

Issue #27

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Image by Andrew Beierle

Holiday

Jonathan Volk

He asked a simple thing: go for a ride in his car, just around the park's edge, just this once. I was a girl who felt guilty refusing.

We drove along the park in a slow dissolve, like an ice cube on a finger. I watched children my age surround a boy with a gold horn and beat him with their fists, then with his horn.

He let me off where we started and asked if I'd like to ride another day. He seemed lonely, and I was lonely, so I told him yes.

He began to change the routes, and I didn't complain: I liked the gentle slide of the neighbourhood through the windows and the attention of an adult. Our rides made me special.

The kids who knew not to talk to strangers watched me slip into his car. For my part, I made it look natural as water finding the ocean.

What did we talk about? We didn't talk. We listened to the radio. He turned the dials and pointed at the songs he liked. His fingers had black hairs on the knuckles like my dad's.

Our rides were the best part of my week. I waited on the park bench and clapped my knees. I had to sit on my tingling hands. My friends would ask me to play, but I had something better to do.

Once he didn't show up. I cried, feeling smaller than a molecule. A woman asked me what was the matter, and I told her the matter was not mattering. I wanted to disappear.

In the backseat he kept a revolver with a wooden handle. It shined on the vinyl like a seal on a rock. Sometimes he would reach back to touch it, and I reached over to correct the wheel.

How do I explain? I knew our rides were dangerous. That chance hovered over them like a scalpel. That one day he might turn off the radio, say a word, lift the revolver. Change everything.

But I also felt grace. I felt so long as I sat in his car and the songs on the radio changed and he pointed at the ones he liked, grace was mine. Who else was so blessed?

The routes changed. We left the city and drove beside fields of sunny wheat. He liked to pull into driveways and tap his straight fingers on the vinyl behind my neck.

But he didn't live in the houses whose driveways we stopped at. He'd wait a moment and then put the car in reverse, returning to the road.

I kept our rides secret from my husband. My friend had grown old and frail. A rust hole bloomed on the side of his car, but he still picked me up at the park once a week.

I considered our rides the happiest parts of my life. And the densest: they sank through my memories like witches tied to stones.

I warned my daughters never to get in the cars of strangers, but when I said this my tongue was a knife waving through my mouth.

I loved our quiet. I loved the silences we created. I loved sensing him guess me out, getting me wrong, and it not mattering. At least we didn't matter together.

And I knew this would be the last ride: his skin scaled, the scales sifting to the floor mats. I could hear his bones clap. The car choked over the yellow line and he shook his head *sorry*.

We drove farther away than we ever had. I felt the sweaty heat of a river. Then a turn in the road he refused to take, and the car drowning through dry corn stalks.

The stalks bent and cracked outside the windows. Sunlight slitted my hands in my lap. He switched the radio off and tapped his crooked fingers on the vinyl behind my neck.

I wept. I wept for my life but also his. We'd waited so long. Practiced a holy patience with the other. He turned to me, and his spine popped in his skin like toast.

I knew he wanted to reach into the backseat for the revolver. It would be difficult for him to do it alone. I knew he had

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always been hungry as I had always been hungry. That we'd fed on each other like cannibals.

So I listened to the stalks crack and waited. I would help him if he wanted. He only had to ask.



Image by "kslyesmith"

Two Poems

Brett Elizabeth Jenkins

The House Does Not Look Burnt

My dreams must be real. They must. How else can I explain it?
I wake crying and I cry all day.

In this one I am watching an episode of Seinfeld with my mother
and sister. I rise and go to the table where I eat a slice of orange.

The news comes on next. I don't listen to the headlines.
Nobody listens. We are all at the table now, eating orange slices.

In this one I am standing under an acorn tree,
peering up into a dark sky and chanting *why?*

These dreams are so real. There is nothing in them
I would not normally do.

These are real, so I know it must be that this dream is also real:

I am young again. Our house is building itself back up small,
alone in a quiet field of canola flowers, sky the colour of sunburn.

