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Flash

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Flash Reviews

Editorial

Welcome to the twenty-first issue of *Flash*, which marks ten years of the magazine. Since our inaugural issue of October 2008, we are delighted to have published almost 1,000 stories by over 500 authors from nearly fifty countries across six continents, including forty-five flashes in translation, from eight languages; this issue features new stories from Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, India, Israel, South Africa, the UK, and the USA, four translated from Icelandic. We are also pleased to have published over 100 reviews of flash collections, anthologies, craft guides, and critical studies. The magazine's occasional '*Flash* Essays' section has included snapshot analyses of flashes by significant writers such as Samuel Beckett, Kate Chopin, Jane Anne Phillips, and Virginia Woolf. For making the magazine an international success, we would like to extend our warmest thanks to all contributors and readers of the past decade.

In this issue's '*Flash* Reviews', Jade Hainsworth-Walsh is taken happily out of her comfort zone by Meg Pokrass's latest collection, *Alligators at Night*. Liz Milne extols Nicole Rivas's refreshing exploration of 'women's sexuality and lust' in *A Bright and Pleading Dagger*, winner of the twelfth Rose Metal Press Short Short Chapbook Contest. Two micro-fiction anthologies are considered: Bjorn Ephgrave finds brilliance transcending the 300-word limits of James Thomas and Robert Scotellaro's *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fictions*, while Peter Blair admires writers' responses to the even tighter constraints of the drabble in *Nothing Short Of: Selected Tales from 100 Word Story*, edited by Grant Faulkner, Lynn Mundell, and Beret Olsen. Melissa Fegan surveys the wide range of genres anthologized in Robert Alexander's valuable *Spring Phantoms: Short Prose By 19th Century British and American Authors*. Ashley Chantler welcomes the 'refreshingly serious' essays in *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction*, edited by Michael Cocchiarale and Scott D. Emmert.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Peter Blair and Ashley Chantler

SAAB STORY

Tom Hazuka

I hated that car, to tell you the truth. Nothing against the Swedes and their sexy blond hair, but we couldn't afford the Saab and it put us under a debt eight ball that never rolled off us.

Or maybe I didn't really hate the car, I hated that Billy bought the damn thing. 'Our ship's comin' in, baby,' he'd always say, and the crazy part is the guy believed it, no matter how low our tide got or how many storms were in the forecast.

Billy could finance the car because he was working for the power company, reading meters in the Utah sticks, and I was a cashier at the mercantile. It was the closest we ever came to being rich, or at least living like other people. But after a year he got fired for drinking on the job and informing his boss that he was an asshole. In case you're wondering, according to Billy the situation was all the boss's fault. Nothing was ever Billy's fault.

Which is why I wonder what he'd say if they'd managed to pull him alive from that one-car wreck outside the Ute reservation. His best friend's wife (you won't hear me say her name) survived in the passenger seat, but unlike Billy she was wearing her belt. Billy always drove like a bat out of Hades, but maybe it was an armadillo's fault that he swerved the Saab off the road. Maybe a jackalope jumped onto his windshield or a shiny UFO distracted him.

I know one thing. It definitely would have been my fault if I hadn't kept paying his life-insurance premiums.

KITES

D. A. Carlsen

Edna jacked up the car and began to dismantle the front end, while Hollis sat in a canvas folding chair gazing out to the tobacco field.

'Edna?'

'Yeah?'

'You still headed to Charlotte in the fall?'

'Yeah.'

Hollis stood up, walked over to the car, and peered down through the open hood. Edna, lying underneath, was struggling to loosen a nut.

Catching Edna's eye, he grinned. 'Do you need a hand?'

'Yeah.'

Hollis crawled under the car. Edna pointed to the recalcitrant nut. Hollis took the wrench and broke it free. As soon as it was loose, Hollis returned the wrench to Edna. She gave him a quick smile.

'Edna?'

'Look, Hollis, I don't want to talk about it anymore.'

'But –'

'No, not another word.'

Hollis wriggled out from under the car and lay there watching the clouds drift by. 'I used to fly kites on days like this,' he said. 'After the kite was in the air, I'd lay down in the grass and watch it grow smaller as it climbed. Only the string connecting us. Some days I'd fall asleep. Some days I'd lose a kite.'

There was no reply from Edna, only the sound of tools on metal as she worked.

Hollis stood and looked out across the tobacco field. 'Edna

… There's a fox in the field running down the row.' As it disappeared from view, he said, 'It's gone.' Again, no reply. Looking down at Edna's booted feet sticking out from under the car, Hollis scuffed the dirt with the toe of his sneaker, turned, and left.

Edna paused at the sound of his truck starting up and heading down the dirt road, then lay staring up at the rusting chassis, listening to the engine as it faded away.

LEDA AND STAN

Eunice Yeates

You should've said. You should have said you felt that way. Stan looked at Leda as he spoke. Well? Leda angled the wine glass away from her, watching its contents reach the brim. Then she straightened and drank it in. Was there another bottle in the fridge, she wondered. Again: Well? Jesus, thought Leda. Steadfast Stan. Sincere, earnest, tedious. Yes, she said flatly, I should have.

Stan smiled. Leda closed her eyes as if that might ward off the inevitable follow-up. She knew he would add something vexing, like, That wasn't so difficult, was it? But he didn't. Right, he was saying, will I make you a cup of tea? Leda longed for Chardonnay. No, I'm going to bed. Stan's eyes said, Good, I think that's sensible. There was murder in Leda's heart.

Upstairs, the bedroom was cool. On her dresser, Vishnu and Shiva glinted in the lamplight. Then Leda's phone buzzed. It was her sister. Alex, hi! Tell me everything, ask me nothing. Alex laughed. They chatted easily about work, the weather, their parents. Then suddenly: Why did you marry him, Leda? The question was swift and unexpected. Good *night*, Al.

Though it was early, sleep came instantly to Leda. She dreamt it was Christmas and she was at Stan's family home. His mother was drunk. Leda was expected to cook the turkey, but didn't know how. Stan was playing a board game with his nephews, high-fiving them constantly. Leda started to cry. She woke abruptly and found she'd only been asleep for sixteen minutes.

She switched on her bedside light, then immediately turned it off. Feeling for her phone, she rang Alex, whose voicemail greeting was this: What would you do if you weren't afraid? My sister of the

big questions, thought Leda. At the tone, she spoke without drawing breath.

The reason, Alex, was how Stan seemed entirely without artifice. After those vain, arrogant players I'd always dated – fucking poets, self-absorbed idiots, takers – I thought I was finally on solid ground.

Leda kept talking until the machine cut her off. Then she phoned back and continued.

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

LEMONS, ALL SLIGHTLY SHRIVELLED …

Santino Prinzi

… a lone lime, a small jug of water, a paring knife, a blue-and-white check porcelain bowl, two foggy glasses scratched by time, a wooden chopping block well-worn from years of shared use, a blue tablecloth with gold polka dots, two oak chairs – one a little rickety with an elderly woman sitting on it, the other empty. The elderly woman, her hands always trembling these days, picks up the knife, the lime, and slices. She scrapes the lime into the small jug of water. Droplets plop and spring, zest and juice infuse. There's a knock on the door. The elderly woman rises, steadies herself on the table, and tightens the shawl draped over her shoulders. She opens the door to the Tuscan sun and another elderly woman, her friend. Her third friend today. They all come out to visit her now. They kiss each other's cheeks, and the elderly woman welcomes her friend inside. The elderly woman tells her friend not to remove her shoes, but the friend insists on doing so, says it's respectful to the dead. Not to my nose, the elderly woman thinks. She offers her friend a glass of water with lime, but her friend asks if she could have lemon instead, says she prefers the zing of a lemon to a zang of a lime. The elderly woman shakes her head, refuses to touch the lemons. She tells her friend that the lemons were his, are his. A lemon tumbles from the bowl and rolls to the edge of the table. See, the elderly woman shouts so any who desire lemons may hear, he's still here, still watching his lemons. Her friend takes the knife and cuts the runaway lemon into slices. He's gone, she says, and the friends embrace, both quietly crying.

SHOWERING

Santino Prinzi

One of the shower curtain rings sits empty on the rail, the curtain having loosened itself. Your body is soap-suddy and smells like plums. The shower's water is warm on your skin, and no water is going where it shouldn't, but the slight lopsidedness of the curtain bothers you. You stretch to hook the curtain back on the ring. You stretch further and slip, your hands reaching out to grasp anything that may stop your fall. You hear rips and pings, the ruffling up of the shower curtain as you tear it from the rail. It twirls itself around your body and you hit the bottom of the bath. You assumed that a white shower curtain would always look fresh and clean, but wrapped around your body you see the curtain for what it is: off-white and tinged with beige, black mould creeping around the edges. You hug the shower curtain like a blanket, staring up at the bathroom ceiling. The water remains constant, pattering your plastic quilt. You know you're fine, really, you know you're not physically hurt. You'll get up in a minute or two because you don't want to be late for the office. You lie there a while and think about how you ended up here and it all comes back to you, how nothing's turned out as you imagined. Even from this new perspective, even though the water is warm, you still feel the cold creeping in.

