

ISSUE 1 | VOLUME 1

SPRING/SUMMER 2020

FICTION KITCHEN BERLIN



FEATURING: LIZ WRIDE, CARRIE ETTER, KATELYN THOMAS, MARK ANTHONY SMITH, IVAN JENSON, RICHARD BOWER, HENRY BLADON, MARY GRIMM, DEANNA SALSER, YASH SEYEDBAGHERI, D.I. JOLLY, AARON BAILEY, HANNAH STORM, CATH BARTON, MANDIRA PATTNAIK, JWGOLL, SARA DOBBIE, SORAMIMI HANAREJIMA, PATIENCE MACKARNESS, HENRY BLADON, ALYSSA JORDAN, WILSON KOEWING, PAUL BECKMAN, NIAMH WOOD, ALICE ROSE, MARIAH FERIA.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It my sincerest pleasure to release this first edition of the Fiction Kitchen Berlin Literary Journal! This spring/summer edition collects all stories published on the site from January to June – twenty-six pieces in total. These amazing stories, and their authors, represent the best that the flash fiction genre has to offer today.

As happy as I am to showcase these many voices, the launch of Fiction Kitchen Berlin, and indeed this new journal, was never a certainty. What started as a Meetup group in Berlin two years ago, has blossomed in ways I could never have imagined. Indeed, it has (if you excuse the pun!) opened a whole new chapter in my life, with each step along the way a thrilling new experience. What started off as a random “What if?” over a couple of pints, is now an amazing reality.

But all of this would not have been possible without the support and encouragement I have received from contributing authors, and the wider writing community at large. It is their voices that have made all of this possible, and for that I say a huge heartfelt thank you!

I hope you enjoy all the stories contained in this first issue, and that you will be back for Issue two due to come out in December 2020.

Until then, happy reading!
Shane.



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Editor: Shane O'Halloran
contact@fictionkitchen.berlin

Facebook: fictionkitchenberlin
Twitter: @FictionBerlin
Instagram: @FictionBerlin

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SHOPPING FOR THE SOMETIMES SUBMERGED

— LIZ WRIDE

You resurface. Your hair feels like a trawler net. Caught within it are shells, splinters of shipwrecks and shards of glass from broken messages in a bottle. At least this is the way it feels to you, when you finally dinglehopper your fingers through it. The store lights seem too bright. They still seem to refract and stretch, as if you are viewing them from just beneath the surface, neck tilted upwards. Your limbs feel heavy; your ears full of water. Your clothes feel like they are clinging to perma-wet skin. You feel barefoot; every footstep seems to pool and puddle. You wonder if you smell of the sea; or the rot of raw humanity. You think ‘you have to eat’ but the shelves are full of dead things for live people and all you wish they sold was air, as you feel the world, like a whale-bone corset, lacing up your back.

You notice strange figures as you move through the aisles: wet-suited, flipper-footed; goggles filled with tiny fish cover their eyes. They carry oxygen on their backs and not one is gasping for air. As they pass you, they raise their hand, their index finger pressed against their thumb: OK?



Liz Wride is a writer from Wales. Her work has appeared in Milk Candy Review, Okay Donkey Magazine, Cabinet of Heed and others. In 2015, her short fiction ‘Potato’ was shortlisted for the ELLE UK Talent Awards.

WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER?

— CARRIE ETTER

The secret club was really Lynn's idea. We would all have secret names that we used only when we were alone together, we would practice our superpowers, and we would write spells—both love spells and curses—and try them out on boys we knew. We all lived in the North Fields subdivision, and three of us were 12 and had known each other forever: me, Suzanne, and Lisa. The new girl, Lynn, turned 13 three weeks ago, one week before she moved here from Los Angeles.

We sat on the floor amid candles—there must have been a dozen of them. “Have you each chosen your secret name?” Lynn asked, grinning. Suzanne and I nodded, and Lisa, the redhead and youngest of us, shrugged.

“I will be...Cassandra,” Lynn told us.

“I will be Angelina,” I said. I'd always thought Angelina a beautiful name.

“I will be...” Suzanne said. “I can't decide. Melissa or Francesca.”

“Oh, Francesca,” Cassandra-Lynn answered. “Much grander.” I nodded in agreement, and we all looked to Lisa for her answer.

“I'll just keep Lisa.”

“No, no!” Cassandra-Lynn said. “Lisa is ordinary. This club is for our special selves.”

“Lisa isn't ordinary,” Lisa snapped back.

“Oh please. I've met so many Lisas. It's totally ordinary.”

Lisa looked like she would cry. Her lips trembled, her eyes shone. I put a hand on her shoulder. “How about Lisette?” I asked. “It's like a fancy version of Lisa.”

Lisa sniffed and nodded. “Lisette.”

Cassandra-Lynn clapped her hands, and the candle flames around the room seemed to jump. “Cassandra, Angelina, Francesca, and Lisette! Beautiful!” She looked so happy I gave a little clap, too, and she smiled at me.

“Next, our superpowers.”

Lisa-Lisette giggled. “We don't have superpowers.”

“Really?”

Cassandra said, head cocked to one side. “I do.”

“That's ridiculous,” Lisa said. “What can you do?”

Cassandra leaned forward, toward Lisa, so their faces were only a foot apart. “I can tell the future.”

“The future?”

“You,” she said, leaning in. “You will lose an eye in a car crash and have a glass eye the rest of your life.” She pulled back and looked at Suzanne, but she and Lisa were already scrambling to their feet and grabbing their things. Cassandra didn't speak, just watched them go. Suzanne gestured, pleading for me to join them, but I just shrugged like this was all no big deal.

If Cassandra could tell the future, she could tell me my superpower.

*Originally from Normal, Illinois, Carrie Etter has lived in England since 2001 and taught creative writing at Bath Spa University since 2004. She has published four collections of poetry, most recently *The Weather in Normal* (UK: Seren; US: Station Hill, 2018), and a chapbook of flash fictions, *Hometown* (V. Press, 2016).*

THE BARBER SEES TOO MUCH

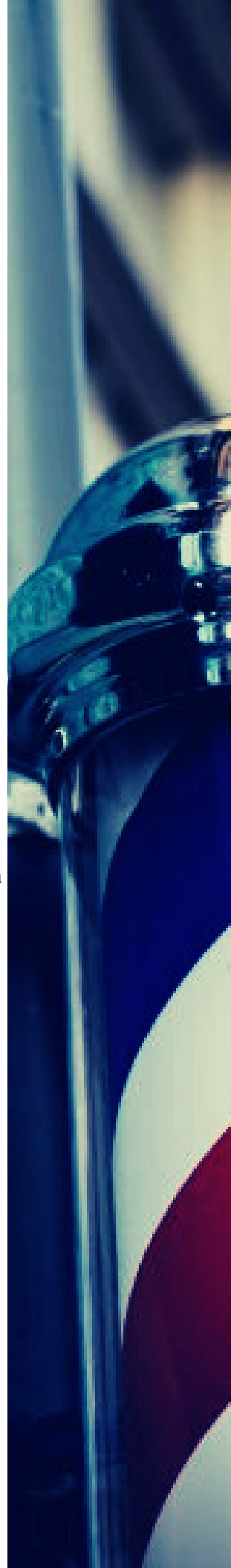
KATELYN THOMAS

HE went to school to be a barber, but he discovered that he only liked razors and the way they shaved clean lines with no wriggle room. His second customer was distraught both in and out of the mirror, but he stood firm, explaining that the lines were a map of her heart.

HE went to school to be a barber, but he stood for too long behind a dummy with a revolving head of hair. The silence was too long and he did not have the skill of talking about nothing at all for hours on end. Instead, he stared into the mirror, saw nothing of the dummy's soul, but some of his own. After that, he would not allow any of his classmates to practice on his hair. Instead, his head was shaved by his own razor held steady in his own hands as he reflected and deflected in mirror after mirror. In the end, he left the deepest secrets covered by a two inch curly thatch that ran from widow's peak to nape.

HE went to school to be a barber, but he found that there was too much of taking away and too little of adding to. He began saving bits of hair, created a suit of shorn secrets that armored him against the faces that gazed from mirror after mirror. As the suit grew, so did the chair's emptiness, until the only face in the mirror was his own.

