

Neon

A Journal of Brilliant Things

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The Idea Groves

Jane Flett

They rush into the chippie in the woozy rum hours after 3am, the hours of Formica and kebabs. They gather armfuls of greaseproof paper, pungent and vinegary, with small, scrabbled hands. Wee ant eater hipsters, foraging.

They resemble bug-eyed thyroid kids, expressions as huge as fists. Undoubtedly, their nails are dirty and feet unclean. They reek of pollen, the wallowing cherry blossoms of Hillhead Park and the West End.

No one asks their names, and no one gives them bother. Folk know better. That's the way it is with the Chipshop Darlings.

Once, the kid on dish duty tried to break their fragile poise. He gathered his suds and gestured to one of the girls, with a guttural voice and all-right-darlin' air. She gaped at him, eyes widening, tears large and hot like infected wounds.

The papers rustled.

Converse scudded across the lino, doors slammed.

The shop fell silent and strangled as a dial tone, and stayed that way for a week. There were recriminations, wallops from the manager.

No one bothered them again.

They work at the Idea Grove. It's fallen into disrepair these days, but the Chipshop Darlings still nurse the dying plants, try to tend them back to health.

That's why they need the paper. Nothing nurtures the fragile roots of idea cuttings like the warm vinegar teats of fish&chip paper. It's best harvested at those small hours too, while it's still warm with drunken rambling and the thrill-gasp evening adventure smell of *still-before-bedtime*. That's

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what works best for the ideas, keeps them cosy and fresh through all kinds of weather. Keeps them alive.

No one else much bothers with the Groves these days. They've got synthetics, acrylic ideas that rinse at 60 degrees, alloy ideas that withstand road tests at up to 120mph.

In Switzerland, they're testing a new metaphysic crafted from atomised nylon that holds firm against ninety-seven degrees of scepticism. They built a long tunnel, and fired Eleatic electrons at it, almost at the speed of light. The idea held up well.

They don't need the Groves.

No one needs the Groves.

Apart from the Chipshop Darlings.

The Groves are pretty old, and this is one reason to have faith in them. Although the ideas there have grown gnarly and wizened with disrepair, they're not dead yet. This may be because they are quiet ideas too; the synthetic manufacturers don't feel they need to bother with sabotage.

But the grove ideas are there, worming their way into the earth. Persisting.



Sometimes the kids take dares at the Groves. Sometimes the drunks in the district wander home via them and piss through the hedgerows. Young, blossoming inspirations buckle under a streak of urine.

The Chipshop Darlings don't have time to stand guard all the time, though they always worry about the ideas, camp out in the fertile months.

But it's terrible.

The kids yank handfuls of ideas out of the earth for an afternoon dare, run them to the schoolyard and present them for inspection. No one ever thinks much of these ideas. They're picked too soon; they wilt like dandelions in a glass tumbler. None of them makes the afternoon; they're flung to the fields with derision, and the entertainment turns to thumb wars and peanuts.

The kids still bother, because they once caught a beauty. Billy Slater did. He ran fearless as a gunner right to the centre of the Groves. Of course, that was where the witch lived, the bug-eyed witch who would peel off your skin if you ever came near, wrap it round her roots, and cackle. Oh, she was evil. She reeked of pickled eggs and vinegar, hair as black as rotten teeth. No one went to the centre of the Groves. Except for wee Billy Slater.

He ran in, grabbed a good-un, and pelted for the yard. He heard the yells of the Chipshop Darlings and bombed it right out of there, didn't stop until he was right inside the gates, heaving and panting like an only-just-victorious gazelle.

It was a beauty. The Chipshop Darlings had been nursing this one, tending it with all the vinegar papers they could find. It reeked of promise, a real diamond, right up there with Socrates ilk. Right up with the Swiss.

In the middle of their circle, it glowed. Everyone felt wiser just looking at it, felt good, all understanding and nods. There was sense. The girls grinned, bit lips, embarrassed by a

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sudden knowing. The boys jostled, abashed but happy with that hot rush of superiority.

Of course, they all wanted it. The older boys demanded it should be theirs, Billy contested – all hands flung in and pulled pieces to their chests. That sublime idea ended up in pieces. Everyone clutched the empty words they had won but, of course, the pieces were nothing. They tried to tape them back together, PrittStick, stitching, Uhu, putty, nails, hammers. Later, they tried water and earth, planting the broken roots in a window box outside the maths class where they could watch it with impunity, notice if it flourished. Of course, it died.

The Chipshop Darlings were sad about that one, but they carried on, delicate fingered and ever-eager. They spent hours in city bookshops, rushed back resplendent with copies of Kant and Schopenhauer from the wee corner shops on Otago Lane. These were tucked deep in the earth and vinegar-nourished. They waited, watched and spoke of propositions. Something was bound to happen soon.

As ever, something did.

The Groves did not belong to the Chipshop Darlings. If anyone's, they were the Council's. The Council did not believe in the Idea Groves. The Council believed in flats and supermarkets and parking meters. The Council sold the Groves to Sainsbury's, who do three-for-two on sausages and 12-pack beers during major sports events.

I guess that's an idea too.

Sometime I still see the Chipshop Darlings, silent and wide-eyed in the West-End cafes. They keep window boxes now, and keep quiet.

The Swiss have moved on too.

These days, they're making guns.

Three Poems

M.E. Silverman

On Exhibit

The Tree of Life is empty.
This is no mistake.
Please believe.

We coated it with iron,
stored it in a corner wing
the color of slate.

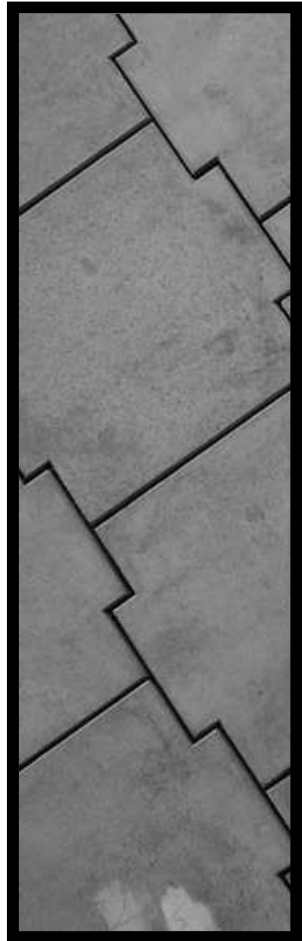
Here, in the Natural History Museum,
seeing it is a fundamental part
of the tour.