The house does not look burnt at all.

Nothing inside except me and a cordless telephone with no
receiver.

It rings, and you are there, on the line.

We talk for a few minutes about my day. Like that, for a few minutes.

We stay on the phone but are silent now. The sun never goes down.

The sky burns itself red. The field turns to water.

Telling It Like It Is

There are two beer cans on the floor that I will
not move until later.

I probably won't ever be thin (there, I said it!),
and I don't know if God is real.

I am suspect of anyone who is certain of anything,
and I obsess over whether or not I remembered
to lock the door while I'm in bed at night,

but I don't get up to do anything about it
because I'm lazy and so I must convince myself nightly
that my life is not really that important,

which takes more energy than my body would require
to get out of bed and lock the door.

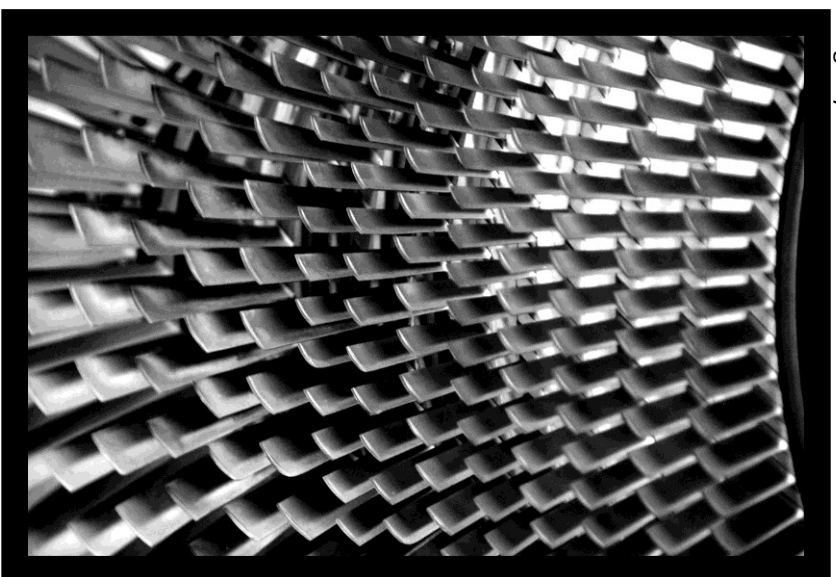
Now there's a white car going down the road,
roaring its engine fatly,
like there isn't a stop sign in one hundred yards (there is),

and that's the way it is.

I'm going to drink another beer, and then
a few more beers,
and lie down in bed and then

I think you know how it's going to be
from then on until I fall asleep.

Image by Kriss Szkurlatowski



Three Poems

Hallie Steiner

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

The room shakes
luggage falling, soda spilling, pulses flying, plane
dropping
 a carnival ride gone wrong.

In the miniature moments
of this ending
no words have time to form.
But in my bones I feel them:
 I am fine.

Maybe the explosion of my flesh will spell it
for jaw-dropped onlookers.
Or they'll find it in my autopsy--
scrape the fineness from charred tongue.

Either way I want it sent to you
packaged neatly, with ribbon,
so you'll know not to bother with
 missing me.

Worship Song

Ghosts of green eyes hold me
tight, tied
to the chair where your kiss left me.

You poured acid in an artery
(to kill me slowly)
while your absence presses in--

Letters, photos, germs, oxygen, everything
that isn't you
heavy on eyes and lungs...

I inhale it 'til it
suffocates.

Craving

Dear knot
in my throat,
goosebump skin,

Dear throb,
loss of breath,
blurred vision,

fire lips,
sick heartsick,
stretch me thin.

I'm not me
'til you visit
yet again.

Image by Matthew Bowden



Two Poems

Christina Thatcher

Detox

He said he could feel his ankles again and
thought that was weird.
He said he carried his pain between his shoulder blades,
his elbow crux and jaw.
And his teeth, he said, felt like they were always falling loose.

