

# FLASH FICTION MAGAZINE

March 2016





Published by 101 Words, LLC

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# FORWARD

What's up, cupcakes? This is Shannon, the owner of *101 Words* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*.

What you are about to read is the first of many anthologies to come. If you are a writer, I encourage you to keep submitting stories, you may just end up in a future issue.

Special thanks to Grace Black and Emily Clayton for selecting the stories you are about to read.

Enjoy,

—Shannon

# **STARS IN HER HAIR**

by Shannon Barber

Mama never lets me wear my hair all out. She washes it section by section, each twist gently untangled, washed, soaked in conditioner and twisted again. She calls me the Thousand Names of Creation and Fertility and Love and Stars.

I sit between her knees, my ear pressed to her thigh while she braids my clean hair. Sometimes I doze off, the rhythm of her knuckles against my scalp and her soft low voice lulls me into half dreams.

Behind my closed eyes, I see the most beautiful things. The slow birth of a universe, swirling hot gases bringing some other new life. I skip along the rings of Saturn and smell the blue raspberry mystery of deep space.

When I'm not dozing, I pick the deedly bobs and butterflies Mama puts at the ends of my braids. My favorites are sparkly, little balls that clack when I run, but will smack my face if I'm careless.

Sometimes I complain. I want to see my hair full and nappy and standing out from my head like a gas giant.

“No. Some down is enough. All is too much.”

Unlike the voices of others, there is no shame in her. She sings songs to my hair about beauty and power. I don’t understand, but I obey.

Every two weeks like clockwork it’s just Mama, my hair, and my dreams. Mama names all the stars and constellations with each braid.

Mama says my hair is like chaos. Necessary and exciting. Terrifying to a world that craves unnatural order. She tells me that my hair is rarer than a witness to the death of a dwarf star, but it is there and real beyond the comprehension of most people.

I love how my Mama loves me. The way she weaves her love into my hair until it is only made of constellations, universes and worlds as yet unknown. Her love is the rainbow corona I see around the moon sometimes.

I know all these things but it wants to see my hair. Just once wild and free. I need to see it.

I wait until I am alone. I gather my combs and sit under the stars and undo myself.

Each time my fingers turn I speak the secret names of stars as yet unborn.

When my hair is all down and hanging in soft black nappy curls and coils, I dance.

The Northern Lights crackle in the tiny coils on the back of my neck and black holes whirl out of my afro as I spin and frolic.

Under my hair as velvet and soft as the sky above, I know things are happening and I just can't stop.

Mama always calls me the Thousand Names of Creation and Fertility and Love and Stars. She says I am God and Asase Ya. I am Xochiquetzal and the Celestial Registrar of Childbirth. I am Bastet and Hathor. I am Haumea and Aditi. I am Mama Quilla and Hanhepi Wi.

I am in our World only another child with stars and the power of creation in her eyes and falling from her hair.

I spin right into Mama's arms and for a moment, all the twinkling lights go dim in my hair and my eyes.

I'm afraid I'm going to get into trouble.

"I'm sorry Mama, I'm sorry. I couldn't help it."

Before I know what to do, there are tears pouring out of me. Mama wraps her long dark arms around me and holds me tight, she presses her lips to my hair and I can feel her vibrating with laughter.

"Hush now, don't cry, star. Don't cry. We all must

have our freedoms. You are my Child. You are the  
Thousand Goddesses of Creation and Fertility and Love  
and Stars. Dance with me, I will show you how to birth a  
universe properly.”

Mama and me, we dance forever and forever am I her  
little one. Forever are the stars in my hair. In my braids,  
the secrets of creation live until I let them loose to create  
again. And thus you are born and I am born and Mama is  
born and we are all born. Over and over again.

# **THE BOOK**

by DeRicki Johnson

His lips moved as he read the tag on the worn, tattered book: “Slightly Foxed—\$5.00.”

Humph. More like savagely sharked, he thought. But, there was something about this tome, driving him to covet it.

“I’ll give you two bucks for it.”

Just then the book cover flapped ever so slightly, its dog-eared pages restlessly ruffling.

The eldritch clerk looked over his precariously perched reading glasses and down his nose at the scruffy whelp; the book definitely quivering in anticipation. “No charge. The book’s chosen you.”

Walking home, he couldn’t shake the feeling the book itself had begun to read...him.



# **THE PROMISE LAND**

by Levi J. Mericle

He rejected life with a twitch of an index finger, and no one knew how to stop him.

Not his mother, not his father. Not even the splintered faith of a man that lay across the rosary around his neck.

He was a forgotten story, a fractured fairy tale with an ending like sour milk and moldy cookies at Christmas time. He needed substance beyond what this world entailed.

Now, his new life can start with the dancing fairies he's always dreamt about. He leaves behind a mark, his legacy for all time.

Speckled like love scene shadows on the wallpaper.

# **MICHAEL AND MARINA MOONWATER**

by Christopher Blaine

“The less we talk, the better,” Marina said, cutting him off mid-sentence. Michael was taken aback, confused; it was their first date.

Peering over the top of his menu, he watched as she intently scanned her own. Then, slapping her menu shut and dropping it onto their table, she kicked her heel impatiently while trying to catch the eye of the waiter. Michael was fascinated. It seemed to him that she hardly noticed his presence at all.

After they had ordered, she turned her eyes upon him. They were a very intense shade of green. He imagined the writhing growth of a jungle in tropical heat. “Look,” she said, “the best thing any stranger’s got going for them is an air of mystery. People get to know each other, figure each other out, they lose interest and want to be on to solving the next mystery. So, for both of our sakes, why don’t we just do our best to maintain that air of mystery?”

Talking is nasty and mostly pointless, so let's leave words to that for which they were intended: communicating practical problems. Like, hand me the wrench. Okay? No personal questions that aren't necessary."

For a moment, Michael just stared at her. Then, beginning to open his mouth, he changed his mind. Instead, he merely nodded his head. In his thirty years, he had never been on such a strange date; he was intrigued.

When the food arrived, they ate. Otherwise, they watched each other. Very intently and very intensely, each trying to find an opening through the eyes into the inner workings of the other.