SAILING

Julia Paillier

Most days he wakes at five and listens to the house, creaking, whirring, humming. His sleeping wife fidgets, grey tendrils roped across her pillow like roots of an ancient tree. Bed becomes boat, cast adrift, bobbing on wild and treacherous seas. What will capsize it, throw them to the icy depths? A leaky pipe? Pandemic? The demise of cheques? Fears he dare not voice lest speech makes them real. He is silent, watchful, waiting.

At 7.15 the letter flap rattles; newspaper glides gently across parquet. His wife yawns, stretches, pads in sock-shod feet. Pans clink and water whooshes. Taking his window seat, he scans the headlines: house prices have fallen, global warming approaches tipping point. Outside, it is raining for the seventh consecutive day but uncommonly warm for November.

Fear churns, chomps; he swallows it down with bitter coffee. The room smells stale. Politicians, he tells the top of his wife's head, are messing up. Back in the day, when he was responsible for running a business, when he was taking on the Unions single-handed, he'd seen it coming. He could teach them a thing or two.

But who would listen? Who on earth would listen, now?

STAYIN' ALIVE

David Steward

He plays the same mix on shuffle every day in the gym. You'd think these tunes would become over-familiar, but they still take him way back. 'Killer Queen'. He's at the charity disco in Ox Poly, mid-seventies, where he met her. The soundtrack from *Saturday Night Fever*. Caledonian Road, cramming in his bedsit, with the smell of instant coffee and damp plaster on the walls. Three tracks from The Who all remind him of their first home, the rented flat in a terrace near Whitechapel station. They did it up together in the evenings after work. 'September' by Earth Wind & Fire was the first dance at their wedding.

He finds the rhythm, so the pedals hit the bottom of their cycle on the stressed beats, one and three.

'Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick'. Davey Payne's saxes squeal and he can experience again the mix of relief and guilt. He played this on repeat in the car after the divorce. It was the guilt that made him delete the only nineties tune, something by Madonna, which the kids used to listen to. He never liked it anyway.

It's not the everyday stuff that he remembers. There were times in his life, significant events or states of being, which played out to the accompaniment of this music. Now, it's just what he clings to in his daily routine, the effort of keeping his weight down, slowing the hardening of his arteries, prolonging life by a few years.

FASCIST INTERLUDE, SATURDAY COASTLINER

David Swann

On the double-decker, someone asks this: 'Does pork come from pigs, like bacon?'

It's Saturday, crowded. A lot of coughing. Bags in the aisles, rain on the sills.

'And less of your flipping moithering,' the passenger behind me warns her son.

I stare at my book, a collection of lines. Difficult to concentrate. Something brewing.

'I never said owt,' the boy growls.

'Yes, you did,' his mother sighs. 'You were moithering again.'

The boy's coat rustles like some bulky creature caught in scratchy winter undergrowth. He's leaning close enough to breathe his sulk over the back of my neck.

Off to the side of the bus, the sea's gone courting with the mud. They're part of the same brown stew – in love. The sun hasn't shone for weeks.

'And budge up, lad,' the mother tells him.

He makes a soft grunt, mutters.

My book's been killed. Made unreadable.

'You're the wrong way out, child,' she observes, sagely. 'It's worse than shopping with your dad.'

'I came to help, didn't I!' he explodes. 'Unlike that lazy bugger!'

'Right,' she says. 'Off this bus! Now!'

Their bags crackle, the seats groan. She hammers the bell, drags her son after her down the aisle, yanking his coat. As they shudder by, I notice the mother's perm. It's fitted like a helmet to

her head, the curls so tight they make her face looked stretched and yellow.

In her wake lopes a teenager made enormous by a padded cream anorak and four plastic bags. He sways in the aisle, muttering. His forehead is broad and white. Across its expanse of white skin, tattooed in cheap blue ink, is a swastika.

I watch them get down into the rain. They go on bickering as they turn their faces towards the wind. When the mother waves a fifth bag before him, the teenager takes it, shaking his head, mumbling.

They stumble away together, into the weather, down the promenade. I turn my head to watch them, thinking about the swastika, trying to picture the boy's dad.

Rain pours down the side of the bus.

'Gammon, then,' says the voice at the back. 'What animal makes *gammon*?'

ZEN OF THE NIGHT FISHERMAN

David Swann

The hiker had been watching the two German lasses, admiring their walking boots, interested in their refusal to dress up for the pub.

But fair play to the lads for making their move. They'd come down from London for the weekend and had been playing a noisy game of pool, until they homed in.

Now they were strutting around them, certain they'd heard the lasses mention Bono.

'U2?' they said. 'You know U2?' And they played their cues like The Edge.

So it was back to Plan A – a paperback in a tent in the pub's back field.

But, on the way, the hiker was drawn to a spot on the beach where a fisherman had set his lamp, and he found a youth about his own age staring down his line into the darkness.

Shyness is bold with others' shyness. Or that's what the hiker's grandmother used to claim – the daft way they talked in her valley. Anyway, he told that fisherman things he wished he'd told the German lasses.

Yes, a beautiful place, the angler agreed. And great for walks. But he preferred the night. Preferred the quiet.

'You can think straight under that lot,' he said, and jabbed his thumb at the stars, at the sparse bright shingle over their heads.

Below, the sea sucked stones as if it were a quiet old man who liked a lozenge, as if it had nothing to do, nowhere much to go. The hiker stared down the angler's line, imagining the fish he was hunting. They'd be passing through that dark water, just a few yards

away, as invisible as thoughts. He understood, briefly, that he was made of nothing. Packed with the stuff.

'Just you and the stars,' said the angler. 'Just your hook and the fish …'

The hiker nodded, trying to remember what he'd understood.

Back up the beach, the German girls were leaving the pub.

The hiker was only a little torn when he heard the boys from London calling out behind them, cracking their jokes under the lights.

TELL THE TRUTH NOW

David Swann

The cricket field is close to the moors, high enough above town to grant views of grey roofs and distant hills. We're knocking up before the match when three lads lope down the grass bank onto the pitch. One of them is swishing a stick as if it's a sword. He's the eldest, probably about eleven. The youngest must be seven.

'Tell the truth now,' says the eldest in an unhurried Irish brogue. 'Did you ever have sex with a woman?'

I look at him, out of sorts and awkward. My batting pads don't fit properly. The practice has been awful: I keep lifting my head and missing the ball.

'Tell the truth now,' the child persists. His tone is innocent, funny. But he looks me in the eye. Unwavering.

'None of your business,' I tell him, trying not to blink. I've done a bit of teaching, so I know classroom control. It's like batting: you stand your ground, pretend it doesn't faze you.

The seven-year-old plants himself between the bowler and me, sniffing noisily. His pale face is daubed with streaks of dirt. 'There's something up there, and it's on fire,' he announces.

'Will you kids *move*?' the bowler shouts.

The youngest points a sooty finger. 'Up there,' he nods. 'You'll see them soon enough. A good lot of flames.'

'The only thing that's on fire here,' I crack, trying not to stammer, 'is my batting. Now can you b-budge, please?'

The seven-year-old stays put, crinkling his nose. 'Give me the bat,' he says. 'I'm better than you. Give me the bat.'

The eldest child holds the sword upright. 'Tell the truth now,' he says. His eyes are still on me, the question crawling over my face.

‘Oi!’ shouts the bowler. ‘I won’t tell you again!’ He fires down a delivery that fizzes past the youngest.

The children watch the ball bounce into the weeds, then slowly traipse away, listless and pale.

Smoke is rising now from beyond the grass bank. The children look back every now and again to study it, the eldest swishing the air with his stick.

FAMILY FROM HULL

David Swann

They can only talk to each other when one member has reached the end of the beach and must then be hollered after.

'The key, Duane! You've taken the fucking key!'

Her eldest glares from the centre of his strop and starts the long hot slog back over the sand. For a time, it's nearly peaceful. The pit-bull looks up from the hole it's digging down to the core of the earth and the youngest pauses from hitting his own feet with a squeaky hammer while one of the daughters weeps more quietly for her lost father, who is snoring two yards offshore on an air mattress that absolutely refuses to sink.

Finally, Duane is there, sweating like a horse. 'Here,' he says and lobs the key into the space between his heaving flanks and the unhappy woman, who has carrots, not fingers, and spills it in the sand.

Then it all starts again. Various brothers wage war for a rubber ring that's too small for their waists, although you could imagine it as a noose. And the daughter wails harder for her snoring, long-gone father.

And the mother screams, 'Duane! You've lost the fucking key, Duane!' and Duane says, 'The hotel's shit, anyway,' while their dog covers the rest of me in dirt.