He said his cravings pained him.
His tongue, his veins, his nostrils, and his fingers flared and burned.
He thought it odd not to see an owl in the mirror.

He said he missed that old prick;
the instant hot pins and needles high or, depending on the day,
the warm, oozing crawl of full body mosquito bites
that made him want to tear his skin off.
I want to tear my skin off he said,
starting with the tracks.

Prediction

It was April and as predicted,
there were showers then. Days before,
the rain had seeped in under the wedge door
of the kitchen and pooled in the creases of the hard, stone tiles.

Soon the puddles flattened out, soaked the corner
of the thick woven rug next to the cupboard. Days after,
it still wet her bare feet, left wiry fibres on their underside
each time she reached for eggs or cereal.

She recognised this, that in the mornings the house was damp, but quiet.
She could see their garden through the window, the daffodils.
She could see chickens and barn animals. But no one else.
The reckless man slept. She filled the sink to wash his favourite mug
and ready it for coffee--soap, hot water, dry, onto the chipped
counter, pot on.

She could hear his first stretch upstairs.
Hear him put his feet on the floor in one heavy thud.
He never woke up gently.

In the next field, the cows laid down and prepared for a storm.

Image by Michal Ufniak



Sweepers

Leslianne Wilder

Manhattan. They bought the island for beads and built it up into a forest of steel and glass. I used to spit in executives' cobb salads at the cafeteria, listen to them talk about eating little companies, and look out over their shoulders at all the buildings spiking up, gray, white, and shining, like they were going to poke holes in the sky.

They made up that word, you know: sky-scraper. They had a contest. Some old guy who loved Beowulf sent it in and said that's what the Vikings would have called them.

You never think how everything is going to change forever, and even when it does, you always believe tomorrow it will go back to how it was before. Some days I still wake up and believe it. We were lucky. There's a kitchen here, and we're high enough up.

There are pumps under the city. The guys who worked them might still be down there, floating in little rooms. I know they didn't wear white lab coats, but that's how I imagine them: suspended upside down next to control panels like astronaut scientists, beside open valves of rainwater and sewage.

The smell was the worst part. The city always smelled. There were too many cars, too many people, too much garbage for it not to. I guess if you're born here you never notice, but I always felt like it burned the inside of my nose. When the water started rising it was worse. It brought up the sewers. It drove up all the rats. There were so many it sounded like the walls were screaming and tearing themselves apart. The radios told us to stay where we were. Rescuers would come. For a while we looked out and tried to pretend it was Venice. We drank all the wine when the power went out. I spit in the executives cups, and they talked about insurance stocks. Cara and I had sex on the cold stove. We decided it didn't matter if we got fired.

The helicopters never came. The batteries ran out. The water kept rising. And the smell got worse.

We didn't recognise the bodies for what they were; we were too high up for that. We pressed our heads against the glass and looked down at what looked like cereal that had sat too long in milk. Everyone below us swelled and floated, and even from a spike piercing heaven, you could see there were too many for all of them to come to the surface. The streets weren't wide enough for the rising tide of dead.

Some cried and wiped their eyes with hundred dollar ties. Some jumped. They dropped down into the soup of everything that had been, and where they hit they left little black holes where they dragged the bodies down with them. Then the holes closed up.

Cara talked about God--not like I'd ever heard before. Most people talked about redemption and making life easier when they quoted the bible. Cara talked about locusts, and frogs, and first born children. She said terror of God is the beginning of all wisdom. I miss her. I wish she hadn't given up. The ovens here are so big and she was always small. I thought she'd gone to explore, or to look at the stars. She held the propane tank to her like an infant, and she shut the door.

The water sucked up the tenements and the walk-ups. By the third day the bridges were gone. The guys who had been to school said it didn't make sense. There wasn't this much water in the world. Our bead-bought island city turned into sky-scraper dots, and the people below us moved in and out on the tide. It looked like someone was trying to make a puppet show of traffic. Glass and trash and human remains went east and west. We put Cara out into it. There weren't any flowers left. I folded up a silk napkin for her to hold and I cried when we let her go.