Drop

My body knows this blue wallpaper will
soon stream into my marrow,
make my feet wrinkled and soggy,
the prints of my hands and feet
unreadable and useless.

My mind may finally give
in to the urge to sweep streets,
to scrub the bricks of Hell's Kitchen
or stand six floors high
on top of a building no one visits.

My resumé reveals drunken days
and late-night orgies



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of reruns, while the pendulum pull-chain
clocks days from a fan –
have you heard all this before?

I want to disappear into the noise
of the coupling city – no,
I want more
noise, to scream
from a lit window you walk past

in Chelsea or Tudor City,
to remember why I wait
tables, and why I perch at the edge
of a bench, pecking at my lunch
like the pigeons at my feet.

Who remembers each raindrop
that drops into back alley
dumpsters onto the gray
backs of mice scuttling through shadows?
Who remembers?

Not
you.

The Body

A thin film of plastic covers
the cracked
windows. It puffs
from the wind,
sounds like cockroaches caught,
unable to escape a space –
a bedroom that breathes,
a staleness

that tickles the throat.

Detectives are late
to the scene. Dark spots
coagulate like crushed dates.

Peaches filched from a neighbor's tree
brown in a laundry basket
and block
the bathroom door.

Flecks of black hair
crust the checkered linoleum.
On the white counter,
smudges and broken tiles look like scabs.
Pill cases stand
upturned, empty –
but no toothbrush or comb
nor bar of soap.

Flies ballet in and out
of the stained toilet.
In the antique tub,
beer bottles float
in piss and spit and dirt.
Near a four-pack
of Angel Soft, unopened,
running shoes slump
on their sides, still tied –
as if looking
for a way out.

Three Poems

Miranda Merklein

Flight

Confronted by the dusty outline of a bird hitting the glass,
wings spread into a wide quarter-moon, feather marks still
visible where it struck – This is enough to ruin everything.
This is enough to press “Stop” and rewind your song
indefinitely, but then you start thinking: If you had to be a
bird, you would be a mockingbird made of lead, or titanium,
and you would smash through windows unharmed while
people cupped their faces in disbelief. You would fly past
them, tear through their tedious rooms and explode the
western wall.



Parallels

She wakes up
at dawn, sleeps until noon
in a three-storey house
in Asheville,
sprinkling y'allisms
over torn open bags
of rat poison

littering the crawl spaces
beneath.

Her parents, now divorced,
are married again.
The lawnmower is still broken,
and she's probably
an attorney by now,
with an impeccable
temporal lobe,
boarding a flight to Palo Alto.

She never goes to bed, never
wakes up.

She did get hit by those
random bullets,
didn't survive rolling down
the ski basin, forever
entombed by an Indian drunk driver
and several other
prison-bound delinquents.

Or, she is sitting in a small office,
on an uncomfortable, black
futon couch belonging to a dead
man she has never met,

surrounded by unraveling
wicker furniture,
bought with Cuban drug money
several lifetimes ago.

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Samaritan

We drain the rent. We donate
blood for our neighbors, landlords,

future schoolmasters,

students met by fragment bombs
overseas, Middle Eastern night crawlers

aerating the soil we scythe. Septic water,
rubella, hepatitis,

viral infections colonizing the spine.

Assassins for the cure, we strike
the gospel line,

affixing the permanent bandage —
platelets fasting in the sun.



The Second Class Jesus

Martin Hayes

There is a long dark road, full of twist and turns and bends and at the end of it there is a small post office. The building is made of wood and is painted white (although the paint is flaking and peeling now) and it has a sturdy wooden walkway running right around it. The sign that reads *Post Office* is rusting and pitted and it squeaks whenever the wind picks up.

Judas sits behind the short mahogany service counter and he bundles letters into two piles, one for domestic and one for international airmail. There have been no customers so far today. In the background, a small cheap radio plays yet another generic Gospel song. After long enough, everything sounds the same.

Judas likes to look at the addresses on the envelopes as he works. He likes to imagine how it would feel to live in those far off places, in those strange sounding towns and streets and avenues. He likes to read the names too. And if it is a man's name then he imagines what it might be like to live as that man, to become the parasite, to raise that man's children and to take his wife. If the intended's name is a woman's, then he will close his eyes and see her face, the subtle curves of her cheekbones, perhaps the arch of an eyebrow. But it is always the same face that he sees, and always the same voice that he hears.

Just like the Gospel songs, even memory eventually succumbs to routine, originality to habit.

Judas was a famous man once, long ago, infamous even, notorious among the desert towns and villages. Now he is a martyr to history. He is the misrepresented. His notoriety is a distortion of the things which he tried to do.

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After finishing with the letters he goes to work on the parcels. He feels strange, off kilter somehow, he's been remembering more and more as the day has dragged on. Rattling each parcel, listening carefully to the dull sounds that creep through the cardboard, he wonders what their corrugated cases might contain. In his mind, they always hold broken statues, fractured Messiahs.

He stacks the boxes and parcels on a long blue table, where they await the van which will bring them to the main dispatch centre. But as he stacks and piles them he notices something. One of the parcels is labelled: second-class post. And the address, when he reads that address he almost faints, almost dies as that last and fiercest wave of memory washes over him.

Judas shuts his eyes, not trusting what they are seeing. They are two blue liars, fibbers and whores to disinformation. They have to be. How else could you explain it? That name and address cannot be real. It's a joke, a prank. Where are the hidden cameras? Where are the hidden cameras?

He opens his eyes and they reluctantly take in the address - *Jesus Christ, Nazareth, Israel*.

Judas cries salty tears of fury and sorrow. His fists are clenched, each knuckle white like snow on a mountain peak. He thinks of the times when they had laughed together, when the days were long and the sun had always shone on them. And he thinks of the times when they cried, and of the day of his betrayal and of his death. And he thinks about false prophets and the way the media always spins things and how only the feeble of mind will worship a fake. He thinks about his rightful place in the great scheme of things, how history might have been fairer had he ascended to the throne instead of the impostor.

Gathering himself, he wipes the tears from his creased face and places that second-class parcel beside the main bulk of boxes, so that it will not go by airmail.