Hours later, I find them still there on the beach, all twelve of them, settled in a circle and no one talking while they sift the sand through their hands, each absorbed in the hunt, red shoulders moulting as if even the skin wants shut of them.

But something in the intensity of their frowns, in the sea-

whitened acres of their legs, makes me wonder if this closeness is what they were after, and the key the best excuse they could find.

REMAND PROCEEDINGS

David Swann

As soon as I turned to locate the source of the disturbance, I wished I hadn't. In school, we'd heated biros over Bunsen burners, and I was not long gone from that miserable den, so I remembered the damage. Remembered the spoiled plastic.

It was like that now. I heard his chains grinding as they manhandled him into the dock. I heard the clicking in his throat.

The clerk had seen everything during his career, and his eyes usually reassured me when I was floundering. Not today. His face remained tipped to the court papers. Whatever brutality had been visited upon the accused man, it frightened the clerk.

One glance had been enough: the defendant's face had run down over his neck. His body was twisted away from his face.

'Rape,' said the judge. 'Attempted murder.'

Further along the press-bench, my rival from the other paper was galloping his feet, a habit when he was anxious. He'd cracked up, seen flying saucers over the moor – and the face-to-face stuff had become difficult, so they sent him to court every day.

Below, the proceedings had gained speed, entered fast-forward. The defendant would be remanded in custody.

'Take him down,' said the judge. 'Take him down now, please.'

It was hard for the guards. The man's ravaged frame faced two ways at once. I'd never known such things existed, never understood the meaning of rape.

The courtroom was noiseless after he'd gone. You couldn't call it quietness or silence. It was more like the stunned nothing that follows a blow.

Then he was in the tunnel, beneath our feet. We heard the

awful insect that clicked through him, we heard the chains scraping.

My rival could not stop galloping. The clerk was furious with his papers.

I got up and went. Outside, across the interchange, there were views of the moor. I wanted to see something impossible there, wanted aliens. Except I was facing the wrong way. If you want aliens, work on a newspaper. Serve the public interest. Spend mornings in court. Then do your best to understand why the man in the next seat has lost control of his own feet.

MAGIC HOUR

David Swann

I remember our magic hour, when we came to a clearing and the cornfield moved for us, as if we'd found an ocean in woodland near Coventry.

The word on my lips was *evening*, though I kept it to myself, like a charm, in that secret place under the oaks.

A passenger on the moped you could barely steer, I set my face into the gloaming, and you aimed for that gap loved by filmmakers, when skin glows with the last of the light. You were shouting something about summer. Something about trees.

The moped veered between lanes. I had my hands around your waist.

'Evening,' I chanted, 'evening …' – until the word made sense, and everything in the old Forest of Arden had something to declare: lovers' trails that vanished through groves, mossy rocks scattered like pillows beneath trees.

When we hit a ditch and fell from the moped, I went out of the world for a few seconds, and came back wondering if I was free of my body.

Then we were limping from the wreckage, our skin ripped, our clothes in tatters.

Somehow we made it to my house, where I soaked cotton balls in TCP and held them over your wounds, and you winced as I cleaned the injuries.

It was the closest I ever got, close enough to smell the coconut in your hair.

Afterwards, I couldn't make myself throw away the bloody water. Instead, I tried to read. But a bare bulb glared on the window.

Whenever I looked up, I saw a badly lit version of myself, failing to read.

Angrily, I poured your blood into the drain. Then I stared into the plughole as if looking down through myself. There was a world beneath, there were pipes in the earth. I imagined your blood sinking down through them. I imagined the roots that would drink.

You were everywhere then, for a long time afterwards. Under my house, outside in puddles. Sometimes I found you in coconuts, and TCP.

And in sunlight, too, at magic hour – whenever it found the angle loved by filmmakers, and glowed on cornfields, and other women's skin.

CONCERT
Minette Cummings

You invite us to the concert. It is outdoors, and we will meet you there. We bring a mutual friend: three meeting two. When we arrive, rain hazes our heads. We look for you, but we do not see you. We stand under a tree to make a plan. The plan is for one of us to circle the grassy hillside in the rain to find you. I do that. I do not see you.

Our mutual friend has a wicker basket filled with crab cakes. The smell rising from the steaming basket mixed with the foggy mist under the tree is pleasant. We decide to sit on a striped blanket under the tree and eat while we make another plan. Our fingers are sticky with crab and the red sauce our mutual friend has thoughtfully provided in a blue plastic container. We open a bottle of wine.

One of us circles the hillside again in the rain. Aha! You have planted chairs in front of the stage. These are chairs with awnings that block out sun and rain. We do not have chairs with awnings or otherwise. We present the merits of our sweet-smelling tree, but you counter with proximity to stage.

We gather our striped blanket and empty basket and join you there. The rain is stopping, and we three are silly now with wine and full bellies of crab cake, so we do not mind. Our mutual friend burps on the striped blanket and falls asleep. You two are not silly. You are quiet under your awnings. You are waiting for the music to start.

BIRTHDAY PARTY
Jude Higgins

Five little girls in pastel party frocks posed around a garden bench smiling for your mother. There should have been six.

It was your idea to all go down to Carole's house after the photograph. You cluster like flowers on her doorstep. Pretty pink, blue and yellow, hair combed clean and shiny. Giggles. Three bangs with the knocker on the wooden door and tiny flakes of paint jump off like insects. A baby wails.

When Carole opens the door, you smell old gravy and cabbage. Her mother stands in the background, arms folded. She wears one of those cross-over pinnies like the woman who comes to clean the floors at your house. Carole is still in her thick school skirt.

'Why didn't you come to my birthday?' you say in your best voice, the one you use to recite poetry at school. 'You can still come now, if you want.'

'Come on, Carole,' says Gillian.

More giggles.

'Come on, Carole,' says Margaret.

'Don't be a meanie,' says Sue.

Sheila pulls the silky white head off a dandelion and blows it in Carole's face. 'One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock …' she says.

You check your new Timex watch with its pale-pink leather strap. 'It's only half past four,' you say. 'We've saved you some chocolate cake.'

Your mother says that Carole has a lovely little round face with

cheeks like a robin. Those cheeks are bright red now and her black eyes are so shiny, they could be wet.

But she says nothing.

CEREMONY
Christopher Linforth

We chant his name from the cliffside. Far below, our father cranes his neck for the source of the noise. We call Michael, Michael, Michael, then collapse in the undergrowth, laughing to ourselves. We pick up stones and judge our father's position. He's naked in his deckchair, a newspaper in his lap, the gray sea in front of him. We each pitch a stone – one skittering across a rockpool, way off, the other slugging the back of his chair. Our father thuds forward and stands, his hand stretched around to the soft skin between his shoulder blades. His head dips. We hear a cry. We feel a strange pleasure; we become erect; we grope for another stone. We hurl limestone shards as far as we can. One catches his temple. We duck down then spring up again. Over the cliffside, we see our father sprawled on the pebbled beach. A red welt has ballooned across his back, blood smears the side of his face. We chant Dad, Dad, Dad. Waves foam across the shore toward his head. Water touches his thinning hair. He doesn't flinch or jerk. We gather up pieces of rock, fling them toward his body, slowly covering his mottled white flesh. Seawater runs over the rocks, channels down the crevices, blessing him as only nature can do.

RENEWING MY VOWS

Kevin Tosca

I've been bitten. My seven-month-old son's been bitten. We don't know by what. It's winter and the goddamned insects should still be in hell where they belong.

The bites are red and spreading. Mine looks like Texas. My son's, California.

They itch like a bastard.

My wife, a Ukrainian not prone to panic, seems concerned.

I have this theory that Eastern Europe – if you were lucky enough to be born there before 1989 – immunizes the human soul to much Western Neurotic Exhausting Modern Bullshit, so her concern is something rare, troubling.

Though my scratching has drawn blood and swallowing has become impossible and I've lost all feeling in my left arm, that concern is not for me.

No, that concern is for the small creature probing the nose of a stuffed monkey with his right index finger, probing it with intense, damn-near yogic concentration.

If I reach out and somehow manage to pull the monkey's tail before total paralysis sets in, the monkey will start to make exaggerated monkey sounds, my boy will snap out of it, he will laugh his magical laughter, and my wife will worry a little less.

I do.

NEVERTHELESS, MAGIC

Kevin Tosca

From Porte Dauphine to Place de Clichy to Le Bal to see the Gerard Fieret exposition. This is our trajectory. This, for us, is a new part of an old part of town.

Fieret?

Fieret's mad, Dutch, joyful, cusping celebrity, and dead.

After savoring the kind of artist – kind of *man* – he was (endangered, if not extinct), we cross over into the seventeenth arrondissement and stroll down the rue des Dames.

The sky is gray, the air mild, the pollution unnoticeable. The neighborhood feels like only certain Parisian neighborhoods feel: charming, local, lived-in. Nothing like the slaughterhouse sixteenth we now, unfortunately, call home.