When finally he had walked her to her door, Michael was somehow not surprised at the passionate kiss they fell into. Each were well on their way to becoming in the other's mind everything they dreamed of.

• • •

Three days later, there was a second date. A year later, they were married.

As the years passed, they laughed and they cried together, smiled and smirked, but only rarely did they talk. If words built up inside them, they dumped them upon their friends. Their love making, though, was a thing

to be marveled at—pure and vicious.

When at last, at seventy-six years old, Michael Moonwater had been forced to bury Marina Moonwater, seventy-eight, he knew next to nothing about her aside from what he had observed of her in their forty-six years together. Driving back from the funeral to what would be an empty house, many thoughts flooded his brain. There was sadness, of course, a heaping heart full. But, on top of that, there was fascination. How had he fallen into such a weird relationship, how had his life passed in such a way? Had he been hypnotized, enchanted? He was not a remarkable man. Marina, as far as he knew, had not been a remarkable woman. Only very, very peculiar. None of their friends or his family (he had never met hers) had understood their relationship in the least, though some professed admiration.

In what had been their car, Michael pondered her. He felt like a man who had lived inside a storm for forty-six years, finally seeing the broad blue sky. In the calm, everything had become very clear.

Suddenly, the image of the woman who had been his wife, down there in her grave under six feet of dirt, rose up in his mind.

Inside her rotting body were many treasures, treasures no one had ever seen. As her body decayed and her skin split, these treasures fell out. They were many and

wondrous. In time, though, the treasures too decayed, becoming part of the soil.

The image fading, a large smile began to spread its wings upon the wrinkled old face of Michael Moonwater. Then, opening his mouth, he started to sing.

As the car moved through light and shadow, winding its way back toward what would never feel like home again, Michael Moonwater sang as he never had before—ecstatically—as large tears rolled down his weathered cheeks, and the world whipped past his windows.



# **rites of passage**

by Steven O. Young Jr.

I bled, and they said I was a woman. I only felt closer to dying and thought my molted heart had fallen out.

I stammered through the Torah. They said I was an adult. Then showered me with trinkets. I couldn't tell who was disillusioned.

I broiled under his bourboned breath. He bit at the tzitzit splayed on my thigh and said he'd make me a woman. His absinthe-tinted eyes pierced through my tears. The sense of dying resurged.

They found him bludgeoned by the scroll. I bled, but so did he.

I finally felt like an adult. The judge concurred.

# **HELLSGATE, NM**

by Deidre Dykes

Daryl “Deadeye” Wilcox died on March 23, 1903, at 1:27 p.m. At about 3:00 that same afternoon, he took his usual stool at The Jackson tavern and ordered himself a white whiskey. The messy hole blown through his chest made drinking a little bit difficult, but Shoeleather, the weathered old barkeep, was more than used to this kind of incident. He toweled up the spilled liquid and offered the ugly, soaked rag to Wilcox. Daryl nodded his thanks to the barkeep, stuffed the whiskey-soaked towel firmly into his wound, and ordered up another drink. This time, he asked for a double.

# **I'LL BUY**

by Daniel J. Cleary

There was a corner at Broadway and one of the numbered streets, near Union, with a Popeye's across the street from a KFC and a Church's. We called it the corner of Broadway and Chicken. One winter Sunday morning, I was hanging out with this old guy from the neighborhood, Preacher, who got his name from the multiple Jesus tattoos he got in the joint. Preacher and I were desperate to keep the party going. We had a bunch of beers in the fridge, but we wouldn't be able to drink them all unless we had something to smoke with them.

"You fly, I'll buy," he told me through his skinny, yellow teeth.

He gave me sixty bucks to get more rock. So I did the fiend-walk, pacing the numbered streets between Broadway and Fleet, 55th to 71st, looking for a dope boy. Winter. Sunday morning. 5 a.m. No dope boys.

I was approaching the corner of Broadway and Chicken again, about to head back toward Preacher's

place, when a little black kid, couldn't have been more than twelve years old, came out from between two houses. He reached his thumb and index finger into his mouth and pulled a baggy from between his cheek and gum.

"How much you need?" he asked me.

"How old are you?" I asked him.

"How much you need?" he asked again.

"Look, I don't want to buy dope from a kid."

He pulled out four beautiful stones that could easily have passed for forties from a more imposing dealer.

"I've got thirties that I'm giving away for twenty 'cause I want to go to bed."

I thought about what I was up to when I was twelve. I was a fuckup—drinking a bit, smoking reefer already—but, at least, I wasn't slinging dope. I thought about this kid's future. I pictured him in juvie within a year, graduating to real prison as soon as he got popped as an adult.

Then I thought about those rocks. Those little off-white pearls that meant, at least, another twelve hours of fuzz and blur. And I thought about the half a case of beer still in the fridge back at Preacher's place. And I thought about the fact that Sunoco would start selling beer again in a couple of hours. And I knew Preacher would buy if I

would fly. Especially if we had scored a few boulders.

I stood there, in the shadow of Broadway and Chicken, and told this kid, “Give me three.”



# **RETURN REQUESTED**

by Petar Ramadanovic

Re: Order 516099

Initially, I requested to return the Sony BluRay Player I bought from you online, Wednesday, 02/04/2015. I wanted to return the item because it would not turn on.

Upon closer inspection, after my six-year-old grandson showed me which button to press, it appeared the item was, in fact, in full working order; it was me who was not functioning well. I would, therefore, like to cancel the original request and initiate another return.

If you could send me packaging a seventy-year-old male can fit in, and advise me on proper handling, I would be much obliged to you.

# **BIRD UNDERTAKER**

by Cassandra Parkin

When he sees her, she's holding a funeral for a chaffinch. "It died of cold," she tells him, patting the soil. They can't store fat. It weighs them down. Captivated, he suggests hot chocolate. When she counter-proposes sex, he's lost.

Her appeal's distinctly avian—small bones, quick movements, bright eyes, sharp little face. Three years later, she kills him (I've met someone else, I'm leaving now, bye). Lying on the kitchen floor, all the blood leaking out of his warm mammalian heart, he longs to shed his coat of fat and fly after her, tearing her to shreds with his talons.

