

*Issue Ten | Spring 2019*  
*Anniversary Issue*

*Basic Edition*

**Helen**   
a literary magazine

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# Letter of Acknowledgements

Over the past five years, *Helen: a literary magazine* has published 10 issues.

We started out small, but strong. Our first issue was glorious in print and in vivid color. We made a splash on the Vegas literary scene that cannot be mistaken and we came out of nowhere it seemed.

But the idea of the existence of this magazine was planted in my mind many years ago as I grew up in this city. When I moved back here after divorce and a short spell in Wilmington, North Carolina, I felt determined to make this dream a reality.

What I love most about my city is its' ability to inspire others to go outside their comfort zone, take huge risks, and draw outside the lines. This magazine pushed me as it pushed others to do better and be better in our evolving and challenging world.

There was no mistake that there would be obstacles, criticism, and people dead set on undermining the mission of our magazine. But like many other Nevada women before me, I wasn't having it. To quote Mildred Breedlove: "I do not crush easily. My backbone is made of forged steel and I spit at tigers."

And, there has been great love and respect for what we have done and continue to do. Every time I run into an unexpected fan of our magazine, I am humbled and grateful. We have made our mark and I look forward to the years to come.

The staff has grown and evolved over those past five years in ways I couldn't even imagine when I first started this adventure in publishing a literary magazine rooted in my hometown of Las Vegas, Nevada. We are now an international group with people even in India and Africa volunteering as readers.

We would like to give special thanks to the many people who helped support us and build our foundation over the years.

Cordell McCurdy and Amanda Farrar contributed greatly to the launching of this magazine and we would not have our success today if it weren't for them.

Scott Seeley and Drew Cohen of The Writer's Block were excited about our existence from the very beginning as our journey in the literary scene started around the same time. We are deeply appreciative of them allowing us to hold readings and events at their bookshop as well as allowing James Joseph Brown to complete his interview series with Laura McBride there.

We would also like to thank Beverly Rogers, Laura McBride, Jorge Lara & The Las Vegas Poets Organization, Paloma Solamente, Melisa Weikel, Kara Wickwire, Dax Pagan, Ellie Mendre, Barbara Olsson, Laura McBride, Vogue Robinson, Sarah King, Ellen Sussman, Tina Wallace, Corie Weaver, Andy Hall, Crystal Norris, Arika Elizenberry, Vern Holmstrom, Nancy Holmstrom, Cliff Holmstrom, Battle Born Slam team, Danielle M. Kelly, Ruth Rauma and The Friends of the Fort, Beth Hewitt, Linda Miller, The All-Togethers, Dennis McBride, KNPR, Rachel Christiansen, Stacy Willis, Kristen Peterson, Gregory Robinson, 300 Days of Sun, Bobbie Ann Howell, Gina Quaranto, Jana Lynch of Jana's RedRoom, Friends of the Fort, Las Vegas Color, Kayla Dean, Erica Vital-Lazare, Red Rock Review, Petite Hound Press, Heather Lang Cassera, Letisia Cruz, Kristen Peterson, Christina Frausto and The Corner Gallery, Teresa Maharaj, Kim Henry of BooksorBooks, Laura McBride, Geneva Marquez, Artist.Vault, Melanie Davis & Mad Girl in a Box, , Erica Vital-Lazare, Ginger Meurer, Diane Bush, Lisa Fields Clark, Chris Cutler & BLVDS magazine, Henderson and Las Vegas Writer's Group, Paul Atriedes, Gregory Kompes, Angela M. Brommel, Melanie Davis & Mad Girl in a Box, Diane Bush, Eric Miller, Writers of Southern Nevada, Henderson and Las Vegas Writer's Group, Tina Willis, Kalisha Buckhannon, Fred Wasser, KNPR, Lois Roma-Deeley, Blue Minaret Literary Journal, Huizache, and Rise Up Review, Neon Lit, Christine Bettis, Bobbie Ann Howell and Nevada Humanities, Black Mountain Institute, Cindi Moon, Neon Museum, Rosemarie Dombrowski, The Las Vegas Book Festival, Poetry Promise, Vogue Robinson, the family of Helen Stewart, and our growing supportive local community who keeps reminding us how important we are.

Please enjoy our Anniversary Issue celebrating all the literary works we have published from current and former local Nevadans. It is a true testament to how we have progressed as a literary magazine.

And when you're done ... head over to our subdivision and check out our first digital anthology, *Unincorporated*. From there you will see a diverse collection of works from current and former staff members.

