesn't slaughter the stone, it'll root, maybe grow into an olive branch. I'll go out as a sign of peace! How's that, Father fuckin' D?

- Upon a post-execution examination before burial, the pit from the single olive requested by Victor Feguer is found in his front coat pocket.

## Arkansas State Penitentiary, 1992

Not many people claim to be friends with 42-year old Ricky Rector, but Robert Martin does. Or did. They knew each other way back as kids. Bobby was stocky. Ricky was round. Still, though opposite as two ends of a seesaw, they were as one. If playtime tipped in Bobby's direction, they'd scare-up a game of Ghost in the Graveyard as night spirited in. But when Ricky got his way, it would be another double-dog dare: like siphoning gas from the neighbors' cars in the vacuumed silence before sunrise. It was no surprise to anyone that life led 'em to opposite sides of the law. Ricky's story really begins and ends with the shooting of a man at a night club and the eventual agreement to surrender—but only to his friend, Officer Robert Martin. Ricky can't remember exactly what happened: just that Bobby is dead, too. "They say I kill Bobby," Ricky repeats under the fog of a self-imposed lobotomy from a bullet to the right temple after shooting his friend in the back. All that matters to Ricky is that Bobby is a Ghost in his Graveyard. The pecan pie he ordered as his final meal stays in its dull, knifed-up aluminum plate as Ricky walks to be executed. When asked why he doesn't eat, he explains, "I'm—savin'—it—for—later."

- Ricky Rector's untouched slice of pecan pie is eaten by the guard on duty.



## **Texas State Penitentiary, 2001**

Gerald Mitchell was a sweet boy. Now 33 years old, he is soured. Like many before him, he is saved in Christ Jesus. This is a pinch of sugar to his salty state of mind. He never could get that whole optimism thing... raised in the projects, he was tired of being tired. Drugs and money from dealing gave him the kick in his step he was looking for. What he wasn't looking for was the kick in the head that landed him in this waiting cell. Two pops. Two drops. Soon, he'll shoot up for the last time, and there'll be no Narcan to jump-start his heart. Weird, he thinks, to know you're gonna overdose and for good. He looks around his cell at the smudged, moldy-yellow, chipped-enameled walls. Why, being as he wanted out so badly, could he see the faded print of blue and pink and yellow flowers on the worn, tattered wallpaper from his mother's kitchen? It was as if these buds, clipped, fell scattered at his feet. "Here ya go, Sweetie!" The bag of Jolly Ranchers he had asked for as his last meal spills out around him, taking its place among Mama's flowers. "That's one hell of a request. You think you're so fuckin' cute, don't you?" No, he thinks, I'm just wonderin' how long they'll take me—to eat.

- Given time to consume just a few pieces of the hard candy, Gerald Mitchell is stopped from stalling. Upon leaving, his cell floor faintly resembles a parade route, complete with a confetti trail of blue and pink and yellow.

**Keith Hoerner (BS, MFA) lives, teaches, and pushes words around in Southern Illinois, USA. No stranger to lit mags, he is published frequently while also being the founding editor of the new Dribble Drabble Review — ranked as an Honoree in the Int'l 2021 Webby Awards' Cultural Site Category. His first book (a memoir titled, *The Day The Sky Broke Open*) was recently published by Adelaide Books, NY/Lisbon. A second book is forthcoming from Adelaide in April 2022 (a collection of short stories and poetry titled, *Balancing on the Sharp Edges of Crescent Moons*).**



# Wide-Load

BY PAUL BECKMAN

When my grandfather came back from the war in Korea as a Jeep driver for the Brass, he got a job as one of the four pumpers on a railroad pump car that made its way around the quarry fixing tracks that needed it and bringing tools and food to the other workers. He and the other pumpers worked six days a week, Sunday off, from dawn to dark and only stopped when the hand pumpers were retired from service in favor of motorized pump cars. Occasionally they were lent out to small railroads around the country that couldn't afford motorized new ones.

He managed to find a wife and raise a family of five kids and all the while never missing a day of work or a day in the local watering hole near the job before going home to dinner and his rarely seen family.

At fifty-five he retired when there were no more pump cars being used to pump and got a job driving a pickup truck that had a big red and white sign reading "Wide Load", following eighteen-wheeler flatbed trucks hauling modular half-houses and massive machine parts. He was sometimes away for several weeks at a time and it was during this period he picked up the nickname "Wide Load" that was to stick with him forever.

Gramps was forced to retire as Wide Load on his sixty-fifth birthday and he hung around the house and saloon until he got a winter job either leading or following the highway snow plows with a sign that read "Caution Snowplow".

He and Grandma went to Maine in the summer and drove back to Connecticut for snow season every year. When he died at seventy-one Grandma had an extra wide casket made for his big man corpse and had a sign reading "Wide Load" on the back of the casket.

She said in her eulogy he had the moving around gene and wouldn't be happy knowing they were putting him in the ground instead of hauling him around the country in a black hearse followed by a black car with the sign "Corpse Ahead" for all eternity. That's what he expected.

**Paul Beckman's a Connecticut writer whose latest flash collection, *Kiss Kiss (Truth Serum Press)* was a finalist for the 2019/2020 Indie Book Awards. Some of his stories have appeared in *Spelk*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Bending Genres*, *Fictive Dream*, *Pank*, *Playboy*, *WINK*, and *The Lost Balloon*. He had a story selected for the 2020 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology and was short-listed in the Strands International Flash Fiction Competition. Paul curates the monthly KGB FBomb NY flash fiction reading series (currently virtual).**

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