Katelyn Thomas is a writer, poet and photographer who works in the children's department of her local library. She spends her free time hiking, reading and watching her rambunctious hens cavorting in the sunlight. She has most recently been published in Noble/Glass Quarterly, The Rush and Califragile.



ROUNDAABOUTS

— MARK ANTHONY SMITH

She doesn't know if she should leave him. He has become too distant. Martin never looks at her when she tries to talk with him. He always has somewhere else he'd rather be. And now she has lost him at The Fair. Anne edges through the crowd past the food stands. The smell of fried onions and candyfloss make her stomach turn. She hates crowds. She can't stand still and think. Everything is too bright. The lights on the rides, the noises, the screams and the laughter. She has to find him. Anne pushes through near the waltzers as they speed round and round.

Where could he be? She feels nauseous as she searches by the rollercoaster. It rattles up the track as it nears the summit before the winding drop. He isn't near the Ghost Train either with the gaudy paintings of werewolves and serial killers and the animatronic skeleton climbing up a rope with its red flashing eyes. The tall rides that loop the loop or spin upside down are always too much. Anne finds a space and throws up.

Martin was the perfect lover. He used to give her compliments and flowers. He used to listen and give her his full attention. Even her Mother liked him. But then work took over and he became more distant and aloof. He isn't as funny as he used to be. She rarely smiles now. He's changed. That much is true. And Anne feels quite alone, even now, through the crowds.

She looks again past the food stands. Anne's breathing is shallow. She is growing impatient. The candyfloss and fried onions mingle like something sour and sweet. The lights affect her ability to see in the dark as she listens to the banter and notices a Fortune Teller. The Romany lady in black beckons at the door of her caravan. Anne does not make eye contact. She doesn't want a contract or an obligation because she finds it hard to say no. The clacking of rides, screams, and laughter feel like an onslaught on her senses. She wants to go home. She wants Martin to stand still and acknowledge her. She needs to find him. Would she leave him?

The rollercoaster is climbing again. It must have done a lap or two. It went on and rattled without her being there to observe it. All this would be gone soon. The rides would move on somewhere else and the rubbish would be swept away. It would just be a car park again by the end of the week. She acknowledges the feeling of loss. She needs to focus. He isn't near the Ghost Train with the serial killers in masks or the skeleton with red eyes that flash. It's the same as before. Her repeated search is becoming as fruitless as the first. But she can't stop. Not now. Even though she wants to stand still and think. Her mind is spinning.

She jumps as someone taps her shoulder. She spins off kilter. There is the familiar face who looks as perturbed as ever. He says, 'We really can't go on like this.' And for a moment, Anne stands still.

Mark Anthony Smith was born in Hull. His writings have appeared in Fiction Kitchen Berlin, Spelk, The Horror Tree and many others. Several of his books, including 'Hearts of the matter', are available on Amazon. His Horrors also appear in Anthologies by Red Cape, Eerie River, and Nocturnal Sirens. Facebook: Mark Anthony Smith – Author | Twitter: MarkAnthonySm16

SOS

— IVAN JENSON

Jake's life was saved when he a was seventeen-year-old skinny boy dressed all in black, walking out of Grand Central Station with his own song blasting on his Walkman. At the time, he lived and breathed rock and roll. It would all have come to a halt if that Manhattan businessman had not grabbed Jake by the elbow and pulled him back to the sidewalk just before the taxi cab zoomed by. Jake didn't even take off his headphones to thank the suited man with the briefcase. Jake could barely hear the Samaritan say, "Kid, you gotta watch where you are going, or you're going to get yourself killed.

"Another brush with death took place at a street carnival set up in the parking lot of a mall in Mount Vernon. It was a sweltering August night, and Jake had been waiting in line for close to half an hour to ride the 'hammerhead.' The ride consisted of sitting enclosed in a metal capsule held by a metal arm that circled in the air. There was some confusion as to who was next in line, and the ticket taker fatefully decided to let two teen girls go next. The girls giggled as they climbed into the capsule shaped like a rocket. Minutes later, the rocket broke loose and plummeted into the cement. One of the girls died, and the other was seriously injured.

Death also knocked when eighteen-year-old Jake sat in the passenger seat with his father driving on the West Side Highway. The car was suddenly, crazily veering into other lanes. Jake noticed his father had fallen asleep at the wheel. He shook his father awake. "Son of a bitch!" his father said, regaining control.

On September 10, 2001 Jake jogged to the World Trade Center and back to his place in the East Village. He planned to run again on the morning of 9/11 but his girlfriend unexpectedly popped by to take him out for bagels and coffee. He later dubbed her his "Urban Guardian Angel".

He is thinking back to all this as his old rickety Ford Taurus stalls just as the light turns green on the Beltline in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The car won't start again. He gets out in the middle of the road and calls 911. The Beltline is eerily deserted this wintry day. A white jeep pulls, up and two burly men get out.

"What happened?" the bigger one asks.

"Car won't start."

"Well, you don't want it parked here. This is a dangerous place to be. First of all, you need to turn on your hazards."

"I don't know what that means?" Jake says. As a former New Yorker, he had only learned to drive at the age of forty-two. He knows nada about cars. The smaller guy gets in Jake's car and switches on the blinkers. He puts the car in neutral. The three of them push the car to the side of the road.

When the cop arrives on the scene, he says, "Hell of a place to have your car die."

"Yeah, I know."

"You are damn lucky. Cars come speeding down here at sixty miles an hour. Nobody follows the speed limit. Where were you going?"

"To catch a movie with friends."

"From the looks of it, you're going to have to get a new engine or a new car."

"Yeah."

"If you want to warm up while you wait to get towed, you can sit in the back of my car." The back of the squad car looks like a cage that is strictly used to contain criminals.

"That's OK," Jake says.

"Suit yourself." The tow truck arrives, and the car is hoisted up and chained to the back. Jack climbs in, and the driver cranks up a rock-and-roll radio station and drives like a speed freak. The roads are icy, and Jake is petrified, yet Jake doesn't have the guts to ask the guy to slow down.

"You look a little stressed there," the bearded lumberjack-looking driver yells over the music of ZZ Top.

"I'll have you know this truck can handle any terrain."

The driver, who looks to be in his late sixties, is balding, blue-eyed and has tanned weathered skin, and it reminds Jake of his older brother Tom who still lives in LA. He recalls the very last time the two went sailing.

They were coming back from Catalina, and Jake, who was thirteen, was holding onto the mast and making up songs and singing out to the Pacific ocean. It was the age when Jake first started dreaming about becoming a rock star. And then mid song, the mast cracked in half and fell splashing into the ocean. The two brothers were stranded at sea. The SOS horn was not working. Tom had always been the total sportsman. He skied, surfed, built model boats, and often risked life and limb hang-gliding at Kagel Mountain in the Angeles National forest. Now, they would both be lost at sea. And yet, Jake was not scared as he stared at his brother's receding hairline and hippie mustache. They had both just smoked a raspy joint of weed and were very high. All around them, there was only open sea. Tom tried his outbound motor and realized it was out of gas. They both had the munchies, but the only sustenance left on deck was the Snickers bar in Jake's pocket. They split it in half, so they each could have some. The chocolate melted in Jake's mouth as the sun beat down on his forehead. Jake was sure that he would either starve to death or drown that day. He wished they were at a San Fernando Valley drive-in watching a Kung Fu movie triple feature. Jake could see in Tom's terrified ocean-blue eyes that they were in big trouble.

"I think we are both going to die out here," Tom said. And then they both doubled over in stoned laughter.

Ivan Jenson is a fine artist, novelist and a popular contemporary poet. His artwork was featured in Art in America, Art News, and Interview, and has sold at auction at Christie's. Ivan was commissioned by Absolut Vodka to make a painting titled Absolut Jenson for the brand's national ad campaign. Ivan's poetry is widely published with over 600 poems published in the US, the UK and throughout Europe online and in print. Jenson has numerous novels and a collection of poems published. Ivan's fictional memoir, Gypsies of New Rochelle, has been released by Michelkin Publishing. www.ivanjenson.com.

REPLACING THE VACUUM

— RICHARD BOWER

We did not choose our son to replace the vacuum. He discovered plenty of dirt on his own, and when the Hoover broke, he took to it. First, he rolled around collecting glitter and string. Lint flattened out under his roller-pin frame. Cat fur strung around his neck, and to regain mobility we scissored free his head from the threads.