# Masthead

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# Poetry

# Las Vegas, Battle Born | Jeremy Gregerson

*Fall 2018*

10/2/17

The flag of our state is emblazoned  
with the motto Battle Born,  
and stenciled on my throat,  
walking to my office on Monday,  
a question: How many more  
now born and borne  
under the banner;  
how many dead,  
how many wounded,  
how many of the hundreds  
who caught one stone of a hail  
of bullets awoke in an ER,  
a stranger's belt 'round their thigh?  
How many lovers and children  
needed shielding by heroes nearby?  
I walk from the office to class,  
to class and back.  
I greet the children,  
their eyes ask  
how many holes were torn  
in festival fencing  
with trucks and bloody hands  
as means for escape,

how many returned to the field  
again and again  
to follow the sounds of the cries?  
How many gallons of blood,  
spilled and donated,  
can the kids' backpacks contain,  
how many thoughts and prayers,  
how many days until bleeding  
bullet holes that cousins and mothers  
and their babies sustained  
are holes we can ignore?  
How many more?  
How much might we endure,  
we wonder, watching  
my students' innocence  
fall soft to the floor  
like so much windswept wool  
from lambs newly shorn,  
wrapped in a flag reading:  
Battle Born.

# None of Us | Charlene Stegman Moskal

*Fall 2018*

None of us are the sun.

Arrogance to believe  
I am anyone's light  
and if I should go out  
you would falter, be abandoned,  
become dark matter, be absorbed  
by pain,  
by longing,  
by confusion,  
by self-retribution and fear,  
loathe to believe I've been shut off  
by some celestial Tesla.

.

None of us are the sun.

You would not vanish.  
Your path would not devolve,  
only wobble,  
lost in space for a while  
until you find a stronger gravity  
than love to stabilize  
the orbit of your heart.

None of us are the sun.

# Skin | Charlene Stegman Moskal

*Fall 2018*

Remember how it used to be?  
I'd wrap my arms around you  
or you'd wrap your arms around me,  
our flesh sticking to each other  
like a Harlequin novel left out in the rain,  
the pages dried by the wind and stuck together.  
To not destroy the moment, we'd unpeel  
slowly, languorously, carefully.  
Now we rarely touch skin to skin,  
we comfortably say "I love you" and "Goodnight,"  
and hope that morning comes.

# Continuum | Jennifer Battisti

*Spring 2018 : 1st Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

*Vegas '91*

Under the eves of the 7-11 whole galaxies are forming,  
Exodus in Doc Martins arrive, clove-cloaked in hazy  
Pink Floyd replicated armor, indigo hair  
sprayed in the alley minutes before.  
Suicide Slurpees are straw-sucked at the speed of light,  
kaleidoscoping comets into throats full  
of futures that will not come.

Girls with inky eyes take big gulps  
of adolescence as if it were bottomless.  
Mothers with cracked faces slip coins  
into video poker window-seats while  
toddlers wait with full diapers and dirty feet--

We don't know anything yet,  
how most of us will not make it further  
than the distance of the day's supply,  
our bodies celestial after  
two bong hits and a hot dog.

We are still there, orbiting convenience,  
like breakfast links on a turnstile grill, still  
shoplifting diet pills and Zig-Zags— paralleled  
with our now existence.  
Sometimes a glimpsed bifold flashes back our  
reflection, prism in an open door, the sun sling-shot  
into a fissure in the fabric of time, bent  
just so—the way a decade goes down like instant coffee.  
For a moment we meet our juvenile selves,  
our potential still shelved like motor oil and NoDoz,

The continuum assembled later--  
after the blue-blazed quasar devours our young lives.



# My Dad at Sixty, Sixty Years Ago | George Perrault

*Spring 2018 : 2nd Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award 2018*

When my dad was coming up, town's Democrats  
wanted nothing to do with Canucks, a pain that  
lived along with playground taunts – Frenchy  
Caboo, shit in your shoe, never get up till half-  
past two – something he could recall even then,  
like walking one night in Detroit, being told you  
white folk get off the sidewalk – streets, gutters  
be good enough, or getting shot at, south Chicago  
where he just ran, didn't dare look see who fired.