# **SEVERANCE**

by Aaron J. Housholder

Entangled in the top of the bush near the front stoop there hangs a severed finger. Anyone who sees the finger will notice that it's a ring finger because the wedding band is still there. The observer—he or she, but please, God, she—will notice that the bloody end is cut clean and should thus deduce that the severance was intentional, not some accidental ripping or yanking of flesh and bone.

It might occur to her that it would be much harder to lose a ring finger to accidental amputation than, say, a pinky. She wasn't here yesterday to see that the pinky went first. She should notice that the blood is not quite dried on the ring finger and must therefore assume that the cutting and entangling was done today, at the earliest this morning but possibly this afternoon, while she might have been and should have been but probably wasn't actually in her office, though of course she'll say she was, damn it.

She'll have a chance, to be sure, to notice the finger in the bush, intertwined as it is in the upper twigs and leaves,

because the sprinkled blood on the front step should make her stop and the smeared blood on the screen door should draw her eyes up and then it's a quick lateral glance to the bush and the finger. Plus it will be pointing right at her. But she'll probably miss it. It's pretty tangled in there.

More likely she'll miss it because she'll be distracted by her phone or by making sure her clothes aren't disheveled from her time not in the office or by some other self-absorption. Or she'll come home after dark, again. Pleading for grace as usual as she crosses the threshold because the office was crazy and everyone was sick or at some damn conference, and she just couldn't get away. So she'll have a surprise waiting when she comes in, despite the finger out there, clear as anything... pointing right at her.

I think I'll tell her I've already eaten. I'll don the oven mitts and carry her the dinner I've kept warm for her. I'll keep my hands submerged in the dishwater, which will burn like all the fires of hell but I won't mind, washing all those pots and pans while she stares at her phone and eats.

I'll wait until she's climbed into bed and turned out the lights before I join her. I'll offer to rub her shoulders, just how she likes. We'll talk there in the dark as she lies face down and I straddle her hips and knead away the tension in those tight shoulders after she's removed her ratty old sleeping dress. I'll remind her in my quiet voice

what she said last Sunday, that she thinks we've lost some of our focus, our dedication, but that it takes both of us. And then I'll assure her that I know she's not doing her part, but even so, I'm as dedicated as she could ever ask me to be, and I'll put a little extra pressure with my left hand on her left shoulder, and I'll echo those final words she said to me last Sunday, that it "just seems like there's a little something missing, doesn't there?" And I'll squeeze again with that hand until she figures out what I mean. And then she'll scream and scream as I straddle her and rub her shoulders with these now eight fingers, though, I still feel all ten. Then I'll whisper, so she has to quiet down to hear me, and I'll ask if she thinks she could ever, ever be as dedicated as I am.

And then I'll get up and walk out. I'll show her how dedicated I would have been to staying by how dedicated I am to leaving. I'll march out the front door and I'll walk past that ring, with the finger showing me the way. Just like that.

So that's the plan. I almost can't wait for her to get home. It's going to be epic. Totally worth these last three days of waiting, this torture.

Should be any minute. It's been dark for a while. Going on midnight again.

Any minute now. She's coming home. I just know it.





# **BROKEN THINGS**

by Matt Spaetzel

I came to Kendra when I felt broken. She always had answers.

A hundred pottery shards lined her table when I entered. She sat repairing them with gold lacquer. Nearby sat a finished vase, beautiful gold lines spiderwebbing across every inch. I stood, wiping tears.

“Few know the trade,” she whispered. “Fewer understand the philosophy.”

I watched her. She leaned in close.

“Sometimes broken things are better for being broken.” A smile tugged her lips. “You have any questions today, dearest?”

I stared at the golden artwork—broken, beautiful, perfect. A smile formed. “Actually, I think today you answered them all.”

# **MAUDE**

by Leela Bear

Rifling through the vast collection of unwanted clothes, Maude unabashedly uses her skills for seeking out the thoroughly used, best bargain buys for her collection. She has a particular use for most items she acquires. She adores the smell of others and the personalities locked up within each.

She started her collection when her mother died. She had donated her mother's clothes and a lifetime of items to a hospice. Upon delivering them, she discovered so many new friends. New friends who would never judge or reject her.

Oh no, the dolls she dresses suit her taste in people perfectly well.

# **MATCHED**

by Matthew Fay

They sat on opposite ends of the circular marble table, hoping that the other would speak. It was their first time meeting, and both had been expecting the other to start the conversation. And steer it, for that matter.

The result was the past few minutes of painfully awkward silence. With each second the air seemed heavier, weighing down on them as it thickened in their chests. The mutual feeling was that of the last minute of a ticking bomb timer: at some point, they would just have to admit defeat and let everything go up in flames.

They had met over a hookup app, something neither of them would have considered had their respective friends not goaded them into it. They were decidedly the last type to sleep around: habitual homebodies and crap at small talk, much less flirting. And even given their social handicaps, something about those kinds of apps had always screamed of desperation to them, like the first of many steps towards giving up on real life before resigning oneself to the Matrix. They were quick to realize how

much they were just dinosaurs.

“It’s just a means to an end, man,” a friend of his had said, “it’s simplifying what everyone does anyway. People are busy. It’s so you don’t have to look so hard.”

“We’re not on campus anymore, hon,” a friend of hers had said, “this is just the next best thing.”

Both had finally caved. They did have to admit a sense of relief at the idea of minimizing the unclassified galaxy that was the New York dating scene, like narrowing the fish in the sea down to a lake. That was the main problem with the city, from what they’d gathered since moving there: the right ones always seemed to be hiding. Even in plain sight.

They both found the signup process immensely intimidating. Summing themselves up in a few photos and some select sentences of biography. He wasn’t sure how to be both honest and appealing, not when his idea of a good time was usually a Netflix sci-fi binge. She spent close to three hours putting together a profile picture, tearing apart her wardrobe for the proper outfit. Something attractive and fun, but that also didn’t give any false impressions of who she was.

He had found her one Saturday, three days after joining. He was drawn to her auburn hair and bright hazel eyes but especially to the Tom Baker Doctor Who scarf



she wore in her profile picture. Two days later, he had summoned the courage to message her.