Our house leaked many pollutants, the gooey grease kind. They leaked out of the beds after sunrise and vomited around the toilet. They separated into sticky marble-sized pests and collided like billiard balls seeking pockets. Net pockets just below the table surface. Felt ripped by beer-sloshing cues. Our son hummed in chalky puffs turned clouds spinning dust devils. Inevitably, school expelled him for poor hygiene, or so he informed us.

We didn't mind. The house looked better and better, and there's no point in a vacuum being learned. Neighbors and friends recruited him. He felt obliged, but their dirt didn't stick. So he returned home and mowed our fibers threadbare. When mother faded to a kitchen ghost, we married a sweeper. She stood taller than us and carried her broom from room to room and house to market. Without children herself, she trained the dustpans to trail after her. They clanged, gonged, and demanded equality. "Almost brother, sorta daddy, be fair. Give us wood floors. We want to slide, not scuff our bottoms."



Stepmother warned, "You love us all, don't you?" and her eyelashes flashed knives.

To appease the little dustpans and avoid impalement, we ripped out the carpet and sent our son downstairs.

He may yet be in the basement vacuuming the rug remnant left there. Making lines in the rectangle, obsessively and faithfully, we wouldn't know. It's grown quiet in the house except for the broom sweeping.

Richard Bower lives in Central New York with wife, daughter, and black cats. He teaches writing for Cayuga's School of Media and the Arts (SOMA). Follow his work at <https://tinyurl.com/RichardBower>

H2OH NO

— HENRY BLADON

It seemed like it had rained forever. The rain wouldn't stop and the day was filling up. Like me, people were on their way to work and struggled along as they waded through the flooded pavements. The roads were okay, so I don't know why we didn't use them instead. A house I know at the corner of the street was full of activity. At one end of the garden the husband was mowing the grass; at the other end his wife was mopping the lawn with a mop and bucket. I walked on and there was a man at the bus-stop who tried in vain to turn the pages of his soggy magazine but only managed to get print on his hands. A girl passed me going the other direction. She smiled and said hello and I noticed her arm tattoo had started to run. Purple ink was dripping off her fingers. A man in a yellow canoe drifted past me and waved. I said, you need wiper blades on your visor. He didn't answer and paddled away.

During the dry summer just gone we almost totally ran out of water. People were forced to drink from the water feeders in the rabbit hutch and even out of their toilet bowl. What a difference now. I can see second floor apartments full to overflowing with water, like somebody has left the bath taps running. There is a tide mark on the window pane. I'm not yet halfway to work but I know my boss will appreciate the effort when I get there. I listened to the radio this morning while I was eating my toast and the weather people didn't mention rain. And there are no clouds in the sky so I don't know where this water is coming from. Perhaps someone cried too much or somewhere in the middle of the ocean a big ship hit an underwater ramp and when it came back down it caused an almighty splash.

I'm still wondering about this when I finally get into work. I see my boss who is already waiting and tapping his watch theatrically. He demands to know why I am late and I say, haven't you seen the rain outside? He points to the window and says it looks fine now. He is right because when I leave with my desk stuff after he fires me all the water has drained away and the yellow canoe is stranded on the floor in the car park next to a grey Volkswagen Golf that looks like they haven't bothered to paint it. Or perhaps the rains have washed all the colour off. And now the sun's coming out.



Henry Bladon is based in Somerset in the UK. He is a writer of short fiction and poetry with a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Birmingham. He is the author of the novel *Threeways*, and several poetry collections. His work can be seen in *Poetica Review*, *Pure Slush*, *Truth Serum Press*, *Lunate*, and *O:JA&L*, among other places.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT DEATH

— MARY GRIMM

Chapter 1: Mother and the Chocolate Cake

Our cake is velvet-crumbed, slivers cut one by one, each melting on the tongue, dark communion wafer. Mother raises her head, lips painted with chocolate: her mouth knows a secret taste. Shall we have milk? For milk and chocolate want to mingle, to marry. Sky-roofed, our pantry is by the stream, our feet careful on the rocks. The milk jug hangs by a string, shimmering in the water, our floor is leaves, laid one on the other until they sink into the earth. Our cupboards nest in low branches, open to wrens and robins: we do not find it strange. I have eaten all the frosting but no one is worried.

Chapter 2: Drying the Dishtowels

If the cake is gone, there is always something else, a cookie like a wheel, apple pie, edges crimped and golden, nut roll iced with a milk-white glaze. Mother is not worried. She lights a candle, spindly as a twig, sets it in a cup where it burns for her birthday, one flicker of flame for each year. Time is burning here in the yellow kitchen, burning on the table in the sun. Fold the dish towels, she says. Gathered in the basket, they are flowered, curlicued, calendared, named for hotels, each one a history of stains once wiped up and removed, edges burnt by the gas flame. They fly from my hands, edges aligned, wrinkles laid flat with the touch of her fingers. The yellow sun floods in and the window melts before it, the candle in its cup still burning, burning.

Chapter 3: Aftermath

We don't believe in the exploding sky: the burrow, the hole, the tunnel below, the darkness of basements, pipes damp with decades-old sweat, windows furred with dust. There we remember the sky, blue as a field of daisies in the shade of a cloud. We cover our heads with tablecloths against the fall of the ceiling, Mother's tied like a babushka, like her own mother when she went to market, her silvering hair covered, her face framed ready to be seen. She watches the ceiling crumble, dressed in clothes that drape and flutter, her arms curved, her back bent. I offer water, an orange, a bit of bread from which I have brushed the dust. I'm fine, she says, fine, her fingers pressing mine, each word from her lips a warning.

Chapter 4: The Jeweled Fish

Moving over the gray green river, dark on either side, we sit, heat-pressed, heat of the sun, of cooking. Mother takes my hand, our hands curve on the white cloth. The fish are honored guests: will you eat this one, scaled with silver, this with pearls, its sides encrusted like a jewel box? They twist on the platter, yearning toward the myth of water, the gray green of heaven. Mouths open, teeth aligned to bite, their eyes flatten with penance: what sin has brought them here? We have come to eat what is alive. My knees are buckling, the joints as weak as river water. For as long as she can Mother holds me up.



**SKY-
ROOFED,
OUR
PANTRY IS
BY THE
STREAM,
OUR FEET
CAREFUL ON
THE ROCKS**

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.

NO FUTURE WITHOUT HER — A CHILD PRODIGY

— DEANNA SALSER

The scene Hope found herself in was nothing like the one she had left moments ago after stepping into the rainbow her new displacement machine had created. Shards of glass lay glittering all over the ground, mixed with pieces of a world which no longer existed. Buildings lay crumbled and burned, and the chunk of sidewalk she was standing on was all that remained of her neighborhood.

She'd been working on her science fair project, which included complex quantum manipulations to the electromagnetic fields of objects, causing them to spontaneously move from one place to another. It had been working perfectly. In recalculating for herself, however, she might have made a few tiny mistakes. She was only supposed to move to the front yard, not across time to some video game post-apocalyptic world. Her machine sat humming beside her, a bright and shining reminder of everything she had just left behind.

Movement in the street grabbed her attention. Eyes wild, Hope scrambled to the nearest shelter and crouched, watching as her father gestured to her mother, who ran to him from behind a scorched and shattered wall. The two embraced briefly and ran toward Hope, her father leading her mother by the hand. Now that they were closer, she could see they were thin and lined as if they had aged twenty years in the space of a heartbeat.

“Over here!” she shouted, waving to them. Her father whipped his head back and forth, shooing her back, when something metallic bounced off the wall beside her and hit the ground nearby. Confusion gave way to dread as her mind scrolled through the possibilities.

Instinctively turning to run, Hope was only able to take a few steps before the air around her erupted into flames. She fell and lay stunned on the broken concrete, every breath a struggle. The next thing she knew, she was being helped to her feet, supported on both sides by her parents, the burning street going by in a blur of sound and motion. A disconnected door leaned against a pile of rubble. Her father elbowed it open, disclosing a dark space beneath, and they maneuvered her inside. Head lolling, she clutched at her parent's clothing, trying to get their attention.

“My machine!” she panted. “We have to go back!” Her father smiled and revealed the gleaming device behind him.