So in the sixties he was at the gas station where  
my brother worked, when a black family pulled up  
at the hose to get air for their tires, and my brother  
didn't offer to do that, the owner's policy being  
they'd do it for a woman but not for a man, not if  
he hadn't bought gas, black guy getting pissed, driving  
off mad, my brother asking what he thought, and dad  
told him I think you should've said hell with company  
rules, just gone out and aired up that shine's tires –

now right there, what's rolling round your head, not  
my dad or what a crap-ass poem this is, what's living  
inside your head, that there's the story of America.

# Sunrise Strip | Joan Robinson

*Spring 2018: 3rd Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award 2018*

A stained sheet, the sun smears bloody  
on the frowzy mountains,  
then lifts off: a jiggly blonde orb.

Whiten the sky, dim the signs,  
Erase the night from the sidewalks.  
Make the streets white, blank, new.

# Ether | Victoria Elghasen

*Spring 2018: Honorable mention Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

I nestle in the dirt packed  
between ribs, centuries-dry;  
rest your injured back  
against the open palm  
of my mechanic history

Your story is etched into dusty spines,  
the version they want to know;  
hide the you cupped in the fist of time  
and when I go, save a corner  
within the spirit of your bones  
to accept my hollow soul into your own.

## Choir | Svetlana Larionova Miller

*Spring 2018: Honorable mention Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

We were singing "The Internationale,"  
The fifth grade of Moscow School #75,  
Red silk ties on tender necks,  
Eyes ablaze,  
Voices strong and pure  
And sure of the meaning of every word.

I had practiced on my own.  
My voice was pale, not worth hearing.  
But I heard it now.  
And it was worth hearing.

I sang, I believed, I joined the torrent.  
A brighter flow filled the hall,  
Shattered the cathedral ceiling  
Of the Palace of Young Pioneers,  
Burst through the stucco molding  
And frescos of the great events  
Of our shining 20th century.  
A river without gravity,  
It rushed toward the stars,  
And I dreamed then and there  
That the sound became spirit  
And joined the light  
Of the universe.

The audience was transfixed.  
I saw people wiping their eyes,  
I felt their souls expanding,  
Touched by the light.  
They stood. They applauded.

If you took city bus 89 to Kutuzovsky Prospekt that night,  
You may have been annoyed by the kids on board.  
They chattered and laughed and seemed to be celebrating something or other.  
Maybe you wanted to be left alone with your thoughts.  
Maybe you had something to frown about.  
Maybe you hadn't heard a thing.

We won first place.

## Challenger | George Perrault

*Spring 2018: Honorable Mention Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

Thirty-one years ago, they're posting online today, thick  
white flowers blossom briefly again in near space where it's  
still cobalt, not black, and I walk door-to-door in my little  
country school, talking with children squirming for news,  
first teacher off to orbit, hopeful eyes as I shake my head  
we don't know why, but what, oh that we surely know.

And surely lessons will follow, engineering failures, public  
pressures, but for now it's only me, enacting calm authority,  
third grade, fourth grade, room by room, their faces tracking,  
open as petals, a few months before Chernobyl unfolds  
and older children must be gathered, reminded these are also  
neighbors, dry-land farmers, herdsman waiting for rain.

Then the older black and whites, seventy-two years now,  
a day when war-hardened humans broke open the gates at  
Auschwitz, releasing a lucky few, asking themselves what  
could have happened for these to be numbered fortunate,  
their minds a portfolio now: barracks, barbed wire, smoke,  
ash and ovens, and everywhere those vacant eyes.

Now the photo's a young boy in Aleppo, a desert town  
where barbarians rocket death from afar, clean as napalm  
devouring distant trees as a girl runs naked from the flames,  
glimpses of historical interest, great herds of people surging

like wildebeest on the savanna, carrying whatever remains  
on their backs, others floating facedown in a cold Latin sea.

But never here, of course, shining city on a hill, refugees  
turned away from our shores, photographs of water arching  
winter air, strikers frozen where they stand, snarling dogs,  
women, children beaten with clubs – was that nineteen-twelve  
or yesterday, Selma or South Dakota, Ludlow or Lawrence,  
Sandy Creek or Wounded Knee, Muslims or Judenfrage?

New York 2018 | Stephanie Kutner  
*Spring 2018*

The first fireworks were lit  
to scare off spirits.  
I hope tonight's will scare ours  
together into the sky's  
alchemy of colors.

What's left of your sweat  
I wear like gunpowder,  
hiding me from this night  
when spark by spark  
I must give us up  
to ordinary explosions.