We continue, via a few more streets, to the Square des Batignolles where my wife feeds our son on a recently painted bench, causing me to wonder, once again, why all the benches in Parisian parks are green and why, when seated on them, we must always be surrounded by pigeons and people – fat and derelict, respectively.

As far as the people go, I don't mean homeless people, I mean selfish people. Spoiled people. Modern people. But none of them stop and stare at my wife's exposed breast, which I appreciate.

We stroll back to the rue des Dames because now *we're* hungry, select a café and order Saint-Nectaire sandwiches. The baguettes are delicious, the cheese soft and flavorful, the mustard strong, the gherkins present. We swallow it all down with small blonde beers while leaning against the counter as if it means something.

We believe it does.

The bartender who serves us, the only employee in the place, is young and over six-feet tall, has terrifically thin, long arms, is kind and incompetent. We ask him for espressos and sip them as we watch the faces go by, some of them interesting, most of them not.

Of all possible music, Creedence Clearwater Revival plays softly in the background. I think: My father would've liked this place.

Then: We live in a preposterous world.

And: I am a preposterous man.

Finally: The magic still exists.

BERLIN ALBUM

After Hansa Studios: By the Wall, 1976–90 *(2018)*

Dan Spencer

Sometimes, it seemed to me, I'd brought us here to break up the band. We were pulling in four different directions, everybody on a different drug. At my window, I watched the soldiers on the chilly observation tower, waiting for inspiration to strike. Any moment now. We were between seasons. I was coming down off something. I was drunk in the morning, a regular at the bar below the studio, where I'd taken to wearing a slinky black dress, revealing myself to be ballsy. I'd slept with the proprietress, who made a big show of not knowing who I was. I was thinking of you. The songs weren't coming. I was trying to follow in somebody's footsteps, pacing the concert hall, looking out windows. A shell of a city. I cultivated ghosts. I wanted to write you a song, having left you. I mumbled and hummed – fragments – but nothing came of anything. At the foot of the wall, my vocalist was strolling with my drummer. She was telling him she couldn't take much more of me. He whistled a melody I thought was mine. One of them lounged against the wall, androgynous at this distance. Somebody dipped towards someone. Grandly, a greatcoat opened, like an overture.

PARABLE

Dan Spencer

How her parents became naturists was they were walking on a foreign beach, the Atlantic coast. This was before she was born. They were also unmarried, marrying after her mother became pregnant with her.

So, her mother and father were, in a way, young and free, in this moment, wearing nothing but their bathing suits, and they were somewhat untethered, walking barefoot along a shoreline in another country, walking along a series of beaches, or a single beach in a series of sections, and when they reached what was evidently a naturist section of beach they simply chose not to turn back.

'Is it private?' someone wondered, but they'd already slipped out of their costumes and kept walking. This was simply another beach in a chain of beaches, and on this beach everyone happened to be unclothed, so they dived right in.

It was natural then to follow the path away from the water, between the dunes and into the pines, discovering the white, wooden houses hidden there. It was natural to rent somewhere and, later, to buy a place. It was easy to have a daughter and to marry and to continue in directions which interested you.

When I think about her, I think about this story. I think I proposed to her badly. I wish we'd been outside, not inside. I wish I'd been kneeling. If only it hadn't rained. If only I'd said 'Marry me', instead of what I did say, which was something like 'Be married to me'.

RETURN

Gyrðir Elíasson

I parked the car at the guesthouse and walked up the hill towards the church. So much time had passed since I had been here, and many of the houses were new. It felt as though I was in a completely different town. I encountered no one on the way up to the church. The sun was setting, the light a peculiar yellow – it seemed it should have been redder somehow. Reaching the top of the hill I looked down along the side of the church. The sand below in the town was covered in ryegrass – before, it had been black and barren. The last rays of the sun managed to shine across the roofs of the houses next to the sea. I looked over my shoulder. The church was just as it had been, save for the roof now being green, and the steeple as well. I looked down again and saw an old man with a wheelbarrow slowly making his way up the hill towards me. I recognized him as the gravedigger, the same one who had been here when I went away, only much older of course, showing signs of the struggle to keep oneself above ground in order to properly deliver others below ground. I waited for him.

Translated by Mark Ioli

BACTERIOLOGY FOR BEGINNERS

Gyrðir Elíasson

The Kavkaz starter was always stored overnight on a shelf above the stove, in a large white jar with a blue stripe around the top. Every day I would watch my mother wash it off in the kitchen sink, 'bathing the little bastard' as she put it, and my impression of it was like that of creatures I had seen in 8mm films. I would sometimes wake in the middle of the night, terrified it was going to fill up the house, squeezing into every corner until it had completely taken over. But in the morning it would always be found in its proper place in the jar, and I would drink the yogurt it had prepared in the darkness as we lay in our beds. Then one day my mother said she had had enough of this *damned yogurt*, took the culture out into the yard and buried it in the flowerbed next to the marigolds. I missed it terribly. I had never imagined it possible to mourn such a being. Papa didn't speak to Mama for several days, since they had been *his* microbes. He had got it from an old woman, who was in all likelihood just a midwife, but who for a time I believed was a witch. When I read about Pushkin and Lermontov later in life, their time in the Caucasus and untimely deaths, I thought they might have perhaps lived a bit longer had they dispensed with the gunplay and instead drunk some yogurt made from such a starter culture, not that they would have composed work of any better quality. After the death of the bacteria I went out to my father's shed, made a little cross out of wood and wrote 'HERE LIES MR. KAVKAZ' on it, then placed it in the dirt beside the marigolds. The following day the cross was gone, as though the earth had devoured it.

Translated by Mark Ioli

CRETE

Gyrðir Elíasson

He had his house designed as a labyrinth, and for the most part still struggled to find his way around it. Sometimes it took half an hour to locate the kitchen, and more than once he couldn't find the bedroom until well into the night. The worst was when he couldn't find the bathroom. This design had been the height of fashion when the house was built, and some of his buddies who had similar houses tried to explain away their laziness in the kitchen by saying they didn't know how to get there at all. Their wives were much more clever at learning all of the twists and turns, and never got lost. If his wife went to bed before he did, and he was in the living room watching television, he would ask her to unravel a ball of yarn leading to the bedroom to make sure he could find his way. She had long since given up knitting, but there was still plenty of yarn. She at times would use it to trick him, and the thread would lead into the kitchen where he was greeted by the admonishment of dirty dishes in the sink, forcing him to start off again on his uncertain journey towards sleep. Not long ago he started to feel some kind of bumps on either side of his head, which seemed to be slowly growing. More and more he stopped going out. If he was home alone during the day and the doorbell rang, he wouldn't even answer it, since he knew that by the time he found his way to the door it would be too late. He once considered asking his wife to draw him a detailed map of the labyrinth, but nothing ever came of it. It had been forever since he had done any kind of work. The bills piled up in the hallway, but he pretended like he couldn't find them. He had become completely bullheaded.

Translated by Mark Ioli

THE HONEY PEN

Gyrðir Elíasson

As he was writing he noticed that the ink, which was at first black, had gradually become lighter, until finally turning a bright gold and feeling stickier with every word he wrote. He set the pen down, touched his index finger to the translucent letters, then brought it to his lips and tasted it. There was no mistaking it – it was honey. The words on the page glistened in the fresh morning sun shining in through the window. If he didn't know what he had been writing, it would have been impossible to read it, except for the beginning, when the words were still black.

Translated by Mark Ioli

MYSTICAL GRAPEFRUIT

Robert Boucheron

A yellow globe sliced in half, a hemisphere of pliable skin, a whole serving, a sacrifice laid on the breakfast table, a symbol of the sun in a shallow bowl – such is the grapefruit. It promises much to one who sits upright with open eyes yet slumbers still. The day begins, it says.

I plunge the serrated spoon in flesh, rosy as dawn. Juice spurts on the tabletop, a puddle on patterned laminate. The bamboo handle of the spoon in my hand is the bone of a finger, jointed and pale. The juice is the blood of the grapefruit. I long to lap it, freshly spilled, tart and clean, the essence of citrus.

The geometry makes me pause. Is the grapefruit an image of the cosmic wheel? Hollow hub and golden rim, linked by many spokes, it would like to revolve. Or else it is the mystic rose of the world, the round window in the west front of a Gothic cathedral, its petals filled with light and color. A delicate fragrance sways me.

Section by section, I dig with the spoon. I lift triangular prisms to my mouth. I crush the cells with my teeth and spit the seeds. I work my way around the circle, turn the bowl, stab and eat, and so I enact the universal drama. Empty membranes quiver. One last full chunk remains …

Now it looks sad, bare and translucent, robbed of goodness. In the palm of my hand, I squeeze the grapefruit hard so the juice runs. I relax, unfold, and squeeze again. I drain the drops down to a little foam. I discard the misshapen rind like a ball that has lost all bounce.