Then he walks across the badly worn linoleum and turns the radio off, the room fills with an easy, practiced silence. He pulls down the woven blinds and moves silently to the back door (which leads to a second, smaller room where he eats his lunch) and he turns out the light. Carefully, as though he is afraid of waking someone, he pulls the door shut behind him.

The smaller room is dim, lit only by an arched table lamp. The rusting refrigerator buzzes and hums like a kicked hornet's nest. He glances up at the clock on the wall and sighs when he sees the time. Ten to nine. Not long now, not long until it all starts over.

Judas picks up his Tupperware lunch box and rinses out his coffee cup. He turns then and switches off the table lamp. In darkness he opens the back door, but not before picking up the loose coil of thick rope which hangs by a nail from the back of it.

An unseen bird sings somewhere in the forest as he steps down from the walkway and begins his moonlit journey.

Animals rustle about him. Branches (kindling dry in this heat) snap and crack beyond the main bank of trees. He thinks he hears a snake hiss. After half a mile or so, he comes to a tree which he knows better than any lover.

It is a traitor tree.

It is at once fiction and fabrication and yet, inexplicably, it is as real as the sunrise, absolute and unarguable, a constant in an ever-altering world, a fixed point against a drifting bed of ice.

Judas places his Tupperware lunch box carefully at the foot of the towering tree. He hopes that tomorrow it will be chicken instead of cheese, although it never is.

He uncoils the rope and slings it up and over the lowermost branch. He pulls on the hairy line to test the branch's strength. It is solid, thick as a man's arm and then, talking time and care about the job, he fashions a noose.

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Rolling a stout log into place he climbs up and slides the coarse necklace over his head. It feels heavy on his shoulders, like a guilty secret.

He feels no pain, knows no fear.

Judas dies again. And in death he finds a restful (if brief) peace.

He wakes beneath the tree, his clothes damp from sleeping in the lush summer grass, the sun sparkles in the dew drops that cling to each tall strand, splitting the cool morning light into a chorus of colours. Judas picks up his lunch box and begins to walk, wondering where he is and what the new day might bring, feeling curiously disappointed at the sight of those cheese sandwiches.

The road he travels is long and dark, full of twist and turns and bends, and at the end of it there is a small post office.



Authors note: This is a made up story . . . they all are.

Two Poems

Craig Caudill

Ham Bone Soup

she could drink kittens through a straw,
she says she learned it from her grandma who could
drink timber wolves through a tracheotomy,

they in turn gave her the smoothest creamiest dreamiest
bowl of Ham Bone soup. She lays on her back, a sheet of paper
is then stabbed with a pin hole and the bowl of soup is
masterfully,
slowly, poured onto the paper dripping into her mouth for her
dining pleasure.

Personal Afflictions

I was born with hammers for hands, I made bread watered the
garden and I helped illiterates to be literary. They wrote
poems and sonnets and went on to be fine young individuals

I was born with kites to stop the gravity pull on my feet

I was born with a dog's nose, and I solved crime, I once told a
curious lady who wanted to know what I looked like and I
said through email that I make the elephant man look like a
sex machine, I never heard from her since. Maybe she is
dating the elephant man, and rightly so

He has the gift of charming the pants off any lady. It's his
manly scent, his Machismo that make women swoon like

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buttery Lilies. During the Night he sings French love songs,
with his pan flute and the women just come in like sheep

I am jealous of the Elephant Man. Some people just Ooze Sex

I was born one would suppose but could I say I was forlorn? I
was speculative, you could put me in a room and feed me
perhaps with feeding tubes and perhaps iron lungs would
have been too dramatic.

But I was born and when I was, I never liked my house and
the toys weren't contemporary and I was jealous of other kids
I was born with a mouth but it never chewed it spewed ethers
and the TV set would blow a picture tube

There were never enough potato chips and would take years
before actual cool music to get to me.

I was born next to a cave I was born with the ability to
disappear, I could hypnotize myself

I was born escaping the death and slaving with life blowing
the picture tube. I was amorous and never knew the how and
why. I was born missing someone my heart ached for her and
I never met her.

I was born in fragments, I was born next to the window, I was
born in the garage huffing gasoline, I was born with steak
knives for eyelids proud as a peacock while trying to convince
the world there is nothing wrong.

I had something to hide.

Two Poems

Luigi Monteferrante

Broadsheet

Such a nice boy
In flat sixteen
Decent honest
Even pleasant

Go figure why
He shot them dead
Wife and children
And best friend

For an inflatable doll
Found in the closet
Full of love

Last Call

Mirrors everywhere

You being the best judge of yourself
You return to your seat
The last stool in the only bar still available to you

Its 2:59 on a Monday night

You poke your hair
Pucker your lips
Press your tongue against that cavity

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You being the best judge

You need a filling
How about it?
Make yourself comfortable

Have some tea

When you begin to speak of all your miseries
You describe each episode in great detail
Exactitudes in a timeless script

Stock characters that in essence did change
Become more complex
Larger than life

Profound

Your miseries an on-screen sensation
A mini-series of true success
You are or were a star

You made me think

When I taste my tea
It's cold
And we are sitting in the dark

After a lifetime of stories
Older and wiser
And so full of bull

Three Poems

Christopher Barnes

Premises of The Hand (The Jesus Love Schizophrenics)

God the omnipotent is stammering
To 15 spent martyrs
In pill-trolley queasy clutches
ward Hustle Wings, Loose Tile Hospital.

A Frightened Light
Is a misfit
In this sombre-smudged sphere.

His run-the-teeth purr
Is a splash (Joseph's-coat glitter).
Cuckoos himself,
Like Memorex co-eternal, rewind.

Wimple-tressed Graces shatter-off
(ghost-rheum on a projector)
even the yucca
is mouse-trapped in His machine.

Prescription Drugs

We tooth-stick Blackheart Cherries,
A Q.T. chuckle gladdens,
Then bank the chemist's bottle.
Candlelight warms, pull-to-pieces capsules
Are pips on fruit-smudge lips.

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Your eyes change completely
Rock roses
On the face of a stream.



Probe

They have the satellites in electronic memory,
We store those images behind pink-lit eyelids
Amongst the lunar gloss.

There is a calm which transports,
An iodine atmosphere, layering gasses,
The motley tally of smidgens connecting.
A remote grid charts it.
I have the distances from the sun
Listed in scads of miles,
An approach of empty space.

An ebony mystery with twinkling stars.