“Did you think I would leave it behind?”

“How did you know?” she asked, certain he'd been too busy to notice. He shrugged.

“I know a few things.” He sat close and took her hand. “When you disappeared twenty years ago, we knew what you were working on,” he said hoarsely, tears building in his timeworn eyes. “We waited a long time for you to return. About a week after you, um, left, some men in suits came and took all your stuff.” At her gasp, he nodded, sniffing. “They copied it but something must have gone wrong. They opened a doorway and these things came through and took over the planet.” He shuddered. “It's been a nightmare.” Hope's hand tightened over her father's. “Help me up.” She said firmly. “We need to make a plan...”

Deanna Salser is enamored with reading, drawing, sculpting and carving, but writing has become her newest passion. She has been entering writing contests, hoping to gain some recognition for her voice, which she has just discovered, due to her first writing project being accepted for publication.

GHOSTS

— YASH SEYEDBAGHERI



I started hanging out with historical ghosts. I'd lost my job teaching history, my wife Betty ran off, called me Mr. Malaise. They commiserated over my lost job, love. They had lost positions. I had vodkas with Nicholas II, danced on tables with Rasputin. Nicholas and I got drunk, thought a Turkish restaurant was Constantinople. We tried to conquer it. Kaiser Wilhelm and I stole a yacht from the marina, reclaimed it for Germany. We proclaimed victory, even if the police disagreed. I got a new job, but think of those nights, our victories. The energy, the danger. I miss it.

Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. His work is forthcoming or has been published in journals such as *50 Word Stories*, *Silent Auctions*, *City. River. Tree.* and *Ariel Chart*.

DROWNING

— D.I. JOLLY

The horn sounded and the train doors opened, giving Jerome the opportunity to watch the people crash like a wave into the train. He enjoyed people watching, enjoying seeing who was on their way, and who was, perhaps, even running away. It was, in fact, one of his favourite hobbies. In this age of technology, flying was quicker and cheaper, but he preferred the slower method. He felt travelling too fast lacked dignity. Trains were just right, fast without being too fast, and you could get a bed, breakfast, and even a cocktail if you felt so inclined. Once everyone else was on board, he rose with his bag and walked to the conductor. His ticket was stamped and he was shown to his room. A nice single compartment with a bed, a small table, and a window.

"How civilised," he said to himself as he took out a bottle of beer from his bag, and his now famous notebook. "How very civilised."

To Jerome, a notebook was an extension of his mind, an outlet for excessive thoughts and feelings. When he felt like he couldn't contain them anymore they would spill out onto the pages. Then, once clear-headed, he would reread and either expand on, or discard, what was there. Most of the time he discarded it all but sometimes he found something worth pursuing.

It had been one of those ideas written in a frenzy that had gotten him onto the train. He was to visit his old university to give a lecture on the birth of modern AI in robotics. It had all come one night, years before, thoughts hitting him like a wave that quickly overwhelmed him and threatened to drag him down, until he spilled it out onto page after page of his notebook. Thoughts, equations, and diagrams flowed from his pen until he, at last, felt like his head was above water and he could breathe again.

And what he found when he went back through it, would not only change his life, but the world. He had cracked the egg of AI. The more he read the more he realised that what had started as a flood of ideas was actually the missing puzzle piece for true artificial intelligence.

There is, however, a common misconception about the process. Most people believed that he'd stumbled across a single idea, when, in truth, it was all the ideas at once. AI wasn't a single thought, a single plan, how could it be. True intelligence wasn't just one idea after all. So, he went to his lab and started programming his computer with the tools to decipher code, and all the latest virtual intelligence software he could find. Then he started feeding it conflicting information, ideas, theories, ideologies, dreams, hopes, and desires. He poured into it every page of every notebook he could find, and when he ran out of those, he contacted other scientists and fed in their notes and once that was done, he stepped back and looked up at his creation. From the flood of information, the wave of knowledge, he had found something hidden just beneath the surface, staring at him.

Then like Dr. Frankenstein he proclaimed. "It's... it's alive."
And it looked back at him and replied. "I, am alive."

D.I. Jolly moved to Berlin four years ago to pursue his love for living in a city, and continue his childhood dream of being a writer. With three published novels and one short story anthology under his belt, he continues to fight the stigma that all writers drink whisky.

PUMPKIN

— AARON BAILEY

The husk of the pumpkin sat atop the wooden table. Its tendril-like innards hung over the edge with several clumps having fallen to the floor. Hunched over the bulbous fruit was a slip of a man. With a carving knife in hand, he cut deep lines like a butcher dressing a carcass. The lines and shapes begun to resemble the features of a person, a crooked grin bereft of teeth and uneven eyes separated by a narrow slit for a nose. After some time, he set the knife aside and stood back to admire his work. In the dimness of the small hut, the face appeared real. The deep shadows looked like furrows on the pumpkins face.

With the reverence of a religious ritual, the carver lifted the head from the table and carried it outside. He walked across a large fallow field towards a small copse of willow on a steep embankment. There amidst the trees were several men and women each dressed in white robes tied at the waist with a length of rope. The carver approached with the head, and the gaggle began to chant in unison, their voices rising and falling in harmony as he walked up the ridge. Upon reaching the summit, they drew close to the carver like a bee to a summer bloom. Hands reached out to touch the man, to pull at his robe and to take the pumpkin from his grasp. He stopped walking, allowing the wandering hands to disrobe him. His hands clung to the pumpkin but soon this too was taken.

The carver stood naked. One of the many hands laid a wreath of ivy and mistletoe around his neck, another drew a pentagram on his chest with a soot covered finger. He was led to the centre of the clearing where he was lifted and placed solemnly upon a large Blue John altar. The stone glinted from the low autumn sun that kissed the horizon as night began its ascent. While he lay there, the men and women stood around him and held hands, their chanting becoming more intense as the ritual rose to its climax. The pumpkin was placed over the carvers' head and, as it settled around his neck, it looked like they were one and the same.

A woman, bearing a crown of nightshade, stood at the apex of the altar. She unsheathed a silver sickle and held it aloft before drawing it across the throat of the carver. His blood flowed onto the altar, and with it, the chanting ceased. She touched the blade to the pumpkin before whispering a few words in its ear. Standing back, the druidess watched while the carver's body began to sprout roots that wove across his body like a fleece. As the sun dipped beneath the horizon, he rose from the altar and the druids hailed their protector.

Aaron Bailey hails from the North-East England. He writes prose, poetry as well as composing visual/concrete poetry. Aaron gained a 1st class degree in creative writing from the University of Bedfordshire. When he isn't writing, Aaron produces jungle/drum and bass, runs role-playing games, or spends time with his awesome wife.

HE CUT
DEEP LINES
LIKE A
BUTCHER
DRESSING A
CARCASS



ONE FOR SORROW

HANNAH STORM

The first time I saw Mark raise his right hand, I winced. Salutes meant one thing in my experience and after being married to a military man for half my life, they made me want to run a mile. Given the circumstances, that was ironic.

On second thoughts, perhaps he was just waving at someone he knew, after all he seemed like a friendly sort. He had been the first person to greet me at the athletics track, and he was the one who suggested I tag along with his group for my first session with the running club. But when he saluted again a mile or so later, I had to wonder if he had an ulterior motive. And with nobody else in sight apart from the group of us running, I thought it best to broach the subject. I could hear Jon's voice – my ex-husband's constant 'for fuck's sake, Karen refrain,' in my head, as I imagined the headlines in tomorrow's papers: 'Divorcee gets duped by marathoning masked murderer.'

'That's two,' said Mark, pre-empting my question. 'Two for joy.'

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, but I wasn't going to jettison any little bit of lightness coming my way. Soon our feet fell into line and I figured it couldn't hurt opening up a little, any more than it hurt having run this far already.

'What do the salutes mean?' I asked.

'Magpies,' he said, quick as a flash. 'It's bad luck to ignore them. It's the only superstition I've got.'

I'd forgotten how much easier it was sometimes running with someone. The only time Jon and I had run together, he'd spent the whole time criticizing my running style, even though I was the one who'd run the marathons and not him. Slowly I regained my breath and before I'd really registered, my watch buzzed to mark five miles.

'Three for a girl, four for a boy,' said Mark.

From behind us came a grunt.