As at a banquet in ancient Athens, I raise the rim of the bowl to my lips. I drink the pink juice as though my life depended on it.

I smack my tongue for the grapefruit taste. As it is written, so it is finished.

MANGOES, OVERRIPE

Chennai, India, 1998

Yamuna Matheswaran

The family crowds around the scrumptious feast on the living-room floor. It is June; outside, the sun shines down upon the city of Madras unforgivingly. Crows screech, dogs nap in the shade, and overripe mangoes hang limply from the trees.

Grandma carries the plate of applams, hot off the stove, and sets them down beside the other dishes – white rice, *sambhar*, potatoes, *poriyal*, curd, chicken curry, and mangoes plucked from the tree in the backyard, cut open and ready to eat. I'm seated next to my little brother, and our mother admonishes us over our greedy attempts to grab the mangoes before lunch has commenced. Our father and uncle join us on the floor. Thatha, our beloved grandfather, is the only one who gets to sit in an armchair. A Rajnikanth movie begins on Sun TV and the Sunday feast commences.

If only such moments could be frozen, tucked away safely, and brought out during precarious times, as if to tell people: 'This is what you stand to lose.' This is what you stand to lose by means of your harsh words, and your ridiculous ability to remember the bad and forget the good.

YOU CAN

Linda Grierson-Irish

You can sing your baby a lullaby until dusk weaves you together in sleep. You can wake to her feet ridging up against your tummy. You can drag your baby around by the hair until she has lost her soft curls and turned punk-baby. You can lower your baby out onto the pimply canal at the back of Aldi to see if she floats. Or press down on her in the bath; she'll always spring up for air. You can throw your baby down the stairs to see how many times she bounces. You can leave her out in the rain next to the empty recycling bin until she stops crying and puking. You can draw a black circle around your baby's left eye with permanent marker. You can tell her she's ugly and stupid. You can poke her and pinch her and she won't make a fuss. You can kiss her on the lips then give her a little shake if she still doesn't look happy. You can ask her what the hell she does want then, as you slump onto the sofa and jab at the TV remote. You can tell her she's always had ideas above her station, before you slam the back door onto stiffening silence. You can do all these things until you're a grown-up and your baby isn't plastic any more. And then you can hold your baby close and tell her she's yours. You can make long-distance calls to your baby's grandma and ask her if she'd like to come see you. You can wake at night afraid sometimes that your baby is out in the dark, that you forgot to bring her in, that she's alone with the shadow-shapes. You can remember where you are. You can go and check on your baby to make sure she's safe, snuggled under the night-glow. You can stroke her wispy hair and float the blanket back up over the drowsy sprawl of her limbs. You can do all this. You can sing your baby a lullaby.

HONEY-DOS

Marvin Shackelford

Don't forget to trace your daughter's tiny hands and feet. She's grown. Spread the pudgy nubbins of her fingers flat on the paper. Gently hold her still by the wrist. Drag the pencil quick but firmly around the edges of her skin. Wonder if it's where she really ends. Think a moment – if it's where you end. Then stand her up, giggle with her, and do a foot at a time on the back of the sheet. Fold it carefully into thirds and push it less carefully into the envelope addressed to your in-laws. Mark it off the honey-do list. Sing a little for her. When she keeps fussing, heat a bottle. Let her drink, let her gurgle, let her burp and wriggle and face a little too anxiously the sun climbing the walls of the house. Let her tire out and sing some more. When she sleeps, lay her in her crib and move carefully room to room collecting dirty clothes and dishes and toys. Quietly meet the mailman at the door and send the letter away. Bring in bills, advertisements, nothing nearly as personal in return. Write some checks, start loads to wash. Get ahead of your schedule. Wait, helplessly. Stand at the kitchen sink and then in the bathroom or at the back door with its sliding glass keeping you hardly safe from the world beyond, the trees and breezes and noise of people moving place to place. Stand at the nursery door and watch her before she has a chance to wake, knowing soon she will and the day will move on. Feel certain you're losing something, giving away a thing necessary and unmistakable. Don't begin to guess what it could be.

PERFORMATIVE

Marvin Shackelford

He's cute. Everything he writes is cute. He writes about towels and chipmunks and free climbers, but none of it ever quite becomes a story. He follows pretty sentences to the ends of their tethers, to the very last thread, and lets them dangle. He sketches pretty pictures but never draws them together. But he's cute, he's clever, and that's enough. He tweets. He's so thirsty he could sink, he could drown. He puts on a show. He's scathing of current administrations and quick to let everyone know he opposes child abuse, rape, destroying the planet. He shells out for a domain, publishes a new story each week. Writing is political, he insists, but not at awards season. He nominates women who run other journals, and he smiles when they nominate him in return. It's perfectly legit. He flies to conferences, occasionally joins a panel to discuss the great literary concerns of our day, none of which involve character, setting, plot. He offers progressive solutions backed by all the weight of his MFA. Afterhours he sits in dark bars with men and women reaching back to the last grasp of their twenties and young writers skipping class and traveling on grant money. He lets the crowd thin, draws to a single conversation with a brunette, or dirty blonde, one drunk but not quite gone yet. He sits close in the booth and orders another drink. He published her last fall, or maybe one of her friends. She's full of ideas and questions but kind of sleepy. He's very interested. We need more voices like yours, he says. This is the future of literature, he promises, and when he smiles she's sure he means it. It's late, he's cute, and he's saying all the right things.

MAN AT NIGHT

Marvin Shackelford

The same story night after night: empty beer bottles marched along the walls, clear dark clear dark clear and then a long string of dark. Labels peeled. Lipstick-kissed here and there. A column of ants enters a half-full bottle and never leaves. Lime peels. Half an orange. The broken baseboards. The corner into the hall. Fist-sized holes, chest-high. Family portraits, people who never lived here. In the bathroom the toilet has run all night. Shower curtain half pulled down. Tile polished smooth by knees and prayers. Mirror streaked with white and grease. Bedroom doors missing. Unrecognizable bodies. Undrawn curtains. Headlights on the highway. Shallow breathing. The dreams: a classroom, nakedness. Long stretches of water around an automobile. Three pears with the narrow mouths sliced away and a redheaded widow. She's chewing. He stirs, stretches for the blankets, tries to crawl beneath but someone has them pinned. He isn't quite awake. Thirst, always thirsty, urge to piss. He turns it under, buries in sleep. Desperate.

DOG

Gary Duncan

Adam says I should get a dog because that might help, even though he knows I've never liked dogs, not since I was attacked by one when I was a kid, a yappy terrier with a tartan bow tie and matching booties. The little fucker sank its teeth into my leg. Wouldn't let go, even when someone kicked it and tried to poke its eye out. It started frothing at the mouth and I thought, Great, that's all I need now, fucking rabies. This was a long time ago and back then everyone was terrified of rabies, even though Adam said we'd be okay because his dad had told him we didn't have rabies over here and if you wanted rabies you had to go to France because they had rabies and all sorts of shit over there. Turned out the dog didn't have rabies, it was just slobber, and when it let go there was only a scratch and a tiny puncture where one of its teeth had broken through the skin, so it's probably not much of a story, I realise that now, but it does, I hope, go some way to explaining why I don't like dogs.

Adam was my best friend then and he's still my best friend now, and when Ellie died, his sister, my wife, he said I should get a dog because everyone should have a dog and, what the fuck, it might help, even though he knows better than anyone what I think about dogs (don't like them).

It's what Ellie would have wanted, he says, which isn't true because Ellie liked cats, not dogs, and truth be told didn't even like cats that much either.

Not long after the funeral he brings his dog around and says, You can borrow him. See how you get on. You like him, you can keep him.

The dog sits down at my feet, wheezing heavily.

I tell Adam I don't like his dog because it's old and it smells and it won't turn left and that's just fucking weird.

On his way out, he says, Remember, you like him, he's all yours.

BIRD

Mette Norrie

Only when she parks her bike in front of the apartment building she discovers the bird. Under the tire, fuzzy and dead.

Earlier, at the party, she told them she killed her parrot as a child. She never had a parrot, but sometimes she doesn't know what to say, and then she says stuff like that.

Parties remind her of high-school essays: the fumbling beginning and, later, a search for the exit.

The asphalt surrounds the feathers like a silent witness. She pulls her woolen scarf around her hand and picks up the bird, puts it in her pocket. Locks herself into the apartment while she feels it through the coat, at the same time sickening and soft.