We are a ticklish ship's combo
Cramped in burly moments
In a module that has become the world.
Work late, restless
Till supper has the flavour of daybreak.
A shortcoming of meaningless vision,
Capacity of the inner capsule,
Mainframe light, tinged emerald.
And boredom, the colour black.

The millenniums of silence, an expectant tension,
The magnetic supremacy of the nova-orbit
Drifts into the computer.
Soon we'll be sending messages home,
Bleeping love.

We have in framed holds:
Extensions of forever, the crabby fear of oblivion,
A pungent mist of grim eternity.

Clear

John Oliver Hodges



Other than the ladies of the Texans five seats up, and the black stewardess, Jill was the only woman. The plane smelled of men's colognes, of boot leather and recently smoked cigars. The man seated directly behind Jill, the thickest of the bunch, guffawed. "That ought to teach her," he said, and Jill turned her face his way to be greeted by a smirk. The man's face spanned the pillow propped behind it, his eyeballs large and hard. The bushy brows above the eyeballs stuck out like hairy umbrellas, and his cheeks were just huge bowls of hilarity. Jill turned away. She watched the runway workers below the oval window throw box after box of iced salmon onto the conveyor belt. Then came the rifles in padlocked cases, and the securely bound luggage of the men.

The tired-looking runway workers drove off in the truck, their ponchos flapping in the rain. They were all young women with blond hair and gumboots. Jill watched them disappear, then buckled up. "I ain't ever seen anything so funny," one of the men behind her said.

“Good thing we got it on video,” another said. “We can watch it as many times as we want. Pull out your laptop Henry. Let’s watch it.”

“When we get to the hotel,” the one called Henry said.

Jill glanced his way again, this time smiling so as not to seem rude. His shoulders bounced over how funny whatever it was that was funny was.

He was not fat so much, just wide. In Juneau Jill had seen Hawaiians, Indonesians, and even the Tlingits were wide people. This man Henry was the widest white man Jill ever saw.

The milk-plane readied itself to the mark. The captain pulled whatever lever and the plane shot down the runway, lifted off the tarmac and sailed over the water.

“Look!” Henry said.

“What?” came the man beside him.

“Right there, focus your eyes, quick.”

Jill scanned the muskeg to the right, just beyond the water’s edge, and saw the black bear galloping along.

“I don’t see it,” the buddy said.

The plane shot into a blanket of cloud, the scene gone, but in Jill’s mind the bear galloped onward. In Alaska everybody told bear stories. “A good buddy of mine was eaten down to his boots,” one man she woke up with told her. That was at the Alaska Hotel and Bar, a place downtown, in the small city, where it never mattered how much you drank. On the walls of the bar were black and white blowups of gold miners and of naked women reclining upon silky beds. Another man told Jill a story of a bear who ran off with a friend’s baby. A bear would steal what you loved. Jill wanted to cry. While Gary worked graveyard at the microbrewery, she made it with Hobbs, his best friend. When Gary learned of it he played a last song on his beautiful saxophone, then smashed it on a rock and buried it on the hillside.

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The best thing for a slut's to be buried to the neck.

Jill moved into the Howard Johnson's in the valley, took drinks in the lounge before noon. Men bought Jill drinks, forked over cigarettes. Jill loved the sparkle of the bottles and the hot inside her, the hot liquid. She let her hair hang down against the bar top, and after one or two drinks, her body radiated light like a beacon in the fog. She felt valuable, this thing that could save a drowning man. They gave Jill money for her smiles, hid fifties in her socks, or left bills on the floor, these men with holes in their pockets.

The milk-plane did not clear the dark gnarl, breaking through the clouds into blue, the spread of eternity stretched out below. The plane remained shrouded, then set down in Ketchikan. More salmon, more guns, more bear meat and mackerel was thrown onto the rubber belt and packed into the plane. Jill looked forward to the new takeoff, but the captain's voice came along: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid we're fogged in."

The Texans removed their bags from the overhead compartments and made down the aisle, their wives following.

Jill stayed seated. She wanted to wait, be the last one out, but the men behind her, all three, were gentlemanly southerners. "Ladies first," Henry said. Henry was the main dude, the Kentuckian with hard glossy eyeballs the size of eggs. He was in possession of the laptop.

Jill smiled, grabbed her duffel bag and walked the aisle, the men close behind. These married men wore gold rings on thick fingers, the ore scratched and burnished. In their talk were wives in Virginia and Georgia, and kids, a baseball field, a grocery store. Just don't drink, Jill thought, but she would, she knew, drink. She did not care for making love to men while sober. The times she had were bad experiences.

A van waited in the rain. She got in, the men moved in behind her, closed her in with their bodies, their boozy sweat and carnivore breath. The man driving the van was Native, his long black hair silky and loose. "What's up with the bear?" Henry asked him.

"This?" the Native man said, fingering the anthracite carving.

"Some kind of good luck charm?"

"The bear is my cousin," the driver said. "You never know but that she might be yours too, mister."

Henry and the other men whooped it up. When they stopped laughing, the driver said, "We should always protect our family members."

"I hate to pop your bubble here, fellah, but we are Christians," one of the men said.

"Oh yes, Christians are good. Nothing wrong with Christians," the driver said.

"Actually," Jill said, "I'm a Scientologist."

The men broke out laughing, and this caused Jill too to laugh. When the laughter stopped Jill said, "We try to confront the bad things that have happened to us, to acknowledge those things and forgive our perpetrators in order to become better people. When we have confronted everything and are free, we call ourselves clear."

"Yeah, John Travolta is a Scientologist," Henry said.

"Tom Cruise is one," said another man.

"It's the religion of celebrities," said the driver, and he said, "You must be an actress, eh?"

Jill smiled like who knew but that she was. She was above average in prettiness. She had a good body. Her breasts were long and full and pleasing to men. Her body was excellent. She was an excellent fucker, they always told her so, and there was no reason in the world that she could not do just as fine a job acting as Gwyneth Paltrow or Nicole Kidman.

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Jill watched through the window the gray water speed by. They passed docked fishing boats, canneries that let go onto rocky junk-strewn shores. Through the window she saw old rusted engines in the mist, a barnacled washing machine, a shipwrecked sloop and the discarded carcass of a deer, its rickety spine curling up from the sand. To the right were evergreen slopes. She knew the landscape. It's what you saw all over Alaska. The boughs of the male trees curve skyward, while the boughs of the female droop.