He was her fifteenth message, after only five days. She had thought him a refreshing break from derivatives of ‘hey girl’ and subsequent frustrations at not getting a response.

“Brilliant scarf,” he’d said. “Though for authenticity’s sake, I hope it’s floor-length.” He’d surprised himself. He had no idea where his boldness came from.

She’d received the message while exiting the subway on her way home. She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to smile at it.

“Well, of course,” she’d replied, once back in her apartment. “The cat latches onto it and I have to drag him across the universe.” She was startled by her own pluckiness.

Back in his kitchen, he checked his phone with a breathy chuckle.

The conversation continued over the next few days, and just as fluently. Neither could remember the last time they’d talked so openly to anyone new. They felt funnier, wittier, more flippant. They were louder, more outspoken, and felt less of a risk in being so.

“This app be like ‘tell them your location!’ and I’m like ‘Home. Usually. Can I get Skyped in?’” she’d

messed one day.

“HA. Agreed,” he’d replied. “They could make a club themed after my living room and you’d still have to drag me to it.”

The daily hours became merely spaces between messages. They’d write one another whenever they had a free moment: on coffee, lunch, and bathroom breaks at work, on the subway, at home. His thoughts revolved around what he’d say next, planning it word for word, imagining how it’d sound and whether his tone would come across properly. She’d type out sentences in an open word document, just to see how they’d look in text. She would’ve thought they were said by someone else, someone with a sitcom-esque quirkiness.

By Friday, they were making plans to meet up. They’d decided on a coffee shop halfway between them around 2:00 p.m. on Sunday.

The past week’s correspondence had been so free-flowing they’d nearly forgotten who they were. Now, face to face, they felt reality returning correctively.

The silence persisted and the hopelessness ensued, layering like a fog between them. He took too-frequent sips from his coffee to pass the time, fiddling with the mug in its saucer afterward. She scanned the walls intermittently, pretending she was trying to get a sense of

the place.

All at once he smiled faintly. He held up a finger in a way that said ‘just one sec,’ and reached into his pocket to take out his phone. Her heart sank. The telltale sign of a failed connection, she thought.

He typed something into his phone, then set it screen down on the table and folded his arms. Soon after she felt her own phone vibrate in her purse. She took it out. The dating app was open with a new message from him.

“Well, shit. We’re not very good at this, are we?” It read.

She looked back up at him and smiled. She typed something into her own phone then set it down. He turned his over as it vibrated.

“No, I guess not,” it read, accented with a pensive emoji. “It’s kinda hard.”

His teeth showed through his lips as he smiled wider. He picked up his phone and typed another message.

She read it. This time, she laughed.

# MINT

by John C. Mannone

She was my peppermint girl—constantly chewing gum, even during sex. Soon, I'd bouquet the bedroom with spearmint fresh from my garden. Every day I'd offer her mint julep.

One day she tired of me. Opined in an empty minty voice she had to go and wouldn't be coming back. Our sex wasn't in mint condition anymore.

I stared in the mirror—wintergreen shaving cream lathered on my face—watched her slam the door. For a moment, a scrub pine knurled up in my chest, uprooted my heart. But in her wake, I smelled fresh hope. And the idea of lavender.

# THE BOATMAN

by Dan Purdue

Each night, we watch the boatman's faltering progress towards the island. The light from his lantern flickers as winter storms whip the lake around us into a seething black sea.

While the wind howls down the chimney, we remember last summer—the hottest on record—and the day we'd walked out from the cottage, our sandals kicking up dust as we crossed the dry-baked bowl of the lake bed. Lifting the crumbling husk of a small wooden boat, we'd disturbed broken oars, a skull, the rusted remains of a lantern.

We hold each other close and hope the storm never ends.

# THE CHILDREN

by Brandon Salkil

Stand at the outer barricade, and see the disheveled children wandering aimlessly, searching for other models just like them.

They are the obsolete. Exiled to the barrens, where the sight of lifeless little bodies still makes one feel uneasy.

Observe the melancholic nature of those remaining. Watch as they struggle and wade through the hoards, looking for parts to replace their damaged and their dying.

Remind oneself, quickly, that this is the way it has to be.

There is no room for pity.

There is no room for despair.

For all children fade away.

And new ones are born each day.

# **THE GALLERY ATTENDANT**

by Keely O'Shaughnessy

Sometimes, I visit my wife's gallery showing just to listen to her pre-recorded mission statement; the raspy quality of her voice played through the loudspeaker reminds me of the way she used to sound after late nights spent together drinking under the stars, our clothes smelling of bonfire.

Since my last visit a screen has been erected: a square of curtain, where the steward can sit in a makeshift room.

"Hello, in there?" I say, jiggling the curtain. After a moment, Kristy emerges.

"You're wet," she says, looking at me. I'd seen her here before and she'd seen me, and if I had to guess, I'd say she was somewhere around nineteen. I gesture down to the puddle of water pooled around my feet.

"So it would seem," I say.

She's confused by my reply so I smile and realise, parting my lips, that I haven't brushed my teeth today.

Maybe she thinks I was mocking her. Running my tongue along my gum-line, I mutter something about frames.

“I’m sorry?” she asks.

“The public are reassured when there is a frame.”

Kristy frowns. “Only our small pieces have frames,” she says.

“What I meant is, it shows it’s finished,” I say. “That the artist really means it.” The words feel loaded in my unwashed mouth.

“Oh—yeah,” she says.

“Although, that could still be a lie.”

I gaze at one of the paintings, noticing how the grass in the foreground has been carved out with a palette knife. Then shift my attention back to Kristy. The rise and fall of her chest. The white v-neck she’s wearing reveals a jam-coloured birthmark above her left breast.

“Are you okay? I have a towel back there if you want to dry off,” she says. “I got soaked this morning.”

Behind the curtain, there is more space than I’d imagined. Kristy goes to a set of storage boxes to retrieve a towel. Her boobs are smaller than Sarah’s, but firmer, the kind of boobs that keep their shape without a bra.

“I’ve seen you in here before?” she asks.

“I find it a good place to relax.”



“You like art then?”