BUGMAN

Paul Kavanagh

'It's a problem,' says the bugman. 'But I can solve it.' He leans over the marble countertop and takes a closer inspection of the problem. The problem recoils. 'Do you leave your windows open all night?' We shake our heads. The bugman tuts loudly. 'You must have left the back door open and it sneaked in. You would be amazed how fast they can be.' The bugman swabs his brow and then pokes the problem. It remains steadfast and taciturn. Next, he shows us his equipment. The bugman is proud of his equipment. 'This stuff was designed to kill terrorists.' (I think the bugman is exaggerating.) 'It's the best on the market.' (I believe him.) 'It never fails. Made by the government.' (I could laugh.) 'They pop like popcorn.' My wife claps her hands and cheers. The problem moans. 'Did you hear that?' says the bugman. 'They're obsequious and sycophantic. You could keep it as a pet.' 'No,' I say. The wife would, I know her, she would. 'No,' I reiterate. 'Too expensive, too much trouble,' says the bugman, 'I understand.' I nod. The problem in the cupboard moans, almost too theatrically. I need a drink. The glasses are above the problem. I point. It reaches up. 'To the left,' I say. It hands me a glass. I go to the sink and pour water into the glass. The bugman starts to whistle. The problem groans. I go into the front room. I can't watch. I sit on the sofa and turn on the television. My wife joins me. I turn up the volume and then we hold hands. The news is on – the economy is booming. I sip the water. The old man in the kitchen, wedged in the cupboard of his own choosing, screams and screams.

HERE NOW

Alan Beard

He meets her in the library.

She comes across. 'Remember me?' She is familiar, some charge to her. 'You wanted me once.'

It is the woman he'd followed for a year at university, turned up at the same bar, the same gigs. Stalked, they'd say now. She now has a different set to her face – the lower quarter on one side caved in. She has what look like tyre marks on one arm, also twisted. Her other arm is missing.

'Well, you can have me now,' she says, twirls around for him.

Her figure still beguiles him, calling from a dancefloor years ago. He feels wrongness like coal tar in his throat.

He splutters, 'Got to go. Holiday reading.' He lifts his arm to show her the spines.

She follows him out, on one side the weight of the books, on the other, her. He fears she will always be six inches from his elbow, behind him, beside him, within him as he gets in the car. His wife wrinkles her brow at him and drives away.

Will always be there and yet take up no room. He swivels round to distribute the books to his children and they shout about the beach, the sandcastles they will build. As he answers them in his dad voice, he can hear her whisper, 'I'm here now. I'm yours now.'

H

Simon Collings

I hadn't seen H in a long time. She was little changed, and we soon re-established the easy intimacy we had once shared. We were standing in a meadow of tall grass, with no one else in sight. It was high summer, and the warmth of the late afternoon sun made us languorous. H was wearing a loose, sleeveless dress of pale cotton which perfectly became her. She was aroused and slid the dress slowly over her left shoulder, playfully revealing her naked breast. I began to caress her, but as I did so the breast started to take on the shape and features of a child's head, then rapidly matured into those of a fully-grown man. The face seemed vaguely familiar, though I couldn't quite place who it was. It was smaller than life-size and unmoving, like a waxwork. As I held her breast, the flesh turned to stone, and the head fell sideways into the grass where it landed upright, a small plinth sprouting from the neck. H adjusted the dress to cover the place where her breast had been, and bent forward to examine the curious object. It seemed to be suffused by a warm, pink glow, as from a hidden spotlight suspended above our heads.

FRAYED EDGES

Bronwyn Gore

I had a dream that I could cut my heart out and sew it back in. I would take out the stitches and lay it next to me. Everything would be so calm and peaceful but after a while my body would grow cool and sluggish and I knew I had to put it back. With the same attitude as doing a chore, like putting milk back in the fridge, I would take my heart and sew it in again. Every time, the edges became more frayed and I knew one day I wouldn't be able to put it back.

MARY

Victoria Linnea Thomas

The little girl sitting directly behind me didn't look like she belonged to this hick town. She was maybe twelve and dressed in very nice clothes, looked like a fashion model in the making. And she was wearing heels. Pretty sure the first time she stepped out in those had caused a scandal. She was sitting next to the only black girl in the church. She kept calling her Mary. They were obviously friends in the way little girls are friends with no thought of the implications. Mary had no hair or eyebrows and she was very pale and her head was wrapped in a silk scarf. Probably a chemo kid. The model girl kept trying to babble off to her and Mary kept shushing her so she could listen to the sermon.

The model girl started braiding my hair and I let her cos she reminded me of me and I was hoping it'd be a sign that I approved of the two girls' friendship. The preacher was talking about the afterlife and how Jesus came to get you when you died. I don't know why I was listening. I'd heard it all before. Every summer that I came to live with my dad after the divorce. He always sent me to the Baptist church that ruled the western white part of town. When I rebelled I left this racist town and its backwards religion and went to a historically black college. Thought I could make up for the racism of where I was from by making myself the minority. Thought I was free of this little town 'til my mom died and I flunked out of college. Turned out Dad's hillbilly town was the only place I had left.

The little model girl had started to hum. Someone from behind her finally started telling her off for touching my hair. I turned around to look and I saw Mary's face. Her mouth was slightly

open and her eyes were frozen wide. She was looking behind me – through me. Like in her last moment she had seen something I couldn't. I'd never seen anyone look so happy.

BITING

Rose van Mierlo

As a child I had a problem with violence: I liked playing with others and I liked playing rough. I wasn't an angry child. I just didn't know how to hold things and keep them whole.

The worst trouble I ever got in was when I bit my little brother in the side. From what I am told, it happened without provocation. One day I just grabbed him and tore into his soft belly. It left a mark: a perfect round set of dashes, like punctuation. My mother was furious; I remember the aftermath. We joke about it now. You can still see the mark, but everything else has changed. He has grown into someone with large hands, with which he reads newspapers. He has casual encounters. Sometimes he wears a suit for work, which makes me wonder how we got here, carrying ourselves in these strange bodies while holding down grown-up jobs.

Another memory: At night we would sneak outside to dig for worms to feed to the chickens. We would come back home with sand on our faces and filthy feet. Again there would be yelling, but it was worth it because there is nothing as delicious as being the only ones awake in a cold and bright world, to feel the warmth of dozing chicken bodies and the wriggling of worms – all of which are performers in a child's narrative of invincibility, in which the smallest people conquer the biggest things.

On Mondays my brother sees a therapist. He suffers from hypochondria. He believes he might die at any moment. Most likely a heart attack, he says. Could be a tumor. He is twenty-nine years old. And I think about the mark, and how I just wanted to get as close to him as possible. Like an animal. To give him an anchor, a

memory of a time when a body was all you had, and it was enough.

I try to tell him about the worms, but he doesn't remember.

MAN ON FIRE
Joy Kennedy-O'Neill

My cousin Benny's on the bridge again, engulfed in flames and screaming. He flaps his arms and his jacket sleeves burn like tissue paper. We can smell his charring skin, his hair, his cotton Levi's.

He's going to jump. The river water below is cool and flat silver, but we tell him don't do it. A fall like that, at least sixty feet – he'd hit the surface like cracking into concrete. It'd kill him for sure. He knows it. That's why he's on the bridge.

Spectators cup their hands to mouths. 'It gets better!' 'You don't want to do this.'

This is the third time he's combusted like this, and honestly, we – his family – have always thought he's a little self-absorbed. The first time it happened, he was standing on a ledge and *whoosh*! We got him some help, a good therapist and Zoloft, Zyprexa or Paxil. Prozac? One of those Zs or Ps. His skin grew back but he said it didn't feel like his own.

The second time, we admitted him into a good place for a stay. But he says flames still ate the ends of his fingertips. Heat prickled the back of his neck.

I sat him down then and told him the power of positive thinking. Think happy, be happy. That sort thing. And he looked at me with those sad eyes, the ones I guess are boiling now. Said I didn't understand.

I'm sure he can't see now. He's running parallel to the guard rail and flailing for it. He's a good guy – rescues greyhounds, has a job, a girlfriend. Volunteers. It's not like there's anything to make him unhappy. But he says that sometimes his sinews burn and wrap so tight around his bones that they break in his sleep.

The flames spark angry yellow swirls. The more he runs, the more it looks like the blaze is chasing him.

His mouth moves with lips burned thin.

We can't hear.

He takes the leap. Jumps.

I don't watch. How can he do this to us? Honestly, how selfish can you get?

ALL THAT I'VE DONE

Matthew Roy Davey

There was only one I didn't kill straight away. He was crying, on his knees, saying, 'God, help me. God, help me,' that kind of thing, so I thought, why not, see what happens. So I told him he had half an hour to see if God shows up and, you know, changes the circumstances.

He stayed on his knees, his eyes closed and his lips moving. I could barely hear what he was saying. There was a look of furious concentration on his face.

I smoked and watched him. His grey trousers were dark where he'd wet himself. I was interested to see if anything happened, what it would mean for me, given all I've done.

He started praying faster towards the end, but it didn't make any difference. After half an hour, God hadn't shown up and the circumstances hadn't changed.

It wasn't pretty.

That's the only one I regret, for how I did it. I shouldn't have done it like that. I shouldn't have given him that time.

FLOWERS
Paul Hamer

It started with the flowers. Dead flowers. Sent in a box to the place where she worked.