The driver steered them through mud in the parking lot of a roadside lodge. The building was long and slimy, and looked like a place where a movie might be filmed. The *Grizzly Inn* it was called, a perfect set with its gallery of rough-hewn doors, and the mud, the mist, the gossamer whorls of escaped cloud sticking to the mountainside. The ambiance was of horrible acts of blood, of monstrous creatures, senseless killings and disgrace.

The driver parked beside the office, got out in the rain and opened the doors for them. "Gunalcheesh," he said.

"What, what?" came the men.

"Gunalcheesh," Jill said. "It means thank you in Tlingit. He's Tlingit."

"Yes," the driver said. "It means thank you, but it sounds exactly like good ass cheese."

"Good ass cheese," the men all said, and belly laughed. The party entered the office where — ladies first — she was given a key. She lit a cigarette outside the office door, took a few long drags then leapt through the rain, avoiding the muddy places.

The room was decent, very nice. She lit a new cigarette, tested the bed. She checked the bathroom, washed her face and paced, telling herself she didn't have to have it, but she did. She wanted it, the hot feeling, and she could not stop thinking of Gary. When it came down to it, Gary's cruelty was just as bad as her step's. Gary might not have

belted her, but he made jokes of Jill's desperation, how she wanted to be his wife, official. Gary teased her, saying that he would marry her, but only if he and the wedding party were dropped off by helicopter at the top of Thunder Mountain. Jill would have exactly one hour to make it to the summit before the wedding was called off, on your marks, get set, go. Jill had been willing to try that, even barefooted as he'd begun to suggest when the prospect appeared feasible.

Fuck it. Jill changed out of her jeans and jersey into a dark blue babydoll dress she wore with maroon tights. In the bathroom mirror she applied gloss to her mouth, laced her boots and made to the little tavern in the basement below the office. When Henry saw her, he pulled out a barstool and patted the seat. Jill sat, crossed her legs. "What do you want?" Henry asked, and like that her fingers gripped a gimlet.

Oh, she giggled at the tales of squirming fish. Their tales of deer. There were blinking Christmas lights strung throughout the room, and the sparkles of color glimmered in the eyes of all. Jill drank, smoking, all her drinks free. When they asked Jill about herself, she dodged the issue. She was a Scientologist, that's all they knew. This excited the men. She was a face, a body without history. Like this, she could save them, there was that possibility. Deep inside them they always believed this, didn't they? That they needed to be saved? This was an illusion Jill could provide for them. Through her they could rejuvenate. Often, the less Jill told about herself, the more she was desired.

"Are you clear, Honey?" Henry asked.

"Clear as water, baby," Jill said. "Look deep into my eyes, you'll see the home you grew up in."

Henry squinted, trying to see his childhood home inside Jill.

When Jill thought of home, she saw the live oaks in the back yard, their mossy tongues in the breeze, mealy danglers

Neon

that, strangely, pleased her, made her feel better. The tongues reached for the ground, their tips lapping, licking air. And the lake at the bottom of the hill, that oblong of pleasing green. Jill thought of the small planes flying overhead, over the house and across the lake and the trees, and she thought of those things her step said. "Stand up straight and be proud and stop looking like a damn dog that's been beat to death you fucking bitch! Square your shoulders you goddamn piece-a-shit!"

She could do that, hold her shoulders back, smile, no problemo.

"Do you see it?" the Georgian said. The Georgian had a glass eye. The glass eye was in his scotch glass.

"No," Henry said. "All I see is black holes. I think Jill was lying when she said she was clear."

"I'm a free spirit, baby," Jill said.

"Free?" Henry said, and every man laughed, even the bartender.

"I'm leaving Alaska for good," Jill said. "Five years was enough for me."

"Alaska's no place for a classy lady like you," Henry said.

"What, did your boyfriend dump you?" the Georgian asked.

"Hey, don't talk that way about Jill. She's my new friend," Henry said, and put his hand on Jill's back.

"Oh look, look at her face, she's blushing. I must've been right. Her boyfriend dumped her. Holy shit."

She had wanted to be true to him, to Gary.

"It's okay, Honey," Henry said, moving his hand in circles on Jill's back. "You'll find another man."

She had wanted Gary to be happy, only when she was drunk she wanted every man in the world to be happy too. Don't blame the booze! Jill knew how lame blaming shit on booze was, but still, she saw herself, running through

skunk cabbage and devil's club patches in a white silk wedding dress – it was her favorite fantasy – scrambling through muskegs barefoot and clawing root to root over slopes and along switchbacks high above the rivers. To climb that high in an hour seemed the impossible task, but Jill wanted it, to try it, do it, now.

Jill finished her drink in a swallow.

"That's the way to do," Henry said, ordered her another.

"Hey Jill," the Georgian said, "since you're clear, does that mean you don't care when bad shit goes down? I'm trying to figure it all out still. It don't make sense to me."

"Don't make Jill mad," the Virginian said. "She's got friends in high places. Hey Jill? Will those Scientology people come find us and cause trouble? I don't want Johnny Travolta showing up at my door, I know that."

Jill didn't believe it now, in Scientology, but there was a time when a strange renegade offshoot of it, what her step brought home from Bike Week one year, was instilled in her, was a reality for her and her mother. Her step was principled by nature, but now, in the light of this religion he practiced, all woman were to be considered as existing on the same spiritual and intellectual plane as dogs. Women were creatures, not humans. Women had no say in anything, and men were encouraged to beat them so that in their next lifetimes, having been humbled and made aware of their situations, they might be born as men and climb the spiritual ladder. Jill's mother never lifted a finger, never said a thing. When she saw them walking together in the direction of the okra field, what did she do?

"Y'all're playing with me," Jill said.

"I would never think of playing with you," Henry said.

"Why don't you tell me," Jill said, "what happened on that river y'all were talking about? On the plane you were so excited."

Neon

The men laughed. Henry said, "Come in my room I'll show you."

She was drunk enough. Who cared besides nobody? She was curious. This was her chance to get to the bottom of it. Besides being an actor, she would have made a great detective. Jill was a good sneaker, stealer, all what she learned in her need, how to buy drinks with a drunk friend's fifty so as to slide off two twenties for later, the drunk none the wiser. As a child Jill stole bills from her step's wallet as he slept, him snoring so soft that her own pulse she heard above it. In the rug, on hands and knees, in pajamas, Jill snaked bills. He'd been in Nam. He caught her, took her to the okra field, Jill wondering could the planes flying over see. Would they call in? Would they be raided by the Wakulla County Sherriff's Department?