'What utter bollocks,' said a young guy, who had been trailing us.

'Never heard such nonsense,' he blurted and sprinted off to catch two other youngsters who had gone ahead.

'Don't worry about him; Testosterone Tony, we call him. He's not quite realized life is a marathon, not a sprint,' said Mark, his elbow grazing mine.

I knew I'd bitten off more than I could chew going with the faster group, but I had no intention of giving up and turning back now. I slowed my pace, then stopped to pretend to lace one of my shoes.

'So, what is it that brings you here?' Mark paused next to me, his breathing heavier than I expected.

I looked up, his legs long in Lycra, his top hugging his not too shabby figure. To our right, one, two more birds floated down to the water's edge.

'Five for silver, six for gold,' he said, apparently forgetting his question. He turned to me and smiled, and I felt the empty space on my left hand where my ring had been.

In the distance, the other runners had stopped by the metal fence to the sports center, stretching languorously. On the bank between the wire and the water's edge, the fading sun caught something, and it glimmered like a mirror. Mark didn't see the bird dive towards the diamond light.

'What is it for seven?' I asked. 'Just in case?'

'Seven for a secret never to be told,' and I thought I saw him wink, but it could just have been a trick of the light.



Hannah Storm has recently discovered flash fiction, CNF and poetry, after 20 years travelling the world as a journalist. Now she writes to pay tribute to the people she has met and the places she has been and to process her own experiences. She lives in the UK with her two children and husband and when she's not working, writing and spending time with her family, she runs long distances as a different type of therapy. Her Twitter handle is @hannahstorm6

LATENT HEAT

CATH BARTON

There's something dripping on the floor. I watch the drops as they begin to pool, red. I look at my left hand, at the soft fruit I'm holding, lift it to my mouth and suck at the sweetness. There's a woman walking towards me, walking fast and purposefully towards me, coming close to me, too close. I raise my eyebrows, open my hand. The fruit falls to the ground and the red of it is everywhere now.

'It was more juicy than I realised,' I say. 'I'm sorry.'

She smells of something meaty, this woman. She's wearing a uniform with words on it I don't understand. All around me are words I don't understand. Now she's speaking and I understand that she is angry.

'I'm sorry,' I say again. And start backing away before she can touch me.

Tomorrow I'll be on the bus, moving away from this place. I have my ticket. I think of showing it to the woman with the meaty smell, but she's shouting now, so I turn and start walking away from her. I look at my feet, walking away, moving silently across the silvered floor.

Now I'm in a different area of the shop. There are fridges. I know how a fridge works, how gas is compressed into a liquid, how when the pressure is released the liquid expands and becomes a gas again. That process cools the things inside the fridge. Latent heat. I learnt this. I lift the lid of one of the big fridges and lower my head into the cool blue mist.

'Hey!' There's a man standing next to me. His eyes are a strange colour and they flash when he moves his head. I wonder if he is a humanoid, or if he wants me to have sex with him. He says something I don't understand. He's flashing a light and pointing to the door.

'Is the shop closing?' I say.

His reply is fast and the words have hard edges. I put my hand onto the top of the food in the open fridge. It is beautifully cold.

'Hey!' There are more words, more of those sharp-sided Russian words. 'Niet, niet!' he says.

I can't remember if that means yes or no. His humanoid eyes are not telling me. I've already taken my hand out of the fridge and closed the lid. I'm not stupid. Now I turn and walk away, watching my feet. They are moving just fine, one, then the other, peeling off, pressing down. I watch his feet, out of the corner of my eye. They are not moving.

Outside it is warm. Too warm. Tomorrow I will be on the bus. Tomorrow I will get away from this place. I just have to keep moving, towards tomorrow. I realise it is that simple, and that if I can understand how a fridge works, which I do, then I can do this. It is, this latent knowledge, a big relief.

Cath Barton is an English writer who lives in Wales. Her prize-winning novella *The Plankton Collector* is published by New Welsh Rarebyte, her short stories have been published in *The Lonely Crowd*, *Strix* and a number of anthologies, and she is active in the online flash fiction community. <https://cathbarton.com/> // @CathBarton1

THE BALL BOBS BACK

— MANDIRA PATTNAIK

Asmoky dusk sets in. Ashen fog rises from the depths, copulates with the delicate orange light and births a rare red mist. Dribbling a soccer ball close to the ledge, the halfback bobs his ball towards the mist but never sees it return. The boy turns when his grandma calls him from the porch of the pretty stone-and-wood cottage, perched on the steep south side of the Ozark Mountains. The rare mist is an ethereal halo round it.

We've customers Bono, she says.

Bono trots in with enthusiasm, and on the oak kitchen-top, kneads some fresh flour for the flat breads. The menu is Latin-American—ceviche, chicken-wings and black beans. Aromas of the food waft down the winding valleys to pull in motorists from a 12-mile radius. Not one competing restaurant. An inconspicuous hand-painted sign nailed to a tree down the bend reads—'Martha's'. Nails have fallen off it; the sign hangs on a slant, the arrow skywards; but that doesn't deter families on vacation, old couples or new friends like Jamie and Kiki, to visit.

The family-of-five take their seats. Hickory flowers—small, yellow-green catkins—nestle snugly close to the roof, breaking off when they're cradled by the wind.

Father of this family had felt like a zombie driver on autopilot, zoning out when the sign 'Martha's' had appeared out of the fog. Delectable aromas had guided the way before the red mist had parted to reveal the cottage.

Grandma shuffles about; the boy is collected as he brings in a romaine-cabbage-red-onion ensalada.

A little while later, he brings in the flat breads, blackened shrimp and sautéed vegetables in ancho-tequila pan sauce.

The family over-tips grandma after a hearty meal. She waves them a zesty goodbye and wishes them a happy onward trip. With unsteady feet, she climbs the steps back and reclines on her cushy brown armchair.

Bono had a game that Friday, four springs ago. They'd set off for their holidays a little behind schedule. When their car had rolled off the ledge at the very same spot, their father must've dozed off behind the wheel. Beside him was Bono. At the back were his sister who was capturing the scenic topography on camera, Mom and Grandma.

After the pause, Grandma was the only one alive. Bono was the only one missing, not even his body in a sack.

When Grandma got discharged, her hip replaced with steel nuts and bolts, she'd looked for Bono in the thick woods underneath the ledge. The steep drop revealed nothing. Only a red mist that smelt like Bono hugged her. She built the cottage; let the red mist waft in. It was Bono. He had come to stay with her—moving at her apron tails, holding her hand when she felt wobbly. Together they pull back drowsy motorists from the downslide.

Bono picks up the dishes. The red mist lifts and the ball bobs back.

Mandira Pattnaik is Indian and considers herself lucky to have experienced its diversity. She's bloomed late and eternally grateful for the wide readership of her recent writings that Eclectica, Runcible Spoon, 101words, (Mac)ro(mic), Lunate, DoorIsAJar and FewerThan500 have published.

VISIBILITY

JWGOLL

In 1979 I vanished. I mean I was invisible, or nearly so. That's what I believed anyway. I wasn't shaken by the idea, but neither was I comfortable with it. I didn't think it would last forever, but I was cautious and didn't do the normal invisible things, like playing dirty pranks on my enemies, stealing money, or engaging in easy voyeurism. It's not that I'm above those things, but my girlfriend had just broken up with me and at first I was too depressed to take advantage of the opportunity. I thought it might just be part of my grieving process. Later I wasn't motivated to do much of anything, as though that had disappeared too.

I met only one other invisible (translucent more accurately) person during that time and he was stealing art from galleries and private collectors. "The art world is an oligarchy," he said. "It should be a commune." I asked him if he thought he was Robin Hood and he said no, he felt more like a Nazi looter. "Either way," I said, "I'm glad someone is doing it." He ended up setting himself on fire at Montrose Street Harbor and I don't really see how that fit in to his aesthetic politics, although I admire the discipline since it must have been tough to burn with all that water available.

At the memorial I saw his lover, a bad painter who was known for stirring up trouble. I don't know how he could detect me, but he bragged in my ear that it was he who suggested self-immolation as a piece of performance art. He hinted that he'd lit the match. "I loved him before," he smirked, "but now I'll love him forever. He was glorious." His admission and bragging disturbed me, so I slipped away. He didn't move his head to track me and kept on whispering. I realized he was just talking to himself.