The executives turned their briefcase lives inside out, and we made fires to cook everything before it went rancid. We got sick and the food ran out anyway. The executives talked about eating each other. I guess it wasn't far from what they did before. There weren't any little companies left, only little people.

I won't do it, no matter what it comes to. I don't like them, but we're all still humans.

The water is only a few floors below us now. I'm too tired to catch the gulls and pigeons anymore. I think of Cara and Jesus and I wonder if one of those birds was to land with an olive branch, would I still try to hit it with my pan?

The dead people went away slowly, day by day. Maybe it was the fish, maybe the tide, but the water seems cleaner now. All of the city is diluted out of it, like it had never been.

You can't see to the bottom, but you can see down a ways.

I've been watching. I think I'm the only one that's seen the sweepers. They don't have any bones, from the way they curl through the broken glass. I wonder if they brought the water, or if the water brought them. They make their own blue-pink light, like blind fish that live at the bottom of the ocean, and they have hundreds of arms. They touch everything. I don't know if they're eating, or if they're searching. I wonder if they can taste us on the city's bones. I wonder if they know about the beads and the newspaper contests, about the little companies. About all that terror and sins. About Cara. About me. I watch them and I can't decide. Maybe that's what they came for.

Image by Jascha Hoste



Three Poems

Heather Kamins

De Omnibus Dubitandum

How can I explain to you
the things I don't want? Let's try,

I don't want to wait
in line with you

for your tickets to the midnight opera.
I don't want to sift

through your carpenter dreams.
Let's try, when I look up,

I see only Orion
flinting arrows from the icy sky.

How can I explain the lack
of lacking? What looks like a tunnel

is not a tunnel. Let's try,
I don't want the ghosts of your former self

hanging around my attic.
What looks like a cloud is not a cloud.

What look like wishes
are the inverse shadows of stars.

Entropy

Think of the buildings loved
for their damage, their walls

a fiesta of illegible
graffiti, the peck and crumble

of the bricks. Think of the lost cities, the veil
of moss and vine over ziggurats, the lovers

and criminals preserved
in ash in old stone courtyards. Think

of all the beloved bad boys, the broken
girls, all the children

of disaster. How exciting
that first glimpse of perpendicular

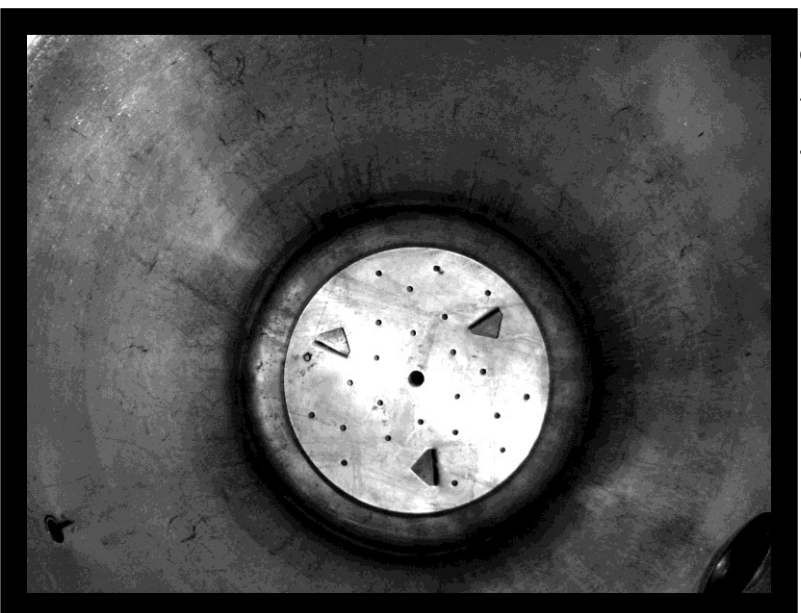
lines, the chiselled edge
of a long-deserted temple