Henry's room replicated her own, log walls and linoleum, the Eskimo throw rug, a double bed, and the small Zenith, a bathroom, a microwave. Above the bed a framed print of the Chilkat mountain range in full sun provided a window into more glorious days, and on the dresser a video camera charged, its red light blinking. Henry unfolded his laptop, set it on the bed stripped of its blanket, and booted it. Jill nipped the bottle. Henry said, "This will be the funniest thing you ever saw in your life, young lady, I guarantee."

Jill looked down at the blanket wadded up on the floor, and passed the bottle to Bobby, the Virginian.

"There she blows," Henry said. A river scene appeared on screen, the rocks in the foreground shiny and wet. There was Bobby, and there was the Georgian. They were knee deep in the river in rubber overalls, and were casting lines. Aware that they were being recorded for posterity, they smiled, said to the camera things to make their children back home giggle. There was nothing strange going on, but in the midst of it the men's faces darkened, and the camera whipped around to show a huge bear lifting a salmon

out of a cache. The bear held the fish in its enormous jaws, and Henry shouted, "Take the camera, Bobby, take the camera!" Henry next appeared on screen with a shotgun. As the bear hobbled for the trees, Henry chased her. He aimed at her and fired and the female part of the bear broke wide open then collapsed and the bear dropped the fish. The bear flipped her head back to try and see her bleeding hindquarters, and at this, all the men laughed. The bear stood up on its hind legs. She bared her teeth, and tried to look scary. That's when Henry ran up closer and blasted her in the face, all this blood and fur and bone exploding backwards.

Jill wanted to cry.

"Play it again," the Georgian said.

"No, don't, please," Jill said. She lit a cigarette. The picture in her head was permanent, how the mama bear fell backwards into the rocks, her arms laid out like a regular person's arms.

"We're going to put it on YouTube," the Georgian said.

"Only if I say so," Henry said.

Jill opened the door to the room, and a gust of rain blew against her face, pressed her dress against her body. She leaned against the jamb, the gentle pins pressing into her cheeks, her lips, forehead. Go, she told herself, but she wasn't ready. The thought of being alone in her room depressed her, and she was not ready to fly back to Florida.

"The best thing for a slut's to be buried to the neck," he liked to say.

Jill watched the water, the little wavelets crashing against the rocks of the shore. When she flew to Alaska with Gary to live on his father's acreage, their dream was to go to school and become educated and get good jobs. They took out loans and went to school and bought so much beer and booze.

"That ought to teach her," Henry said.

Neon

Jill was flying home now eleven thousand dollars in debt, no ring on her finger, no degree in Childhood Education, nothing.

Hold your shoulders back, for godsake, what's the matter with you!

She could have flown straight home, but instead she rode the milk-plane. Looking out at the water, Jill wondered if she was putting it off on purpose, trying to get herself in trouble and so be spared the responsibility. Let her blame the booze, sure, blame the men on the plane. Could she get them to hurt her beyond repair, as damaged as she already was? Could the men save her from asking her mother why? How could you see that, know all about it, yet do nothing? Jill did not want to hurt her mother, who'd been dumped by the crazy man for a younger more beautiful woman, but if she flew home she would. There was no getting around it. Jill brought the cigarette to her mouth, sucked the smoke deep inside, and watched the water. Behind her the blast of the shotgun sounded, followed by shouts of excitement and joy. She let go of her smoke as the second blast sounded, the bear's face getting ripped off, its beautiful black nose. In her mind Jill saw the bear fall backwards, its arms spread out cruciform in the rocks, just like it was a regular person, only covered with black fur. She dragged and realized that what was most pleasing to the men was the bear's look of confusion after the first shot, when the bear's sex opened. That was the funny part, when the bear looked back to see what was wrong with her, before the pain set in.



Three Poems

Tricia Asklar

Period Piece

Ingots like ribbon candy
or ruptured vessels dump over
slopes of cattle covered in clay.
It's 1930 and the Depression is on.

The sky is falling, it's raining dogs,
just dogs, still oil slicked.

They're stretched and trembling,
their bones too brittle for time.
They have had enough of barking,
prefer the bubble of blood pudding.

The sirens sound – the moan
of a long night shift, the first-light
smells of snow fall.

Billows of smoke shade the moon.
The landscape seeps into long
shadows, obelisks, Hereford land flows.



The High Fall

I vault, somersault and plunge, an anchor,
into the wetness that tastes like mint. The back
slap knocks my breath. My gasp obliges
the lifeguard to yell at me once,
as if I could catch enough air to answer.

When I was drowning at Adventure Island
in the wave pool deep end, I didn't know
how far I was from the top. The roar of water
where I stayed for a few moments – the tug
at my navel: a flavor, a scent – and then the barging-
in of hooked arm and the quick pull to the surface.

I was small. Stay out of the deep end, the lifeguard
said.

The guard at Twelve Oaks squints.
She's seen me swim the length of the pool
underwater to escape the last 500 yards
of swim team practice. Then she laughs
as I sputter in the center of the dive pool,
floating belly up.

The boys on top yell at me to move it
so they can jump. I stare up
at the barely visible tips
of their faces hanging over the edge.
It is our first time, all of us.
I make them wait.

Courtship With A Rose-Hulman Student Who Can Recite The Decimal Expansion of Pi Further Than Anyone Else I Know

I'm interested in the number of 'o's
in the name of his hometown, the wings
of his radio-controlled planes, his father's
flak jacket, the twang of the slide guitar,
my mascara that doesn't run if wet,
the widening between us as he unfolds
his body to his full six-foot four height.

His parents think he's attending some engineering
conference in Fort Wayne this first visit.
We eat dessert at the Charky's where I'm a waitress.
Dot (she's worked there forever) makes me blush
over my strawberry pie and mound of whipped cream.
Later, he and I sip Boone's from the bottle
and watch the tiny toads hop around us,
through the grass and into a soybean field.

Everything is a venue for love, even the toads
and their little pee, he says. I close my eyes,
think of his small planes, the competitions,
the rattling and buzzing, his fingers' delicacy
at the controls, the diving and spinning,
their scalawag surrender to the earth.