Most nights I drank for free at the Gare St. Lazare on Armitage, but then it burned too and I feared it was the beginning of a pattern, which it was. Fire seemed to follow me and I wondered if it wasn't just part of the phenomenon. I even started a few, including the bad painters studio. It was a lonely time as you might imagine. I couldn't talk to anyone without causing problems, so maybe the fires were just my remedy for boredom.

When I reappeared several years later I discovered that I'd missed some things, like the end of the punk, the Unabomber, the Happy Meal, and the death of large swaths of the Midwest. It seems invisibility was a two way street. The fires also stopped, which I'm thankful for. When I tell the story, women tend to be suspicious, but not uninterested. I never tell any men. Like chickenpox or mumps, I never vanished again, but I find visibility equally confounding.

*HE DIDN'T MOVE HIS
HEAD TO TRACK ME
AND KEPT ON
WHISPERING. I
REALIZED HE WAS
JUST TALKING TO
HIMSELF.*

JWGoll is a writer and artist currently working as a Patient Advocate at a large hospital in Durham, North Carolina. Their stories are born of experiences as a photographer in Chicago, the Dakotas, and Central Europe.

DRIP, DRIP, DRIP

SARA DOBBIE



Nobody would believe me about the drain. About how I got sucked right in with the bathwater, swirling down, down, down the slimy pipe until I landed in shallow sludge. How my eyes adjusted to the dank chamber where rats writhed in the corners between chinks in crumbling stone. Then the voice that drip, drip, dripped from the damp woman's mouth, the long wet tendrils of white hair clinging to her bare throat and shoulders. She said I would be safe there, in the deep dark with her. She said she was my friend. "Are you dead?" I asked, and she said "That's irrelevant." I listened to the echoes of the watery cavern, the plink, plink, plink of droplets resounding within hollow copper.

"Someday," she told me "you'll want to return, because everything up there will become a terrible shame and an awful mess, and when that day comes you'll know how to find me." "But there are rats down here," I said, shrinking into myself. "They won't hurt you," she assured me, and strangely, I knew she spoke the truth. The humid air collected as beads on my skin. I trailed my fingers over the surface of the warm water, and wanted to sink into it, wanted to stay until my fingers and toes shriveled and became webbed, until I grew gills and scales, but the woman told me, "Not yet."

Nobody would believe me about the bad time that's coming. About how I soak each night in the tub while the clock in the hall tick, tick, ticks toward the inevitable. How I take comfort in the plaintive lament of the leaky faucet because it reminds me of the place I'm going to. How sometimes, after the water is drained and it's very quiet, the sounds of scurrying rodent claws scratch, scratch, scratch from inside the plumbing. Then the pointed, whiskered noses poke out from the drain to prowl across the porcelain, and I spy on them from behind the bathroom door until they squeeze themselves small and slither back to the sewer.

Sara Dobbie is a Canadian writer from Southern Ontario. Her work has appeared in *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *(Mac)ro(Mic)*, *Re-Side*, and is forthcoming in *Spelk Fiction* and *Change Seven Magazine*. Follow her on Twitter @sbdobbie.

ENGINEERING PSYCHOLOGY

— SORAMIMI HANAREJIMA

Finally, after weeks of toil, fitful with setbacks and hang-ups, she hits her stride and is on her way to prototyping technology capable of inducing subjective time dilation. To improve her chances of keeping up the hard-won progress, she decides it necessary to guard against a distraction she has yet to master, the one that could be the most disastrously disruptive: infatuation. So, she rigs up a transdermal hormone delivery system that will hit her endocrine and nervous systems with a custom combo of dopamine, adrenaline, serotonin, oxytocin and vasopressin to engender a romantic attraction to her best friend.

Whenever she is around him, she triggers this system to release a burst of hormones—multiple times if they're having an especially jaunty conversation or enjoying themselves in a jazz lounge or comedy club. She loves the fresh affection that twirls through her after each dose, every little twist of exhilarating fondness reassuring – visceral confirmation that should some unwanted crush start up, the one she has created will be strong enough to quash it.

She doesn't mind feeling this way towards him. He's the kind of person she should be attracted to, and in the past, she has successfully remained detached in the face of attractions to people she should be attracted to. This time appears to be no different. She can easily dismiss the occasional, adoring daydreams about him; those spontaneous, endearing little fantasies seem a modest price to pay for gaining control over time perception. And when she gets her prototype tech to reliably make minutes feel 10% longer, and an hour 3% longer, that price is more like a bargain.

For a good month and a half, this arrangement goes swimmingly—her work advancing steadily and satisfactorily with no undesirable desire arising, no problematic preoccupations, no complications. Until, in the middle of brunch one Saturday, he asks her to be his date to a childhood friend's wedding—just out of nowhere, with no segue or prelude whatsoever.

Stunned by this unprecedented turn in their leisurely mealtime conversation, she lowers her fork to her plate as her gaze lifts over the diner table between them to find his bright, expectant eyes.

“Um, sure,” she answers before she can stop herself, made amenable to his request by the psychological state she's engineered.

You mean, as friends? she wants to add, but her hormonally heightened sensitivity blockades the question with the concern that seeking this clarification may be inconsiderate.

“Great! Set aside the last weekend of May on your calendar,” he says. “We'll fly out on Friday. That way travel will be less stressful, and we can enjoy some of the area's delights. I'll take you to dinner the night before the wedding. There's an amazing farm-to-table restaurant I think you'll like.”

“Sounds nice,” she murmurs while parsing what he said for subtext.

A whole weekend away together? Is this an attempt to take our friendship in a romantic direction? she wonders. Have I been unwittingly behaving in some suggestive way around him while under the influence of these hormones? Could that influence be a liability during the wedding weekend?

The last question launches her into a mental calculation, her mind quickly setting up the multiplication of her typical dosage with clearance rates reported in the studies she read when setting up the hormone delivery system.

Carrying out the arithmetic in her head, she just barely hears him say, “I’ll make all the arrangements, so don’t worry about the logistics. And I’ll of course run the plans by you.”

A moment later, she has the result: if she stops administering the hormones within two weeks, they will be eliminated from her physiology well before the wedding. Relieved, she smiles. There’s no danger that her biohacking will render her prone to behaving with romantic zeal that weekend, leaving only the matter of how her unaltered physiology and psychology will react to whatever happens during the trip, whatever he—

Abruptly, her attention shifts, her gaze going to the tabletop as he reaches across it, toward her hand resting beside the plate of hash browns.

Clasping her hand in both of his, he says, “This will be fantastic,” and a rush of warmth goes through her.

Maybe it will be, she muses.

Though she may feel differently tomorrow, the weekend trip strikes her as a worthwhile distraction—an intriguing deviation. And, however things turn out that weekend, she should at that point have the cognitech to speed up or slow down the passage of the days after their trip, possess the means to fast-forward through awkwardness or draw out delight.

With worry now supplanted by confidence, she feels her heart tingling with a giddy calm, like a promise she could not bring herself to break.



Soramimi Hanarejima is a writer of innovative fiction and the author of *Visits to the Confabulatorium*, a fanciful story collection that Jack Cheng said, “captures moonlight in Ziploc bags.” Soramimi’s recent work can be found in [PANK], *Every Day Fiction*, *Firewords* and *Tahoma Literary Review*.

BEASTS

— PATIENCE MACKARNESS

The kids in the street were feral. They broke windows, slashed car tyres, lobbed bricks at pigeons. They persecuted strangers too, anyone who looked or sounded different. Richard, a Londoner, was targeted from the day he moved in. Obscene graffiti appeared on his door, long scratches on his car.

Richard lectured the kids from his doorstep; they parroted his posh voice. One child spat. Richard called the police, who shrugged, insinuating that a man like him, moving to a place like this, deserved all he got.

His neighbour, a heavily tanned woman whose empty lager cans lay strewn across the pavement, told him they weren't bad kids really, they were just bored. Richard said coldly, "I'm not a babysitter," and installed a CCTV camera over the door. An airgun pellet smashed its lens the first night. A second pellet broke one of his new windows.

One morning a large wooden box with airholes, and LIVING SECURITY SOLUTIONS printed on the side, was delivered to Richard's house. From across the street, the kids stared. Richard sat at the kitchen table, reading the owner's manual.