“In a way,” I say. She must sense the hesitancy in my voice because she doesn’t probe further.

The space we’re in reminds me of Updike’s storage room in *New York Girl*; there’s even a tippy stall in the corner. *Licks of Love* was an anniversary present from Sarah. The narrator has an affair with a gallery attendant called Jane. If only we could share a cigarette.

“You know that a car is the safest place to be in a thunderstorm?” Kristy asks.

She’s now opposite me, close enough that she could rest her head against my chest, and listen to my heart. She doesn’t. Instead, she takes the towel and begins patting at my skin in circular motions, the rough nap of the fabric catching my stubble and from inside our curtained room, I hear my wife’s recorded voice echo around the rest of the gallery.

# **SLOWED**

by Jeffrey A. Paolano

Patrolman Warrenskine steps from his cruiser constantly evaluating the scene.

A man sits on the curb in a cardigan sweater, crotch-soaked green pajamas and socks.

“Good morning,” greets the Patrolman.

The grizzled disheveled man surveys.

“How’re you doing today?” asks the Patrolman.

The speckled man continues to survey.

The Patrolman invitingly says, “How about a lift home?”

“Do you have popsicles?” the man inquires of the Patrolman.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t,” replies the Patrolman.

“Piss off,” says the man, returning to his survey.

The Patrolman grasps an arm. “Let’s go.”

The man violently twists from the grip. “Not without

popsicles.”

# **JUGGLING THE TRUTH**

by Prospero Dae

I was juggling earlier today. I had three creamy-white eggs in the air. Luckily I was in the hen house—plenty eggs should I falter. A ghost white feather tickled my nose and I nearly sneezed. Phew!

Looking outside I could see a fox blanching in the sun. Bad fox, I thought.

I had over one hundred eggs in the air—and that, let me tell you, takes talent. Some of the eggs were brown, but most were white. Three hundred eggs now, folks—a Ferris wheel of uncracked spheres.

It's Tuesday, and Tuesday is my day for telling white lies.

# **I AM ROADKILL**

by Benjamin Langley

Carrion crows peck at your blackened carcass, a pulpy mess crushed on the roadside. The residual patches of red fur, the same shade as my hair, tell me that you were a fox.

“Thanks for coming,” I say.

“I didn’t want you to change your mind,” Gavin says. He used to call me his little fox.

Another cramp. I scan the post-op leaflet to see if it is supposed to hurt this much.

Gavin releases the handbrake and we creep forward a metre or two, enough to spook one of the scavengers. As it flies over the car, a chunk of your fox-flesh falls from its beak and plops onto the windscreen. Gavin cries out as the crow caws. Their cries are indistinguishable. He turns on the wipers and your flesh smears an arc of blood across the windshield.

He looks at me, and I gag. “Don’t throw up in here,” he says, “I’ve just had it cleaned.” It must be nice to be

able to clean up so easily.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Are you all right?” When he places a cold hand on my knee, I jerk away as revulsion surges through me and builds to another cramp.

“Listen,” Gavin says, “we can’t go on after this.”

He’s right. I turn to look at you. The birds keep pecking. One darts its beak into your eye. I cramp up again, squeeze my eyes closed, and try to block it out.

I’m in the operating theatre. Scruffy black hair sticks out of the back of the surgeon’s cap. Some loose hair drifts toward the floor. I glance down, see a pile of feathers, and understand: It’s not hair. I try to get up, but the anaesthetic is already working. The gown falls away and a murder of crows hovers in its place. They flock around my legs. Their beaks are inside me, tearing fleshy chunks from my baby. They pull out their blood-wet heads and tip them back to swallow before delving in deeper.

I scream as pain pulses through my body and I bolt from the car. I fold my arms across my belly and squeeze the emptiness in my womb.

The crows are not startled; they continue to feast on your carcass. Inside the car, Gavin is flapping. He grabs wads of paper towels from the glove box and mops the seat. I stomp towards you. The beady black eyes of the

crows stare at me. Even as I approach, they thrust their beaks down again to tear off another strip of your flesh before they flee.

From the car, Gavin stares with his beady black eyes. His persistent pecking convinced me that he was right. He said the thing growing inside me would change us, but as I watch him flit about in the car, I understand that he's the one who changed.

The traffic trickles forward. Gavin pulls up beside me. He leans across and opens the door. He opens his mouth, but all I hear is 'Caw, caw, caw.' I notice the bloodstain on the front of my dress, and weep. When I sit, the crows return to you. I pick up a clump of mud and toss it at them. It explodes as it strikes the road and they fly off again.

I don't notice that Gavin is out of the car until he is almost upon me. His wingspan blocks the fading sun's rays and we're both enveloped by his long shadow. I imagine his wings spreading around me, suffocating me. I pick up another clump of earth and throw it at him. It strikes his leg and he hops on one foot, flapping his wings wildly.

The traffic moves again. Car horns beep as they pass Gavin's car. He takes another step towards me, but when I pick up another handful of dirt, he scurries away. He crows at me from an open window and disappears.

I'll stay here to protect you from the scavengers. I'll stop them from pecking at you. I'll stop them from feasting on your flesh. And maybe, if I stay here long enough, I'll learn how to stop them from feasting on mine.



# **SEPARATION**

by Krystyna Fedosejevs

Nervous twitches, a flutter of limbs precipitated his departure. Not with her, but with the intruder who interrupted their ambience.

Earlier in the afternoon, the couple took in summer sunshine on their balcony. Murmuring contentment. Falling into deep silence when she nuzzled her face into his neck. He remained calm in appreciation.

Then a stranger intervened. Anger blurred his voice into incomprehensible language. The two males departed leaving the remaining soul sobbing; her head tilted down. Within minutes, she left.

One feather had fallen on my balcony floor. Reminder of the moment the mourning dove was lifted by a falcon's clasp.

# **XYLYL**

by Richard Edenfield

“That is not a word!”

“Yes, it is.” She lays down the tiles with a smug look on her face. She does this all the time. She invents words, especially when she’s losing.

“That doesn’t even seem like a word!”

“It is a word. It’s a chemical used in tear gas.” She writes her score down.