Two Poems

Noel Sloboda

Outside-in

Baba Yaga swears bloody vengeance
on behalf of her sullied hut, hit
late, around 3 A.M., Halloween night,
by a barrage of eggs, the rotten smell
not nearly as bad as the hut's unwillingness
to move until all the broken pieces were
collected, then properly disposed of,
reminders of origins, of what was inside,
of what made the hut no longer what it was,
but what it is: the hard shell of
 a black soul.

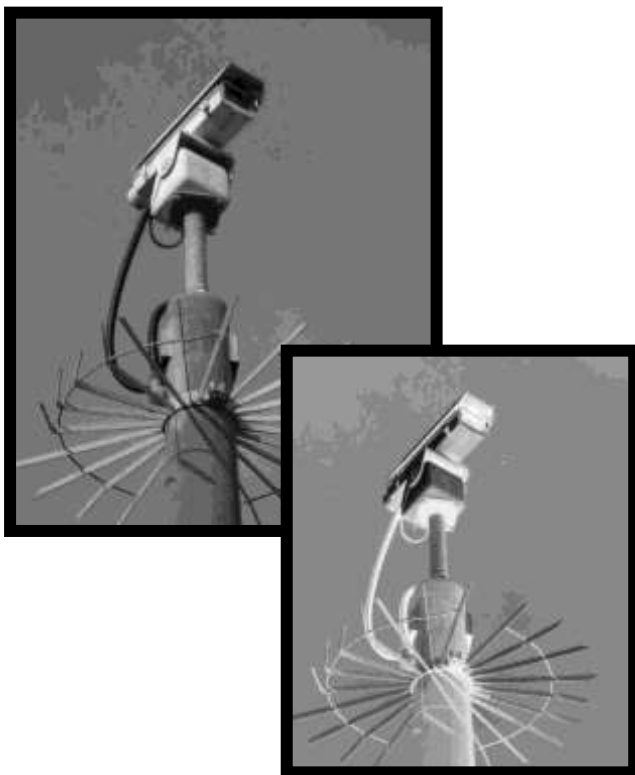
Unreal City

Once it was agreed everyone else had failed,
architects, politicians, and civil engineers,
the artists were given a crack at salvaging
 the capital.

It took some time for beautification
reforms to start: at first the painters couldn't
agree on a palette for the flags and patches;
the composers debated the anthem's pitch;
the poets initially slept late and dreamt
about sestina street signs, then, distracted
on the way to work, missed the whole first
 round of meetings.

Neon

Still, a plan rolled out; in the conceptual phase,
everything looked pretty good.
When the sun went down the night before
the launch of the program, before gold
and purple paint from sidewalks bled
into roadways and canals, priapic statues
of Apollo gave three folks strokes, hymns
transformed into muzak, blasting from town hall,
blew out the power grid, many thought,
for the first time in a long, long while,
everything was going to turn out just
as it should.



Three Poems

Howard Good

Lovesick

It isn't love if our embassy isn't burning,
if the windows haven't exploded

in a shower of diamonds from the heat,
if the ballerina isn't staggering around on stage

as from an accidental elbow in the face,
or if the knife-thrower, subject to ironic applause,

doesn't suddenly doubt the accuracy of his aim;
it isn't love if the moon isn't breathing,

if we don't receive unsought help from machines,
an automated summons to appear in court

and our bewildered joy upon entering the night
a moment after everyone else has left.



Identity

One day it just happens,
a man I never met before,
or wanted to meet,

mistakes me for someone else,
an old classmate's adopted brother,
and that night for the first time

I can distinguish individual words
in the buzz of background conversation,
after which it happens a lot,

people stop me on the concourse to ask
if I am who they think I am,
and when I look into their faces,

the slanting, slate gray rain,
some have the eyes of victims,
some, the eyes of torturers.

The Parable Of Sunlight

It's a rare sunny day,
but the streets are strangely empty,

as if arrests are about to be made,
or already have been.

Head down, heart revving,
I start across the square.

The fountain is dry, stained in dead leaves.
An old man, with the drab, diligent face

of a lifelong student of numbers,
scatters bread crumbs for the pigeons.

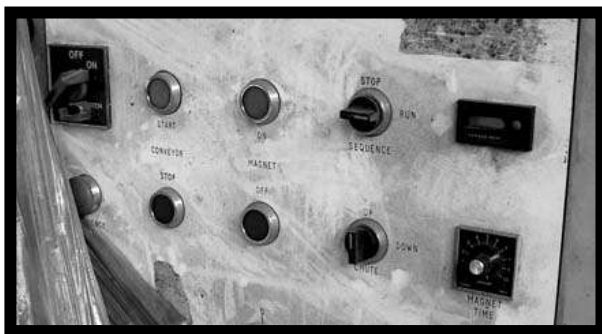
I pretend not to notice him - it's safer -
and in seconds, reach the far side,
where bodies in the early stages of decay
hang like gray rags from the trees.

I glance back at the old man.
He's watching me, and I wonder why

and whether tomorrow
is supposed to be just as nice as today.

Equations of Desire

Morris Collins



You don't mind your wife's new home model ANZ-XO Domestic Service Droid. You don't mind the way he folds your underwear; you like the way he makes meringue (really stiff). What you don't like is the way he keeps exposing your sexual failures. How does he know in the first place? And why does he keep assigning you word problems about them? Like this morning when you were sitting at the kitchen table drinking your coffee and he was beating eggs for your meringue, he said:

If you were performing cunnilingus on your wife and it takes 157 perfectly aimed licks to her clitoris to bring her to orgasm, but you mis-lick every fourth lick, how many licks does it take?

Thanks little Kim, you say.

He doesn't get the reference. He keeps beating the egg-whites.

Add blueberries this time, you say. You want blueberry meringue. You can see that obviously it's gone a little too far with the meringue obsession. Like, maybe you're projecting, trying to obfuscate your other problems with platter after platter of meringue. You think about that, you sip your coffee. It doesn't make any sense. It's just that the robot beats a really good meringue, you mean, it's really really stiff, that's all. You look up, away from the table and the robot is staring at you as if he expected an answer to his question.

Look, you say. It doesn't work that way. Sex isn't all about orgasm.

His electro-lashes blink, like this doesn't compute.

That doesn't compute, he says. What else is it about?

Other stuff, you say. People stuff.

He hums and buzzes, gives you another word problem:

If it takes your wife seventeen minutes to reach peak arousal, but it only takes you ninety-two seconds...

Listen robot, you say, it's not all about numbers and time.