In truth, it started long before that. On an icy road deep in the middle of the night. A phone call. A collision. A death. She pleaded guilty. Death by reckless driving. Sentence suspended. Never once looking the family in the eye. She hid herself away. For a while. Then gradually re-emerged. New town; new friends; new job. It was there she found love. Married. Started a family. And this is what it feels like, she thought, this is what it feels like to be happy.

Then.

Then the flowers came. Once a week. Lying dead in a box the size of a child's coffin.

'You should call the police,' her husband would say.

'No, it's nothing, just a prank.'

But he called them anyway. Behind her back. And the truth re-emerged. The truth she kept hidden.

He read the report. The child had been riding up front, on her father's lap, seat belt behind her. When the cars collided, she was crushed by the airbag.

He told his wife this.

'You're not the only one to blame,' he said.

But the guilt cut her open. That night, she cried again, and pushed him away when he tried to hold her.

In the morning, he took the flowers into the garden and lit a fire.

PUBLIC ADDRESS

Daryl Scroggins

Evening, and the neighborhood starts to fill again with people coming home from work. I always find myself listening then, up in my third-floor apartment. I listen for sounds from the man who lives a block away on the ground floor. This is when he gets let out for some air. I can see him if I press the right side of my face hard against the window, and there is always an older woman standing behind him at the door. She's the one who goes out after a while to collect him. The man may be a kid who looks like he's fifty, or he may be a fifty-year-old who looks like a kid. I couldn't tell even when I stuck my head out the front door once and used my binoculars. Zoomed in on, the man looks like he just glanced up to find that all the people he was with a minute ago have vanished. Then he shouts 'What do you want? What do you *want*?' He shouts it several times. Sometimes more than several times, if the old lady lets him stay out longer. He shouts it at his hands. He shouts it at the sky. Occasionally at the pavement. The interesting thing to me is how people hearing him often look around for the 'you'. Before long he's back in and people stop looking. I turn back from my window then. But the room always looks different. Like everything in it, in its place, has forgotten something. It looks like it does when someone knocks and you're home but you're not.

TELEVISION

Aber O. Grand

The television is always on in the Paterson residence. Mrs Paterson makes sure of it. Should you ask her for her reasoning, she would confide: 'Bonnie loves watching television.' Bonnie is the family's senior poodle. 'She's a very smart dog, that she is.' But Bonnie's favourite spot for nestling isn't anywhere near the television screen, it's on top of her bed of many years, an old crib mattress situated far in the corner of the living room.

The television perorates incessantly, its din so loud as to be heard from anywhere within the large house. Mrs Paterson makes sure of it. Should you ask her for her reasoning, she would confide: 'Bonnie loves listening to the television.' But Bonnie is deaf.

Bonnie may be deaf, but that doesn't stop her from perking up whenever she senses her puphood friend nearing the house.

Keys rattle behind the main door, and it opens promptly.

'Hey, Mom!' Libby calls out. 'I'm home.'

Libby makes sure to visit her mother at least semi-annually.

Bonnie jerks her muzzle towards the main door, and with her cloudy, cataract eyes, she sees her forever friend of yore. Libby's parents bought Bonnie for her fifteenth birthday, twenty years ago. Bonnie forgets all about her arthritis and hurtles toward Libby. Libby bends down and bestows Bonnie a perfunctory pat. Bonnie wants more, but she is grateful nonetheless.

'I'm coming, I'm coming,' Mrs Paterson calls out as she shuffles into the living room. Her face lights up the moment she sees her daughter and she immediately stretches her arms towards her, expecting an embrace.

Libby hurries past her mother and up to the coffee table where

the remote rests, while Bonnie frolics between her feet. Libby points the remote at the screen and turns the television off. 'Mom,' Libby says, 'why do you always have the television on?'

Mrs Paterson takes a moment. Her lips quiver as she rummages for an answer. 'I don't want Bonnie to feel lonely,' she says.

ONE-HANDED

Robert Masterson

'Kee-rist,' the Old Man'd say when he settled into his chair, some kind of cheap fake Laz-E-Boy recliner maybe even from the Salvation Army, or like he said it, 'Salivation Army.' If anybody'd ask him, 'Say, Pop, just where *did* that chair come from? Where'd you get it, Pop?' he'd just say, 'Watch a you seff,' and that was that. Maybe we'd laugh about it, you know, but not so's he could see.

The Old Man liked to do things one-handed – boy, I remember that, whether it was splitting the tax stamp on a pint of Jim Beam, or like he said it, '*Mister* Bem,' or lighting a match for a usable White Owl stump or giving one of us a crack on the back of the head with those thick, hard knuckles of his. It used to bug me a bunch, but I think I know why he liked to do it, why being able to do things with one hand like that made him feel like he knew what he was doing and it showed when he could do it. The Old Man loved it when he'd catch one of us trying to do something one-handed. He'd grin, you know, he'd be 'bemming' from ear to ear.

Came in handy, too, that habit, when the Old Man got one of his paws jammed up in his lathe, split it down the middle like a codfish, and in those days they weren't trying to save nothing, they weren't sewing nothing back on. It was, like, 'There you go, mister, there's your hook and there's a couple grand, too. Send one of your boys around when he's big enough to stand in your spot and do what you did for the rest of his life.' Even those days a couple a grand didn't go too damn far, and when it was gone, it was just gone and that was that.

Flash Reviews

flash fiction micro fiction sudden fiction postcard fiction minute fiction drabble byte ficlet 69er nano fiction 55 fiction furious fiction fast fiction quick fiction skinny fiction the short-short story

Meg Pokrass, *Alligators at Night* (Bath: Ad Hoc Fiction, 2018). 118 pp. ISBN 978-1-912095-65-0

Meg Pokrass's collection of seventy-two well-crafted flashes offers eclectic variety. The stories range from a quirky date involving therapy cats, via unusual similes ('his penis crouched like a worried squirrel'), to an uncomfortable tale in which grown men lead young children away to show them a 'fun time'. Such ambiguous endings leave readers in difficult places, wondering exactly what happens to the children, and the unanswered questions persist long after the book has been put down.

Pokrass's unique style is essentially realist, but often exploits the irreal. 'The women were large as human snails and round as moons', for example, is a bizarre yet fitting description that provides a refreshing look at the ordinary. Some scenarios verge on the ridiculous: Jade Starfish disappears into the abyss beneath a porch's broken floorboards, only to have the emergency telephone operator offer the suicide hotline instead of sending physical help. There are also controversial perspectives: 'He returned with mugs of hot, mulled cider. She hoped it was spiked' is fearless writing, but may shock. The occasional flash is written in the second person, the use of 'you' throwing the reader intimately into a life that is likely to be drastically different from their own. Some stories, such as 'Poking' (referring to the virtual 'poke' notification on Facebook) and 'Tinder Date', are rooted in the modern era of social media and apps.

This variety demonstrates Pokrass's versatility and skill. The stories knit together to form a beautifully seamless collection that can be either read in a single sitting or dipped into at one's leisure. Some flashes may not be to everyone's taste, but *Alligators at Night*

is definitely recommended for those interested in reading a book that takes them out of their comfort zone.

Jade Hainsworth-Walsh

James Thomas and Robert Scotellaro (eds), *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2018). 269 pp. ISBN 978-0-393-35470-6

Exceptional fiction is particularly difficult to accomplish when it is also 'exceptionally short': there's no room for flannel; every word must count. The 135 stories, by eighty-nine authors, in *New Micro* exemplify the versatility of brevity: each no more than 300 words, the micros together run the whole gamut of fiction, delivering diverse themes and characters in a variety of styles in which no word is superfluous.

Each story moves rapidly into a brand-new world. For example, Darlin' Neal's 'Four Hundred Miles' positions us in the cab of a truck, traversing an expansive landscape, then on the next page we are stuck inside a domestic heating duct. The bizarre opening of Kevin Griffith's memorable 'Furnace' – 'For days now, the furnace repair guy has been trapped in one of the ducts' – merely hints at the strangeness to come. In less than 160 words, Griffith takes us inside a family home where the repairman has inexplicably become trapped: 'How this happened, no one is sure'. '[T]he authorities are too busy to rescue him' because there is an unspecified war going on, 'a war that never seems to end'. So the kids end up feeding the furnace guy as if he is some kind of pet: 'Sometimes we slide the couch forward and let the children drop crackers and sliced apples into his open mouth.' This micro has setting, character, and narrative arc, but it is what's missing that gives it its greatest impact. The absences fill themselves with questions: How did the man get trapped? Which war? And what 'armless people'? Brilliant!

I found that I could only read a handful of such well-crafted

micros in one sitting. The potency of each tale lingers in the mind, as it should; but before you can fully digest it, the next story imposes itself. The experience can become overwhelming, and you may not enjoy every flash in *New Micro*. But if you keep your mouth open long enough, there are plenty of 'crackers' that will drop in.