Safe Passage | Elizabeth Quiñones-Zaldaña  
*Spring 2018*

There's little to look on now but  
the remains of the lavender hibiscus  
as it leans against the side of the house  
The pouring of refuse at unsafe distances  
layers of bark peeling back  
the softened knot of exposed roots  
This leave-taking not winter rest  
but finished work lately discovered—  
How long ago did you breathe your last?  
quietly put to death by mop water,  
I did not mean to require your life in  
clearing the tiles of grime  
the unnatural scent of pine  
the natural sound of laughter  
children barreling round a tight corner  
where a narrow walk joins the front patio  
with a shallow enclosure  
How long before the pitch adjusts  
to overturned wagon and scraped knuckles?  
No loss a private loss, I take hold of you  
rock your brittle spine, lean my weight in  
forward and backward to loosen the hold  
of Earth, here in a rented space  
Where common forms of grace have been offered free  
Woe to the one in her toil who refuses to see

# Nuclear Test Moratorium | Claire Dockery

*Fall 2017*

*Nevada Test Site, Mojave Desert, setting of 928 nuclear detonations between 1951 and 1992*

We've put our stillborn stars and parched oceans to rest,  
cast the ashes to silent skies, bluest tomb over land  
blank as morning, crater-wreathed and dormant.

By and by, dust devils wind back into pioneering  
across the old minefield. Promised Land, they hope,  
as they colonize the past. Emboldened, the yucca

repopulate their village. Hares burrow beneath  
faded radiation warning signs. Book of the dead, open  
in bullet casings, fossil faces. Scorpions take pride in trilobite ancestry,

entertain dreams of dominance. Do we rue our shrinking?  
The pages tear and decay as antelope stamp across,  
obscure the wording, vandalize the old testimonies.

Together, they paint the land in broad strokes of gold:  
crown of thorns in perennial bloom until its atoms  
collapse, weary. One can only suffer so much beauty.

## No Chants. | D.K. Sole

*Fall 2017: featured as part of our group of Neon Museum Visual Prompt contest submissions*

Decadence / shouts the French tourist, Maldoror's sister / I am a saint, I know the smell of sin! Great Decadence I denounce thee in the same breath that I denounce my brother. I evade damnation. How? Amphibian question: I flee to a heat. Now there is no Decadence. That century is behind us. I chose the eleven a.m. tour. <in summertime, hisses one from Minnesota, regretting everything from the airport forward> A burning wizard! Crude flakes! He preens, his hand is speared. Repulsed, the earth stabs him. He's proud of that stigmata, this infamously sneering Magic! I see him: I am confronted. He is still, still, but chuckling, chuckling as he stares over a wall. He swings open, an iron maiden. Inside him the spines of a tempting cactus have been set in rows. He seduces me and I resist easily; is he not on a flat plain? <this noise she's making, is that what they mean when they write the words 'diabolical laugh' murmurs the Minnesotan to the guide> The city outside the museum is home to no one. It is exotic to no one. The iron maiden wears a black muff on each ear. Witness the plurality of the silent lozenge. Her hand is both knife and sceptre. <I see it, sobs the Minnesotan> Iron appendage! It owns three casinos. Her lips are on the same plane as her nose. May we all flatten our carcasses so cruelly. That arrow is a circle of lecherous rubies. It is her mouth. Finned backside, it pours to the shark, to the foul sea of my brother's skull. It pierces the wall. Ribald, it crushes open the wizard, whose inner islands gush across the sand like stingrays.

I affect nothing, I do nothing, I am cynical, an addresser of newspapers, those matt baroques. I vomit my snow like an afterbirth into the light but I am still a saint ...

The wall shatters, I see that I am wrong – this is the city in which I must do battle, for every townhouse is painted brown with my brother's turds! <I will join the Home Owners' Association, screams the Minnesotan, weeping at the memory of a leaf>

## Phoenix | Ashley “Ms.AyeVee” Vargas

*Fall 2017: republished with permission from Legs of Tumbleweed, Wings of Lace: An Anthology of Literature by Nevada Women*

Phoenix trapped in glass,

Wings bound. Smiles for the crowd.

Tears. Beautiful Slave.

## Boys Will Be Boys | Rodney Lee

*Fall 2017 : republished with permission from Clark: poetry from Clark County, Nevada*

Mighty, young bullocks we were  
each and every one  
locking horns  
flashing brawn  
a boy's brand of fun.

Hanging in the school's hallways  
clowning for the crowd  
struttin'  
and jiving  
and talking loud!