We have been working on our trust issues in relationship therapy. I do not want to undo progress.

“That is not a Goddamn word!”

She looks at me with big, watery eyes, testing me and my commitment. A dictionary is between us like a dare.

# **RINGS**

by David Cook

When I was little, my granddad told me you could find out how old a tree was by cutting it down and counting its rings. I used to wander round the woods near my house, looking for fallen trees and working out the age of any I found.

Then, when I hit ten years old, I used to borrow a small axe from the garden shed; being quite tall and broad for my age, I was able to cut down some of the more slender trees I found. I was obsessed with the idea that you could discover their age by cutting them in half.

I hadn't wondered if this would apply to other things until my friend Kevin asked how old my cat Mittens was, and I didn't know the answer.

I was disappointed to find that she didn't have rings to count. After all, trees had the same basic needs—air, water, sunlight—as animals, so why wouldn't cats have rings too? Maybe it was only cats that were different. I was thinking this over when my mother and father walked

in. They were horrified by what they saw. They'd just spent hundreds of pounds on a plush antique rug, and now it was soaked in cat innards.

Once they'd sent Kevin home, my mother frantically dialed the number for the local dry cleaner and my dad asked me why I'd done it. I told him the truth: that I thought I'd be able to count Mittens' rings to see how old she was. He didn't believe me—he worked overseas often, only surfacing in my life intermittently, so he wasn't really aware of my obsession.

These last few days were the first time I'd seen him this year. "That's your excuse, is it?" he said to me. "You must think I'm really dumb. Only a kid would believe that. Do I look like a kid to you? How old do you think I am?"

I didn't know.

But I thought I might know a way to find out.

# **WHITE**

by Ashlyn Wheeler

Under the warm scalp, something gave them life. Your parents aged gracefully; you were told that you would too. Maybe it was stress then, that shook, quivered them into existence.

Eight follicles of white hair held hands in the dark and grew up through the skin of your head, sprouting secretly below a layer of brown. They probably smiled, tasting shampoo for the first time. Now, one inch longer, they glisten from healthy doses of coconut conditioner.

You touch up your roots with permanent dye, knowing their kin beneath will never die. You look in the mirror, suddenly old at twenty-two.

# #WEREWOLF

by Valerie Brown

Howling at the moon is so passé. My parents do it. My grandparents. Even my older, perfect sister does it. Perhaps it's an inherited trait, but I'd never give in. I'm an evolved woman of the modern era.

Night creeps upon me. The moon's pale face glows bright, making my skin prickle and throat itch. Trembling, I retrieve the phone from my purse and access my Twitter account. The urge is strong. I grind my teeth as my fingers crash through the letters A-H-H-O-O-O-O. Once I hit *Send* the urge dissolves. A sigh escapes me. That's right. I'm an evolved woman.

# **THE VASE**

by Hermine Robinson

A deliberate sweep of Valerie's elbow set the crystal vase full of artificial peonies beyond the point of no return. It was an impetuous act, in the next moment she changed her mind but by then it was too late and the vase lay shattered on the marble floor of the front hall. Blood mingled with the jagged shards and silk petals as Valerie gathered up the pieces.

The crystal vase had been a wedding present from Darrel's aunt, Edith. It was a white elephant gift if Val ever saw one, and she remembered rolling her eyes as she unwrapped it from layers of tissue paper. Only Aunt Edith would choose something so heavy and old-fashioned for a young couple just starting out in life. Valerie had put the vase in storage and got on with the adventure of having a couple of children and moving their family around the country as Darrel's career advanced. She rediscovered the vase some fifteen years later when life slowed down enough for them to settle in one place.

"That old thing? Just get rid of it," Darrel said when

Valerie pulled the vase out of its old wrapper.

“No, it’s perfect for the new house,” Val replied.  
“And now that the boys are older, we can actually have nice things.”

Valerie had placed the crystal vase in an alcove near the front door of their dream home. It represented something solid and timeless after too many years of unsettled living. Darrel joked about the vase being high-maintenance and threatened to toss it out one day, but Valerie took pleasure in polishing the cut crystal and every few months she changed out the silk flower arrangement according to the season. She had put in the peonies just a week ago. Valerie cared for the vase herself rather than trust it to the new housekeeper—a foreign girl with uncertain English and the bad habit of putting the Henckel chef knife in the dishwasher.

“She’s ruined it,” said Valerie as she held up the pitted blade.

“Get a new one,” Darrel replied. That was his solution for a lot of things, everything from cars to clothes. The man had no sense of nostalgia. In many ways, it seemed inevitable that Darrel would eventually tire of Valerie too and she should hardly have been surprised to come home early one day to find him in bed with the cleaning girl. Valerie wished she had thought things through and walked away instead of running to the kitchen to grab the



chef knife and returning to the bedroom.

Now, as Valerie gathered up the shards of crystal with her blood-stained hands, she mourned the senseless destruction of the vase. Aunt Edith's gift deserved a better fate than to be tainted with the blood of Darrel's infidelity.

# SHIFTING SHAPE

by Kirsten Leggett

“You look different today,” she commented.

I gave her a quizzical glance. “What makes you say that?”

“There is a light that shines behind your eyes when you change.”

I smiled and reached behind my neck to the hard notch at the top of my spine. I pressed it, gently. My skin unravelled from my small frame and folded over and over on itself like an origami paper crane. I shook all over, stretched my wings wide, and preened my feathers with a beak carved from inner wisdom and spit the colour of love.

“I’ve learnt how to fly,” I whispered.

# **DR. LARRY LOVE**

by Phil Temples

I glance at his photograph on my wall: an old, African-American man with frizzy white hair, dressed in a school crossing guard uniform, carrying plastic batons and a toy fire engine. He's posed majestically, larger than life, against a deep, blue sky. He skates up and down Massachusetts Avenue pretending to direct traffic. He's a good skater, very athletic, and ripped for his age. Occasionally a driver honks at him, or yells for him to get out of the street. The police leave him be. They know that he's harmless. He campaigned for Mayor of Cambridge once. I voted for him.