Bjorn Ephgrave

Robert Alexander (ed.), *Spring Phantoms: Short Prose By 19th Century British and American Authors* (Buffalo, New York: White Pine Press, 2018). 212 pp. ISBN 978-1-945680-12-0

This anthology of sketches, prose poems, parables, vignettes, fables, folk-tales, fancies, letters, essays, and extracts from nature writing and memoirs, drawn from forty-five authors, beginning with William Blake's 'Memorable Fancies' from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) and ending with two stories from Lord Dunsany's *Time and the Gods* (1906), is described by its editor as 'truly a mixed bag', but in the positive sense of having 'something for every taste'.

It is a delightful selection to dip into, with both familiar and new (to me) works by the famous, such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton, and introductions to future favourites, like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Dora Greenwell McChesney. The biographical sketches by Holly Iglesias are invaluable.

A back-cover endorsement describes the collection as 'eclectic', and it is, particularly as opportunities to emphasize connections seem to be eschewed. The title, drawn from one of Lafcadio Hearn's *Fantastics and Other Fancies* (1919), about the life-draining obsession with 'the place where we shall never be! […] And the Woman that we shall never know!', is evocative, but not really representative of the anthology. The structure is roughly chronological, so thematic connections are recurring rather than foregrounded. There is a case to be made for juxtaposing the extracts from Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and the glorious 'Letter from a Freedman to His Old Master' (1865) by Jourdon Anderson, rather than interrupting them with the voices

of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. One might also have fruitfully grouped together the nature writing, the parables and fables, and the prose poems, particularly as this is an anthology one is likely to return to rather than read in a sitting.

My advance reader copy of the anthology contains some regrettable typos that will presumably be corrected: 'b' and 'h' are commonly substituted, with 'be', for example, becoming 'he'. 'Hark to the tinkling silver hells' is striking; most unfortunate is: 'For many days the fresh morning air had resounded with the dull bumming of the prairie-chickens'. But the errors did not diminish my pleasure of reading so many and various prose pieces.[1]

Melissa Fegan

[1] *Editors' Note.* The errors were corrected.

Grant Faulkner, Lynn Mundell, and Beret Olsen (eds),
Nothing Short Of: Selected Tales from 100 Word Story
(San Francisco: Outpost19, 2018). 117 pp.
ISBN 978-1-944853-48-8

This pocket-sized book of 116 flashes showcases the first six years of 100WordStory.org, founded 2011. Like even shorter fixed-length fictions – the 'six-word story', fifty-word 'dribble', '55 fiction', and '69er' – the 100-word story, or 'drabble', stimulates writers by imposing a constraint the editors acknowledge is 'arbitrary'. Their Introduction stresses compositional 'concision', 'compression', and 'excision', leaving 'hints' and 'gaps' for readers to follow and fill. Like many popular iterations of this established critical theory, it distinguishes itself by metaphor and simile: 'spectral blank spaces' make writing and reading flash 'similar to playing the Ouija board'.

Invoking 'the other side' seems as fanciful as one blurber's rebranding of '100s' as 'centuries' containing 'microscopic millennia in nutshells'. But the best justify such hyperbole. Courtney Watson's 'Hard Time' implicates the legacy of slavery in the criminality of an incarcerated bank-robber, as he assembles an 'antebellum plantation' house 'populated by little doll people' – who would 'never, ever' do what he did, 'when they had a place like this to call home'. In contrast, Maud Casey's 'On the Tye' captures, with poignant irony, a fleeting spot of time when a Parkinson's sufferer goes 'tubing': 'He would remember it the rest of his life, he said 10 days before he died. His body anchored and buoyant, the sunlit water returning it to him.' These 'nutshells', encapsulating socio-historical complexity and existential extremity, exemplify the potency of compression and the anthology's impressive range.

Two other intimations of mortality demonstrate that

compression does not preclude further formal sophistication: Jeff Friedman's magic-realist 'Old Men', in which 'old men lose their gravity, floating off sidewalks'; and Melanie Taylor Herrera's backstory 'Snapshots of a Crash', a reverse chronology of time-stamped moments preceding impact. Intertextual flashes include Elizabeth Swann's writing-back story 'Humpty Dumpty', about Humpty's long-suffering 'Missus'; and Lina Chern's 'Great Composers of the American Popular Song', which arranges stock motifs into a numinous narrative.

Pamela Painter's 'What do *Those* Characters Want?' is a meta-flash whose characters envy inhabitants of fuller forms. *Nothing Short Of*, which ends with two apocalyptic precis, proves that the long grass is not always greener; that drabbles can be short of nothing, transcend their brevity and reach 'the other side'.

Peter Blair

Nicole Rivas, *A Bright and Pleading Dagger*
(Brookline, Massachusetts: Rose Metal Press, 2018).
34 pp. ISBN 978-1-941628-14-0

With *A Bright and Pleading Dagger*, Nicole Rivas contributes to literary fiction's overdue presentation of women's sexuality and lust in an authentic, cliché-free way. Among many important things, Rivas shows the mute desire of virginal young women. It does not matter that many of her characters are women desiring other women: the yearning and the hope and the fear Rivas captures so elegantly translate effortlessly to any relationship. This is queer fiction, but the collection transcends that to speak to all.

An examination of the story 'Crush' shows this. The protagonist thinks Audrey is just another of the 'straight girls, the ones who love to embarrass you', on whom she tends to develop crushes. They are eating lunch at Audrey's house, alone, when Audrey spills food on her shirt and decides she needs to change. Hopeful, our protagonist tags along:

> [chewing] on your bean burrito as you go so it doesn't seem like you care too much. […] She's wearing a zebra print bra and has love handles. […] Notice that she's very jiggly. Spell the word jiggly under your breath. Don't flinch when Audrey turns around and sees you looking at her. Don't act surprised.

With these skilfully woven words, Rivas shows the helpless desire of the speaker, the longing and the guilt for her attraction to someone she assumes to be straight, as well as the fear of the irrevocability of acting on her feelings, the way it will change, well, everything. The story is simple and poignant, capturing the

breathless way that life changes for young adults as experiences and growth piles upon them – and they are not always changes for the worse, Rivas reveals.

The eleven other stories are similarly insightful, offering observations that will resonate with readers of all ages and genders, each story crafted and shaped so that every sentence earns its place in the collection. The whole is a small book that seems to contain weightier matter than could possibly be found within so few pages. It is highly recommended.

Liz Milne

Michael Cocchiarale and Scott D. Emmert (eds), *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction* (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2017). 249 pp. ISBN 978-1-68217-270-4

This is the first volume of scholarly essays to be devoted to flash fiction: confirmation, if any were needed, that the form requires academic attention. A refreshingly serious alternative to the growing number of how-to-write guides, *Critical Insights* comprises three main sections: Critical Contexts (which includes an updated, if still very USA-focussed, version of Pamelyn Casto's engaging overview, 'Flash Fiction: From Text to Audio to Music, Stage, and Film Adaptations'); Critical Readings (ten essays on specific authors); and Resources (bibliographies of some of the best anthologies, collections, magazines, criticism, and writing guides).

Authors, students, and academics wanting to deepen their understanding of the form will find Critical Readings the most interesting section. It opens with Robert C. Evans's 'Kate Chopin's Flash Fiction and Flash Fiction Theory' and concludes with Jarrell D. Wright's 'Nanofiction and the Limits of the Form: Insights from the 420-Character Fictions of Lou Beach'. In between, there are essays on Lydia Davis, Kathy Fish, Amy Hempel, Mary Robinson, and Diane Williams. The section is dominated, then, by considerations of North American flash-fiction authors.

Thankfully, there are three essays that broaden the scope of the volume. Like the other seven, each is excellent (sensitive, thought-provoking): Santino Prinzi's engagement with flashes by Franz Kafka and Robert Walser, 'Against Short Attention Spans: "Fragmentary" Fiction for "Fragmentary" Lives'; Eric Sterling's 'Living Together, Living Apart: Jews Under Oppressive Russian Regimes in Isaac Babel's Flash Fiction'; and Laura Hatry's 'Latin

American Flash Fiction: Julio Cortázar and Luisa Valenzuela'.

I learned much from the volume: the flash-fiction authors' works are illuminated with a pleasing lack of literary theory and my list of must-read books has grown. I now look forward to flash-focussed essay collections that engage with China, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK … They will hopefully be published in paperback and sold at a reasonable price: at the time of writing, the hardback *Critical Insights: Flash Fiction* is on sale by Salem Press for $105.00 and by amazon.co.uk for £98.77. It is an important volume, but at that cost, even some university libraries won't buy it.

Ashley Chantler

flash fiction micro fiction **sudden fiction** postcard fiction **minute fiction** drabble **byte** ficlet **69er**
nano fiction **55 fiction** furious fiction **fast fiction** quick fiction **skinny fiction** the short-short story

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