In this moment you realize that you will never get along with your wife's new droid. He stands there in the kitchen, whirring and blinking electrically, spinning out the faint whistle and chug of internal pistons as he tries to comprehend what you just said, and gigabyte by gigabyte, rejects it entirely.

Everything, says the robot in his electronic voice, is about numbers and time.

When your wife comes home in the morning you're still sitting at the kitchen table, though you've long since given up on waiting for her. Her hair is down in a dark mangle about her face and her eyes, what you can see of them, are red.

Coffee, please, robot, she says to the robot.

To you, she says nothing.

Neon

When she sits down you try to ignore her t-shirt that has PARTY GIRL emblazoned across the chest, her fishnet stockings, the streaked plum lipstick that in the dull light of morning looks like smudged tar about her mouth. Like she'd just eaten a tar meringue, you think.

The robot places a mug between his legs – an unfortunate design characteristic, certainly – and whizzes out the coffee. Your wife reaches up and puts her hand betwixt his metallo-plastic thighs, takes the mug and brings it slowly to her lips.

Delicious, she says.

You stare at the way her magenta nails tap against the mug's black pottery. You're thinking: raspberry meringue; you're thinking: why is her wedding ring on the wrong finger?

The robot says:

If there were five men for every one woman, and every woman can only be satisfied for 3 years by any one man, how long – provided a good diet and healthy amounts of exercise – would it take for one woman to sleep with every man on earth?

You stand up and knock over your chair.

Hey watch it buster, you say. You're really pushing it there, robot.

My wife, you say and you look at her as you say it, you see the way her mouth opens around the edge of the mug like it's the last goddamn mug of coffee she's ever going to have, you see the way she closes her eyes for a moment, her eyes that you recognize now as empty of attraction but full of need – My wife, you say, has not slept with every man on earth.

Everything, says the robot, is but numbers and time.

You snatch the bowl of whipped egg whites from the table and bury your face in it. You drop the bowl and stand there before your wife and her droid with your face frothed

with whipped egg. You lick it up a little, and it's delicious. You drop to your knees.

Have mercy on me, you say through your muffled mouth. I'm as much of a man as I can be.

The woman you know as your wife stands up and walks, her frayed black fishnets an impossible web you will never untangle, slowly across the kitchen, stops before the bedroom, turns and looks back over her shoulder, and for a moment you think that she is looking to you, is about to nod her head, to smile, to grant some grace as sweet as meringue, to take you, covered as you are with dessert, into her arms and hold you in a succor you've long since forfeited. But then you see, you wipe the froth away from your eyes and you see, she is looking at the robot, raising her chin in her own sad come-hither.

And he does, puts down his wheels and rolls past you where you kneel like a penitent on the floor, zips across the hall and into your bedroom. She follows him in and closes the door in a sad, soft, click.

That night, still sitting on the kitchen floor with the meringue now a dried mask on your face, you hear the buzz of his myriad vibrating parts, your wife's moan coming over the whir and grumble of his long, hard, pistons, and over it all, the robot's metallic voice reverberating in triumph:

If every woman, given infinite desire, could achieve infinite satisfaction...

Yes, she says, cutting him off in a voice you've haven't heard in months or years, a whole lifetime falling away from you, *yes* she says, *yes*, as if desire were an equation that only machines could solve, *oh, my, oh my, yes*.



Contributor Notes

Jane Flett lives in Edinburgh, where she writes poems and stories that she occasionally reads aloud to people. She is also a philosopher, gin drinker and cellist.

M. E. Silverman is completing a collection of poetry called *The Forgotten Songs of Mud Angels*. Currently, he is between M.F.A. and Ph.D. and living in the middle of Georgia with his wife and daughter, Isabel.

Miranda Merklein: My work has appeared or is forthcoming in *South Carolina Review*, *Permafrost*, *VOX*, *RiverSedge*, and others. Currently I am pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg where I continue to edit and publish *Journal of Truth and Consequence*, a magazine for the arts.

Martin Hayes lives in Arklow, a small town on the east coast of Ireland. He founded The Arklow George Orwell Award For Outstanding Achievement In Writing four years ago and has awarded the €20 prize money to himself every spring. He also writes comics. You can visit him at www.paroneiria.com.

Craig Caudill: I have been published in Poetry Journals such as *Parameter Magazine* in Manchester England and *Poetry Salzburg Review* in Austria. I am currently working on two novels of fiction primarily dark soft science fiction and literary novel of fiction much in the vein of Kurt Vonnegut and Albert Camus.

Luigi Monteferrante: Canadian author, recently morphed into singer/songwriter: www.myspace.com/mcmontylive. Previous prose/poems published in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Happy*, *Yellow Mama*, *Word Slaw*. First novel, *At the Hearth of the Devil's Lair*, appeared in 2002. Second novel, *Life During*

Neon

Wartime, recently completed. Also manages Italian B & B as retreat, and Dago Red, acoustic blues band.

Christopher Barnes: In 1998 I won a Northern Arts writers award. In July 200 I read at Waterstones bookshop to promote the anthology '*Titles Are Bitches*'. Christmas 2001 I debuted at Newcastle's famous Morden Tower doing a reading of my poems. Each year I read for Proudwords lesbian and gay writing festival and I partake in workshops. 2005 saw the publication of my collection *LOVEBITES* published by Chanticleer Press

John Oliver Hodges: My stories, poems, and photography have appeared in many journals, including *American Short Fiction*, *Rattle*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Word Riot* and *Rainbow Curve*.

Tricia Asklar received her MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She lives in Rochester, NY, and teaches at Nazareth College. She has had poems in *Redactions: Poetry and Poetics*, *Verse Daily*, and *Blue Earth Review*. She recently collaborated with five other poets on a piece for PUSH Physical Theatre that was performed in Rochester's Geva Theatre Center.

Noel Sloboda currently lives in Pennsylvania. His poetry has appeared in *Aesthetica*, *Bravado*, *Chronogram*, and many other places.

Howie Good, a journalism professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is the author of three poetry chapbooks, *Death of the Frog Prince* (2004) and *Heartland* (2007), both from FootHills Publishing, and *Strangers & Angels* (2007) from Scintillating Publications. His poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals. He has been nominated for the Best of the Web anthology and twice for a Pushcart Prize.

Morris Collins: My work has recently appeared in *The Mid-American Review*, *Rattle*, *Rain Taxi*, *In Posse Review*, *Grasslimb*, and *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*.