# LUNCH

by Carinna Botelho-Howard

Harry fished through his bag, searching for the orange jar. “Do you think that’s why they never sit with us?” he asked his best friend, Don. He stared at his lunch box, knowing he needed to take his pills, but hating to in front of everybody.

“I guess.” Don shrugged. “Hey, we still have each other, right? We’ve been friends since kindergarten.”

Harry smiled, but he sighed as he pushed a pink pill into his sandwich. Tuna. Every Friday.

Don saw Harry was still upset, so he told a joke.

The other kids watched Harry laugh and talk to no one.

# PARADE

by Spencer K. M. Brown

The mayor's tongue spills words like boiling water and only vowels can be heard from this distance and my father reminds me that people are idiots and that's the only reason idiots get into office and why they have parades and close down the streets because idiots need to be distracted like children and imagination needs to be fed to them like cold tomato soup but I can't help staring at the older woman in front of us and how she lives across the street where I see her most nights sitting on her porch drinking wine alone and reading books that she won't discuss with anyone and I stare at the grandchildren that run around her legs playing hide-and-seek amid the bodies of the crowd who stare at the day-glo cars and confetti floats that roll down the street tossing out candy and my father opens another beer from the six-pack he smuggled into the parade and takes long sips between scowls of disgust and he shifts on his feet taking the weight off his bad leg, the one that was pinned down between twisted metal and the vinyl seat of the car, the

same leg he couldn't move far enough to get up and pull mom out of the car in time to stop the bleeding but as he opens another beer with that tell-tale crisp, snapping sound, the old woman turns around and stares at us and my father pulls his coat over his hand and forces a smile and the woman smiles and I see her teeth are stained a purple-red from wine and the mayor goes on and on about all the things he'll do and my father laughs a little harder and says how if mom was still alive she'd probably think this asshole was some sort of genius and the old woman laughs a little as her grandkids run around, their cheeks look like puffy clouds, stuffed with the hard candies they'd tossed from the floats and I stare up at the old woman and wonder why she drinks wine alone on her porch and why she doesn't have anyone to talk about her books and my dad rubs his bad leg and I know the cold is getting to him and I wonder why I was the only one who came back home, why wasn't I off making my own life like my two brothers and just let the old man deal with this by himself and I see he's getting restless and suggest we go and I look around at all the people in the crowd and wonder how many of them have bad legs and how many are hiding beers in their jackets and how many drink their wine alone and go to sleep with an empty space next to them and my father mumbles a little more about the idiots and something about how many asshole politicians it takes to screw in a lightbulb but he's only speaking in

vowels now and his pockets are filled with empty cans and I look over at him and wonder if I'll drink my wine alone one day because no one came back home and my father rubs his hands together in the cold as the empty cans clink together in his pockets and I think about how one day he'll be nothing more than a khaki cloud on the hills, a ribbon of smoke, and that old woman nothing but a faint smell of fermented blackberries and grapes and I know I can't stay here much longer and should be sleeping with a space next to me someplace far away and my father whispers something about how much longer will it all hurt and that the Cubs play later today and I smile as I shift into gear and watch as they toss out candy that looks like money and I know I can't keep going like this but I'll stay with him again tonight, but I have a lonely bed waiting for me in New York or Miami—anywhere—and we drive past the crowds and past the fields towards home and my father's fear moves in rings from his tongue like a parade and my fears slide away in slow clouds and he turns on the Cubs game and I wonder what the weather is like in Chicago.

# BIOS

## **Shannon Barber**

Shannon Barber is an author from the Pacific Northwest. She is a genre and form-surfing writer with a fondness for the complicated. See her work at *The Establishment*, *The Big Click* or read her writing about writing and books [on her website](#).

## **Leela Bear**

Born and raised in South Africa, but choosing to live abroad, Leela Bear draws inspiration from daily events and interactions. She is influenced by various literary genres, especially the more disturbing side of the spectrum. She writes to provoke the imaginations of her readers.

## **Christopher Blaine**

No Comment.



## **Carinna Botelho-Howard**

Carinna Botelho-Howard was born and raised in the United States. Her African and American origins gave her exposure to a diverse set of cultures that influence her daily writing. She has traveled nationwide, and she was home schooled most of her life. Her great love for all animals shows often and it mirrors many of her stories.

## **Spencer K. M. Brown**

Spencer K. M. Brown was born in Bedfordshire, England. His stories and poems have been widely published. He currently lives and writes in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. To read more of his stories and novels, [visit his website](#).

## **Valerie Brown**

Valerie Brown has been writing for six years. She loves creating character-driven stories in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction.

She lives just north of Richmond, Virginia with her husband, two kids, golden couch potato/dog, and two wired tabbies. She can be found on Twitter [@VedBrown](#) and [her website](#).

## **Daniel J. Cleary**

Daniel J. Cleary holds a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from Cleveland State University, and a Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Dayton. He publishes fiction, nonfiction, and scholarly work, along with children's books.

## **David Cook**

David Cook comes from Newcastle, England, and now lives in Bridgend, Wales, with his wife and daughter. He publishes work at [Dave Writes Fiction](#) and is also a regular contributor at [Short Fiction Break](#). You can find him on Twitter: [@davidcook100](#).

## **Prospero Dae**

Prospero Dae lives in Bermuda, with a spirited papillon named Ariel, near the shipwreck of the *Sea Venture*, and amid a farrago of flowers, which whispers stories in his conch-like ears. He never sought formal training in shipbuilding or blacksmithing, though writing seemed natural.

## **Deidre Dykes**

Deidre Delpino Dykes is a birdmom, writer, and coffee-fueled ne'er-do-well. She is always working on her book series about demon hunters, Red and Caleb. Deidre presently works as a freelance web copywriter. She has a B.A. in English Literature as well as a diploma in Baking and Pastry. She lives outside of Washington, DC with her husband and several parrots. Visit [her website](#).

## **Richard Edenfield**

Richard Edenfield passed away today at the age of 112. After a distinguished writing career that included the Nobel prize for literature, Richard retired to Martha's Vineyard with his ninth wife and 78 children. Richard, who grew up in suburban Philadelphia, once said that his inspiration for writing came from well crafted hoagies and grape soda. His last words on his deathbed were misspelled.