among the pitcher plants
and amor seco

Prevailing Winds

Some conspiracy theorist told me once about contrails, how they were the government's aerosolised ulterior motives raining down suspicion on all of us, and even though I sprang as if the conversation would set me on nuclear fire, I still can't help but think of an elephant when I see an X glow rose in the summer sunset. I saw a man on television once who built furniture by training trees to chair-shaped trellises, each seat alive and fissioning beneath you until cut at the source, and I still think about the shape of experience, how they found the birds of Chernobyl have smaller brains, and the children of a certain generation cast an eye as cold as war on most institutions and expect the falling of walls. I've heard it said the electrons that dance through the dark streets of your existence whistle a song you would recognize if you could hear it. They say those particles shift on spooky quantum breezes, and all you know is you wake lonely, or startled, and can't place why.

Image by Wojtek Wozniak



Three Poems

Ben Parker

Morphine, TNT And Other Uses

Imagine if you will that every object
can work in sympathy with those
that share its building blocks
if not its DNA. Then coffee
prepared correctly and with due observance
of its molecular brethren
could at the merest twitch
of the spangled curtain which veils
those infinite distances traversable in seconds
shuck the chains that hold it from its kin.

The steam grows heavy. It falls as dust
toward the kitchen table, white, fine
and to your eye, untrained admittedly,
bearing a serious resemblance to cocaine.
The coffee left at the bottom of the cup
grows cold, hunches into itself
and solidifies into pure nitro-glycerine.

City Of Glass

One morning we woke to find the city
composed entirely of glass, prismatic
in the low sun glancing off sharp edges.
Not one object remained that had not bled
its colour into the ground in the night.
From the deep shock-proof shells of offices
to the etched headlines on delicate sheets
of stacked papers, everything was washed clear.
Only the pavements, foundations and roads
kept unaltered their original form,
supporting the city's fragile sculpture.

And, exposed behind glass walls, carefully
closed glass doors, life continues. A woman
cautiously taps a piano's frail keys,
the silica strings resonate, each note
a high-pitched, drawn-out crystalline scream
that quavers, threatens to but does not break.

Day's Last Wave

Each afternoon he would make the drive
fifteen miles west from his house to see
the breaking of the last wave of the day.
One eye on the sun, or, if obscured
by a peremptory cloud, on the second-hand
of his waterproof watch and an accurate
prediction of the time of the setting,
the other on the lick of the surf
as it ran along the parched lip
of this small, secluded gravel beach.
As the end of the sun teased the edge
of the horizon he would prepare
to record the details of the final wave
unfolding in daylight. Noting down
in his third, thick notebook the volume
as it sprawled against the stones, the height,
approximately, before it fell
and the hue and tone of its body.
When he arrived home he could still hear
the push and sigh of the sea working
at the shore in the thickening dark.

Image by Ana Labate



Two Poems

Deanna Larsen

Changeling

I must credit the creature who switched you
for his fine attention to detail.
How did he know the exact
amplitude of your snore or
your preference for Swiss Chard.
But like anyone new on the job, he made mistakes.
He laughed a beat too late at inside jokes.
His love-making felt like an oil well.
One morning I noticed him shaving his face
with a firm right hand when you
were doggedly left-handed.
When he saw me staring
he let the razor slip; he
didn't wince at the blood
dappling the sink.
I rushed to his neck with a towel and
he said, "Shh,
it's too late to stop it now."

Flight Path

Curled like an earthworm
swept up from the dirt and exposed on the asphalt--
somewhere
in the middle of the three-year stomachache--
I thought vibrations in the walls
were tremors from an earthquake.

Trapped under the rubble,
my ghost
would feel the cold nose of a cadaver dog.

Instead it was a Boeing 747.