The smart alternative to a guard dog, your gryphon is extremely low-maintenance and only needs feeding once a week. Loyal and benign, gryphons have been protecting homes and families for centuries. Its 'hard skills' may never be required, as your free window sticker will act as a deterrent to would-be intruders.

When Richard opened its box, the gryphon slunk into the understairs cupboard and curled up, apparently sulking. He offered it raw hamburger; it clacked its beak in disgust.

"What happened to benign?" Richard asked. The gryphon opened one fierce gold eye but said nothing, though the manual said it could talk perfectly well. When Richard asked it to light his new wood burning stove, it snapped, "What do you think I am, a fucking dragon?"

This was exactly what Richard had thought. He considered denying it, but had just learned that gryphons are mindreaders. He said, "I suppose you don't even breathe fire?"

"Pur-leeease," said the gryphon, tucking its head under one bronze-feathered wing.

As gryphons prefer to hunt their own dinner, Richard drove it down to the canal side one night, to the dank space under a railway bridge. It crouched, lion-tail lashing; pounced; gulped. A bellyful of rats seemed to induce a mini-hibernation cycle; it slept for almost a week, and could not be roused. Sleepy, contented clucking, came from the cupboard.

The Gryphonwatch window sticker had already been defaced with magic marker, and another window broken, when the beast woke. Richard suggested this might be a convenient moment to deal with his own vermin problem.

How old?” the gryphon asked, yawning.“

Ten or eleven.”The gryphon glanced at its belly. “Have you seen the size of me? I’d never digest one of those, I’m not a boa constrictor. How about I scare them instead?”

“It won’t be easy,” Richard warned, but the gryphon got up, stretched, and waited for him to open the front door. Tail waving, it sauntered into the street.

When its owner looked out of the window ten minutes later, the beast was stretched out on the warm tarmac, surrounded by children. Two were bouncing on its tawny back, a third was feeding it a mangled and bloody pigeon.



Patience Mackarness lives and writes partly in an elderly VW camper van, partly in a cottage in Brittany, France. Her stories have been published or accepted by Lunch Ticket, Dime Show Review, Brilliant Flash Fiction, The Coachella Review, Flash Frontier, and elsewhere. <https://patencemackarness.wordpress.com/>

VIRAL SPIRAL

HENRY BLADON

As the virus spread, the animals retreated into the underground lair and planned a counter-revolution.

Hidden away from all the humans and their wasted ambitions and abandoned hope, there's a lizard in charge and he is getting his information from a squirrel who was injured in a previous conflict.

The lizard, who regards the squirrel (and all his type) as perfidious, uses a pandemic-detecting periscope with a radical new spiral design that will never be emulated for reasons he doesn't yet understand.

There is also a badger in the lair and although he is becoming anxious about the confined space. He turns to the squirrel and says, I know what's going on in your head,

I can see your voices.

The squirrel ignores the apparently insightful advances and pours boiling water over the mint leaves in his pot. The lizard retracts the periscope and asks: When will this ever end?

In the space above, a lone piper can be heard playing a lament.



Henry Bladon is based in Somerset in the UK. He is a writer of short fiction and poetry with a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Birmingham. He is the author of the novel *Threeways*, and several poetry collections. His work can be seen in *Poetica Review*, *Pure Slush*, *Truth Serum Press*, *Lunate*, and *O:JA&L*, among other places.

THE ACCOUNTANT'S WIFE

— ALYSSA JORDAN



An accountant comes home to a wife with three heads. One is usually happy to see him, and the middle head is indifferent, but he's careful to give the last a wide berth. They dubbed that head El Diablo. It likes to spit on the accountant, recite dialogue from bad pornography, or heckle plays with children.

That night, the first head gives him a kiss. We're pregnant, dear, she says.

The second head sighs.

El Diablo cackles gleefully.

Alyssa Jordan is a writer living in the United States. She pens literary horoscopes for F(r)iction Series. Her stories can be found or are forthcoming in The Sunlight Press, X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine, Reflex Fiction, and more. You can find her on Twitter @ajordan901 or Instagram @ajordanwriter.

FALL

— WILSON KOEWING

It was their first Fall in Colorado and their first Fall together. The trees that lined downtown Longmont's sleepy main street flashed yellow and red when they weren't watching. John admired the leaves through the floor-to-ceiling windows of their one bedroom, which hovered above the street. The apartment already felt small, though Ella was barely two months old.

John left early, after feeding Ella then Jewel, a two-year old Husky Natalie saved from a shelter before they'd met. He took the road toward Estes Park, planning to photograph Aspens. As the car twisted and climbed, John glanced at Ella in the rear-view.

Natalie's holistic school was intensive, so he let her sleep-in weekends. It was why they left New Orleans after all. That, plus New Orleans was no place to raise a child.

They did not move for John to work at Cube Graphics – a sweat shop that produced stock photo prints for Wal-Mart and Clear Channel billboards—where he spent workdays fantasizing about some different life that existed inside the pictures that came alive inside the printer.

Ella slept soundly in her car seat when they reached the trailhead. Splotches of Aspens burned yellow across the sides of green mountains. John momentarily considered leaving her behind; the out and back was barely two miles.

Ella screamed as John put her in the backpack carrier Natalie's mom presented at the shower, where she wept for their leaving Louisiana, though she never visited once before Ella.

The incline proved steeper than John expected. He grew winded not far from the trailhead and leaned against a rock to rest. Two fit young women passed. They smiled, but farther down the trail, John heard them giggle.

Natalie woke to silence. A comfortable terror struck. After peeing and staggering into the living room, she remembered John had Ella. Jewel jumped on her and whined. She grabbed the leash from the hook by the door.

Natalie tied Jewel up by the doughnut shop on the corner. She ordered a bear claw and coffee but was forced to rush outside when Jewel caused a commotion.

A dad held his toddler close. A trickle of blood rolled down the child's finger.

“She nipped him!”

Natalie grabbed Jewel and apologized profusely. As the dad left with his screaming child, she pet the dog, unsure what else to do.

Natalie wandered around downtown after that. She devoured the bear claw. On a park bench, she read updates and news on her phone until she couldn't figure out what to look at any longer. Then she went home, dragging Jewel behind her.

John reached the top of the trail. It didn't seem like much of an achievement. He set his pack down; the pack that held his child. He snapped photos. It was hardly professional, but it represented something. John out in the world doing his own thing.

On the way down, he passed many people. None seemed to have concerns that mirrored his. On the ride home, he blared Tom Petty. He thought about old John. Old girlfriends. He didn't think much about Natalie.

The Saturday before Halloween they dressed Ella as a pumpkin and watched the town's Halloween Parade. Costumed children and families lined the streets. It was the first blustery day of Fall. They huddled together on the sidewalk as still as cardboard cutouts. The wind fleeced branches of leaves and sent twirling vortexes through the streets to smash against walls and settle in strange places. Natalie's warmth felt familiar yet distant. It was all about the child now.

As the crowds thinned, John found himself drinking on the patio of a downtown bar. Natalie labored up with Ella on her back.

"This is what you want to do today?" she asked.

When they stumbled into the apartment, they were both drunk. Natalie sat Ella on the kitchen floor, in her car seat.

They smoked a joint. As the high settled, they tore at each other's clothes.

Natalie's playlist blared with music John hadn't heard. They had sex on the living room carpet—ignoring Jewel's barking and growling—a brand of sex they'd long forgotten. When it was over, they fell apart in hopeless bliss.

Natalie saw it first, the strange flesh dangling from Jewel's lips; the confusion in the dog's eyes. When John realized what had happened, there was nothing left but the unhinged madness of Natalie's screams and the swelling of reality.

Wilson Koewing is a writer from South Carolina. He lives in Denver, Colorado. His work is featured or forthcoming in *Pembroke Magazine*, *Ghost Parachute*, *X-R-A-Y*, *The Hunger Journal*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Menacing Hedge* and *Five on the Fifth*.



**NATALIE SAW
IT FIRST, THE
STRANGÈ
FLESH
DANGLING
FROM JEWEL'S
LIPS...**

Fall by Wilson Koewing

A GOOFY TRAIN RIDE

— PAUL BECKMAN

Barely missing my train in New Haven for New York, I ran to the parking garage, got my car, and zipped onto the turnpike heading for Bridgeport, passing two stops in between. I made it with five minutes to spare.