## **Matthew Fay**

Matthew Fay is a writer, journalist, and comedian, as well as a lifelong Brooklynite (save for the four years of school in Virginia). He has a penchant for comic books, musical theater, and multiple coffees in the morning. He is a Scorpio. You can follow him on Twitter: [@MaFay91](#).

## **Krystyna Fedosejevs**

Krystyna has been interested in the power of words for a long time; as a librarian and a writer of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. She is published online and in magazines, including: *100 word story*, *50-Word Stories* and *Boston Literary Magazine*. When not residing in Canada, she travels the world.

## **Aaron J. Housholder**

Aaron J. Housholder teaches writing and literature at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana. His creative work has appeared in *Relief Journal*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *freeze frame fiction*, *CHEAP POP*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Five2One Magazine*, and a dozen or so other journals. He lives and writes in his hometown of Anderson, Indiana. You can find him on Twitter: [@ProfAJH](https://twitter.com/ProfAJH).

## **DeRicki Johnson**

Former *New Orleans Times Picayune* newspaperman, DeRicki Johnson is the author of *Brindle Beast*. He frequents Twitter under [@derickijohnson](https://twitter.com/derickijohnson) where he is a prolific tweeter of haikus and <140 character poetry, as well as links to flash fiction stories.

## **Benjamin Langley**

Benjamin Langley is from Cambridgeshire, UK. By day he teaches the rules of grammar; by night he tries to find exciting ways to break them. Benjamin completed an M.A. in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge in 2015. Links to his published work can be found [on his blog](#).

## **Kirsten Leggett**

Kirsten lives and writes in Tasmania, Australia. She is a writer of short stories, flash fiction, and poetry, drawing inspiration from the natural world and her island home. Her short story “The Tiny Teacher” has been a winning entry in the Umoja Orphanage Australian writing competition. Her book *The Orange Space* is her first published book of poetry.

## **John C. Mannone**

Author of several literary collections, John C. Mannone has over 450 works published in venues such as *Inscape Literary Journal*, *2016 Texas Poetry Calendar*, *Artemis*, *Southern Poetry Anthology* (NC), *Town Creek Poetry* and *Pedestal*. He edits poetry (*Silver Blade* and *Abyss & Apex*) and teaches college physics in east TN. Visit [The Art of Poetry](#).

## **Levi J. Mericle**

Levi J. Mericle is a poet/spoken-word artist, lyricist, and freelance writer from Tucumcari, N.M. His work can be seen in *Black Heart Magazine*, *Verse-Virtual*, *101 Words*, *Awakenings Review*, *Muse*, *Devozine* and more. He is an advocate for the mentally ill and bullied individuals of all ages.

## **Keely O'Shaughnessy**

Keely O'Shaughnessy grew up in Devon and has an undergraduate and post-graduate degree in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of Gloucestershire. She was awarded the Francis Close Hall Prize for the highest dissertation mark in 2012 and again in 2015. Her short fiction has appeared in *Duality 6 Literary Magazine*, as well as anthologies *Smoke: New Writing I*, *Fire: New Writing II* and *Compass*.

## **Jeffrey A. Paolano**

Mr. Paolano, an economist having whiled away seventy-plus years on the planet, enjoys the pleasures of writing fiction in Southeast Ohio. Mr. Paolano's work appears in *Frontier Tales*, *Proud to Be: Writing by American Warriors*, *Scar Stories*, *The Tanist's Wife* and other stories and *Veterans Writing Project*.

## **Cassandra Parkin**

Cassandra is a writer with Cornish roots and a passion for fairy-tales. Her published work includes the award-winning short story collection *New World Fairy Tales* (Salt, 2011), and three novels—*The Summer We All Ran Away* (Legend Press, 2013), *The Beach Hut* (Legend Press, 2015), and *Lily's House* (Legend Press, 2016).

## **Dan Purdue**

Dan Purdue's short stories have appeared in print and online in the UK, Ireland, Canada, and the USA, and have been short-listed or won prizes in a variety of competitions. His fiction has also featured in an English study guide for secondary schools. Visit [his website](#).

## **Petar Ramadanovic**

Petar Ramadanovic teaches literary theory at the University of New Hampshire. He immigrated to the U.S. from the former-Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

## **Hermine Robinson**

Hermine Robinson lives in Alberta, Canada where winters are long and inspiration is plentiful. She loves all things ‘short fiction’ and refuses to be the place where perfectly good stories come to die. In 2012 she went from scribbling to submitting, and since then her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications.

## **Brandon Salkil**

Brandon Salkil is a part-time writer and part-time actor. With his first two short stories accepted by *101 Words*, this has given Brandon motivation to venture into his first children’s book with his wife Sherriah.

Brandon can be contacted via email at [salkil78@gmail.com](mailto:salkil78@gmail.com) and previous work can be viewed at [IMDB](#)

## **Matt Spaetzel**

Matt Spaetzel is founder of the Williamsburg Independent Writing Group, co-author of the episodic horror blog, [The Odd Correspondence](#), and editor/contributor for the science fiction music novel, [Valinth](#). On the occasion he emerges from his cave, he can be found at [mattspaetzel@gmail.com](mailto:mattspaetzel@gmail.com).



## **Phil Temples**

Phil Temples lives in Watertown, Massachusetts and works as a computer systems administrator at an area university. He has published over one hundred works of short fiction in print and online journals. Phil's first novel by *Blue Mustang Press* is a murder mystery entitled *The Winship Affair*. His second is a paranormal-horror novel, *Helldown Chronicles* published by *Eternal Press*.

## **Ashlyn Wheeler**

Ashlyn Wheeler is a senior BFA candidate in the Creative Writing Department at Columbia College Chicago. In 2015, she saw a total of thirty-eight films in theaters and got her four wisdom teeth extracted. Her fiction has also appeared in *Hair Trigger* and *Hypertext Magazine*.

## **Steven O. Young Jr.**

Steven channeled his inclination towards critical analysis into an M.A. in English from Oakland University, and often allows that same tendency to dictate his writing. His other works may be found in Volume Six of *freeze frame fiction* and the contest results pages of *Three Line Thursday* and *Micro Bookends*.



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