With that desperate rabbit
chewing my guts,
I pressed my cheek to the wall,
praying for another plane

while I envisioned a hundred tiny faces
peering down; until my house--
my city--
became a green speck and then
disappeared from view.

Image by "MidnightA"



Two Poems

Tyler Bigney

Fifteen

My bedroom is full of ghosts and
glow in the dark stars I glued
to the ceiling
when I was fifteen
and in sort-of love with a girl
who smiled a mouth full of metal,
the brackets of her braces alternating
her favourite colours:
pink purple pink purple pink purple.

I exhaled perfect O's
with a cigarette I stole from some guy at a restaurant

as she took pictures of the wind
swirling over the harbour.

A pint of fireball stowed away
in my breast pocket.
We went drink for drink
in a bathroom stall
and stumbled to the hammock
in the backyard of her mother's house
to grope each other in the dark.

A month later she left me
for some guy who played lacrosse,
and listened to techno,

who broke her heart in all the right places
better than I ever could.

I wrote a letter:
If you come back I'll let you shave my head.

This afternoon I drove past her house.

Her glinting ghost in the front yard,
and the blue dress she wore that night

still hiked up around her thighs.

Flies

I learned young to never
stand behind a horse, instead
to stand to the side.
But my friend, against
all of my pleading
knelt behind him, and
pulled his tail. A laugh,
and then the worst thing:
skull caved in. No heartbeat.
I rolled him onto a sheet
and pulled him with
all my might, outside
onto the scorched lawn.
The white sheet now red.
The blood in my veins halted.
The sun pounding down
on my shoulders, and
my body pushing forward
gracelessly
toward the house. The horse
quiet and oblivious. My friend
dead, the first and only dead body
I've ever seen, and then
the sound of flies and their warm,
metallic blue bodies
collecting on his face.

Image by Sascha Beck



Contributors

Jonathan Volk was born in Kentucky. He has a story about Frank Lloyd Wright in *DIAGRAM* (it's more fun than it sounds) and work forthcoming in *Caketrain*. He's an MFA candidate in creative writing at UMass Amherst. He wants you to like him. But not too much too soon. Maybe you should meet in a public place first? **Twitter** works for him.

Brett Elizabeth Jenkins currently lives and writes in Albert Lea, MN with her husband and no children. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Potomac Review*, *PANK*, *GUD*, and elsewhere.

Hallie Steiner is a senior at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. She is editor of their literary magazine, *The Driftwood*, and has won first place in her campus poetry competition. She enjoys dancing, attempting to sing, and spending time in the California sun.

Christina Thatcher is a recent graduate of the Teaching and Practice of Creative Writing MA at Cardiff University. In 2008, she won the William Van Wert Award for her dedication to professional and creative writing. In 2009, she was awarded the Marshall Scholarship to study how creative writing can improve the lives of at-risk youth in the UK. Christina currently lives in Cardiff and is working on her first collection of short stories.

Leslianne Wilder works by day on an ambulance in San Antonio, Texas. By night, she writes fiction that has appeared in *Shock Totem*, *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction*, and others.

Heather Kamins lives in Western Massachusetts. Her poetry and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Chiron Review*, *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *580 Split*, *Alehouse*, *7x20*, and *The Rat's Ass Review*. You can find her online at www.twitter.com/shakieranthem.

Ben Parker studied creative writing at UEA and has had work published in a number of places, including *Iota*, *Staple* and *Eyewear*.

Deanna Larsen is a Spanish tutor and freelance translator in Minneapolis, MN. Her recent travels include France, Spain, Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota. Her work has appeared in *PANK*, *Xenith*, *Revolution House*, *Mixed Fruit* and elsewhere. Beginning in the fall of 2011 she will be an MFA candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Follow her at whatapithy.blogspot.com.

Tyler Bigney was born in 1984. He lives and writes in Nova Scotia, Canada. His poetry and short stories have appeared in *Pearl*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Third Wednesday*, and *The Meadow*, among others.