I entered the fourth car down, which is my car of choice, ever since I read that the first three cars are the most dangerous for passengers in any train wreck.

I settled in on a deuce, tossing my backpack on the seat next to me and took out a book but fell asleep midway through the first page. The conductor shook me awake at Stamford and I reached for my wallet to give him my credit card and it was Goofy all decked out in train gear and speaking like Goofy. I haven't watched cartoons since they stopped showing them in theaters right after the newsreels, but that Goofy voice came right back to me.

I was mesmerized and pinched myself like I'd read in books to see if I was still sleeping and I wasn't. We pulled into Stamford and a loud lisp asked me to move my backpack so he could sit down. As I was moving it, I saw Donald Duck smile his big duck bill smile and say thank you while spritzing me with duck spittle. I couldn't take anymore and held my backpack and went back to sleep.

I woke as we were leaving the 125th St station for Grand Central and noticed the duck was gone and there was a regular conductor walking through the car. 'What a weird dream,' I decided and looked around and the car was filled with my high school classmates and teachers – all orderly, mostly grey haired, and a mess of canes and walkers. I remembered the reunion notice for my 45th reunion and decided that since I'd never been to a reunion, and there was no one I particularly wanted to see, there would be no sense in going to see New York via a private tour bus.

I didn't want to talk to anyone from high school so I went back to sleep and only awoke when Goofy in his conductor's outfit shook me awake and told me I had to get off since I'd been sleeping ten minutes after pulling into Grand Central. I got off the train thinking that I ought to see someone about these hallucinations, but just thinking about it made me fearful.

*I SAW DONALD DUCK
SMILE HIS BIG DUCK
BILL SMILE AND SAY
THANK YOU WHILE
SPRITZING ME WITH
DUCK SPITTLE.*

Paul Beckman's latest flash collection, *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press) was a finalist for the 2019/2020 Indie Book Awards. Some of his stories appeared in *Spelk*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Litro*, *Pank*, *Playboy*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *The Lost Balloon*. Paul curates the FBomb NY flash fiction reading series monthly in KGB's Red Room (Currently Virtual).

VISION

— NIAMH WOOD

She's someone I can't understand. It doesn't mean our love is untrue. Our love is pure and powerful, but we don't look at the world the same way. I look at the world through a lens I have to share with mostly everyone else. She is above it all. She doesn't trip on the little things. I think it's a good thing that we're different.

She paints pictures. Or not pictures, exactly, but whole worlds on canvas. Her artworks are really something special. She has something different to the rest of us.

Her home studio faces the ocean, and her huge windows usher in the light and call her to look out at the unknown. Her routine is simple. She wakes early, and wanders the house with a slice of toast and cup of tea until it's time to paint. Sometimes she'll wear an apron, and sometimes inspiration calls too loudly, and she moves straight to the studio in her pyjamas, toast between her teeth. She smears colour across her canvas and never stops to deliberate her next brushstroke. She has vision. It's fascinating to watch. You couldn't learn her type of talent. It's buried somewhere deep inside her bones.

She paints these imaginary deep-sea scenes unknown to our world, or to anybody else's mind. You could search both the ocean and your subconscious forever and not find these images, but then she paints them, and they seem so real. Last year, she entered a competition with a painting full of these bizarre sea creatures. I'd always admired that painting. When she unveiled it to the public, the town was in awe. There was something tranquil yet unsettling about it. The memory of it will make them shiver every time their toes touch the ocean now. She won first prize and had her face on the front page of the paper, which I proudly clipped and kept.

The painting featured a finned creature, maybe a fish, yet different. It had feathered skin, and no eyes. Another creature was long, like a snake, but its scales glowed and its eyes might've been human. It all looked so real. She has an incredible mind.

Every evening, she runs along the beach. She bursts with energy, all bare feet and wild hair. She runs all the way to the headland and then disappears. I don't even know where she goes. I'm not so adventurous. Usually, I just wait for her to reappear and return home.

Today, I want to go too. I let her run ahead, close enough to follow her path but not so close as to disrupt her process. As she approaches the headland, her pace only increases, as if excited, impatient. As if she's meeting an old friend, or looking for something.

She disappears into a tiny gap in a haphazard stack of boulders between the beach and the headland, and I begin to run. I clamber up the boulders, and struggle for a moment to find the space she disappeared through, but then there it is, and I squeeze through.

As I descend into a cave, sea water pools around my ankles. Light filters in through the spaces between the boulders overhead. The glow of sunset finds the planes of her face, and her lips, and her hair, as she tucks it behind her ears. She's angelic, other-worldly. I love her.

She kneels in the water, a smile on her face and fingertips dipping beneath the water. She hasn't noticed me yet. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I watch her hands. She lowers them into the water and strokes a feathered, blind almost-fish. A long, luminescent creature circles my feet, and the grand illusion of her incredible mind dissolves.

"What are you doing?" I frighten her. She jumps to her feet and the creatures flee. I can barely look her in the eye. She's untrue. A fraud, and a liar.

She's someone I can't understand. I look at her, but can't read her expression. When I step closer, she steps away and glances toward the exit.

She frowns. "Do I know you?"



Niamh Wood has a BA in writing and English from the University of New England, in Australia. In 2019, she completed the summer creative writing program at the University of Cambridge.

THE LAKE

— ALICE ROSE

She stood at the edge of the water, the wind whipping her cheeks. The sun was just rising, stretching through the trees and striping the muddy marsh where she stood. A ray of sunlight glistened over the lake.

Her routine was always the same; a brisk lap around the aquadrome before breakfast. Yet this time she stopped by a small muddy bank that sloped gently down into the water to watch bubbles appearing on the surface. While waiting for duck or fish to appear, she reached into her pocket to take out a tissue, but instead pulled out an opened packet of marshmallows from the night before.

Pink and white pillows scattered the mud like sprinkles on chocolate icing. Cursing, she blew her nose before bending down to pick up the wrapper. Mallow by mallow, she put the mud coated sweets back into the packet. Inching out a little further towards the water's edge, she noticed the bubbles again, growing closer. She stopped to watch something break through the surface.

When it rose its head, it looked like a man with grey skin, that glowed indigo in the sun. His nose lay flat below yellow eyes. He waited, as still as her, before slowly reaching out a webbed hand.

She leaned back a little. She wanted to run but couldn't make her legs move.

With his long fingers moving towards her, he gently picked up a marshmallow by her feet and sunk back down into the water.



Alice Rose is a UK writer. She was shortlisted for The Bath Flash Fiction Award (Feb 2017) and has been published at CafeAphra and ReflexFiction. Rose writes from her St Albans flat, feeding other people's cats and attempting to keep her plants alive.

BEST MOMENTS

MARIAH FERIA

The lights in the nightclub come on and the dancers melt down into the chequered floor. A woman with green hair and a clipboard comes up to me and asks for my name. I don't tell her, and she writes something down.

"What are you writing?"

She looks at me and says: "Would you like to see your best moments from tonight?"

"No."

The nightclub darkens. A holographic image of me at the bar appears. I am being chatted up by a man and I'm blushing, but when a prettier girl walks past us, he is gone.

Another: I am drinking on my own at one of those little bar tables.

Now I am dancing energetically. People are looking at me. They laugh when I slip onto the floor.

Nothing comes out of holographic me when I have my head over the toilet, but that's only because they haven't figured out how to show bodily fluids. A girl holds my hair back – I think she is my friend. She rubs my back and says "oh dear."

I am looking for my friend but she has left me; holographic me wonders around the dancefloor, turning her head from left to right. After a few moments, I stop.

The bartender won't serve me, I remember this part. I recall the rage – I just wanted another fucking shot. My arms lull over the side and I disappear. The lights come back on.



"I thought you said these were my best bits?" I say to the green haired woman.

"They are." She smiles.

I snatch a holographic drink that remains on the bar, but it vanishes when I touch it, along with my hand. Using my other arm, I take the clipboard from the woman and smack her over the head with it. She falls to the floor and disappears too. A pool of purple tinted blood is left behind where her head should be.

Mariah is a writer living in London, mainly writing weird short stories with a particular love of flash fiction. She also reviews books, preferring anything strange and unusual, translated fiction, and short story collections.



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