When Montana  
fine, fine, gorgeous Montana  
rounded the corner  
and her beauty stilled us all.

Lawd, she looked good back in '78  
afro like a flower  
her young body like a stream  
many nights she had danced through  
the orchid fields of my boyhood dreams.

And we all looked—and checked her out  
devoured her with our very sight

and she walked,  
walked like winds blow and angels sing.  
Sister! My sister had inherited  
the grace of ancestral queens.

Now, I think it was Sainty who cat whistled  
and Don Juan said,

“hey now,”

but it was me  
big-mouthed, insecure, callow, cowardly me  
who shouted

“Ooh, look at that ass!”

My boys all laughed and slapped me five  
and I tried to shoot the jive  
but inside, a part of me had died.

You see, I really liked her  
always had—ever since third grade.

Why didn't I just say hi?

Hi Montana,

why didn't I?

But, instead I was cool, played the fool  
anything to be accepted by the crowd.

I'll never forget the look on her face-her eyes  
a thousand years old they seemed, filled with both pity and pain.

A thousand, thousand years,  
as ancient as women's suffering  
cause men cannot be men  
'less by their disgrace.

Boys will be boys  
and women will always suffer.

## You Can Never Tame Forest Creatures | Andy Kenyon

*Fall 2017 : republished with permission from Legs of Tumbleweed, Wings of Lace: An Anthology of Literature by Nevada Women*

Sometimes she forgets how short she is, and she reaches for things that she cannot grasp without jumping.

She has, on more than one occasion, remarked how graceful bulls can be in china shops.

She is the last person that you would ever expect to understand weight or pain or suffering.

She hides well.

She hides too well.

Except her scars, which if laid end to end could reach from LA to New York. They are a reminder.

They are not forgetful.

Years of being held up in rooms alone attempting to feel-  
her arms and legs are covered with moments of sorrow.

They will never let her go.

She does not want to get better.

She sees no problem.



She is both right and wrong.

# My Eyes | Megan Milligan

*Fall 2017 : republished with permission from Clark: poetry from Clark County, Nevada*

My eyes

Green with flecks of deep amber

Hidden behind spectacles.

My eyes

Hope seen, a little raft

In bottomless wells of pain and sorrow

Filled with broken glass-infested chardonnay waters.

My eyes

Sparkly diamonds

Reflecting bright facets of love and happiness

Not marred by the color of a bruised heart.

My eyes

Hard as green flint

Impervious to repeated beat-downs and strikings

And they can set fire when struck hard enough.

My eyes

Are survivors.

# Home Means Nevada | Angela M. Brommel

*Spring 2017: 1st Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

You leave home for adventure,  
but the highway West still knows East.

You sing 2,000 miles of *Tapestry*  
and Blue with a guitar you cannot play.

You rename Heartache as Quest.  
Endless sunshine on your windshield.

The darkness of mid December dims  
for dreamless sleep in a land of neon.

## A Self | A.R. Martin

*Spring 2017: 2nd Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

There was this one time when I blacked  
Out and a girl lifted me over her  
Shoulder with the strength of the hot  
Sauce I hid in the pantry behind  
The box of cake mix where you  
Stashed your joint, the one you  
Promised yourself you'd smoke the day I  
Graduated, but you forgot it was  
There just like you forgot that  
Joints can't smoke themselves  
And you can't breath when you're  
Too busy exhaling  
Into me.

# Meditations on Love in a Time of Fear | Autumn Widdoes

*Spring 2017: 3rd Place Helen Steward Poetry Award*

When my eyes go in every direction I want to ditch the words that you mouth that the people repeat without knowledge without understanding what is it that you think you mean when you tell me that you love me but never once have the nerve to stay with me in the belly of the night, in the heart of the wolf whose very blood beats through the canyons where I was born.

And I come from the sea and have made the desert my oasis. My own season in hell never ending in which you repeatedly turn your face from me while I try desperately to look into your eyes. I, made from the bones of tiny creatures long dead, can shatter upon your touch. I put my hand in yours with a trust in this goodness, this richness at the back of my mouth. I've placed all my bets on this dream, a mirage in this shuttered town.

I am carving a new language from myself. Fleishy words that cannot be adulterated, that cannot lose their form. I send them out into this frayed world without a price. I will dig a space where the desert returns to its former life and my words will echo across this valley of death that was born from the deepest parts of the ocean.

And I, a free form diver, open lungful to life, will destroy the harshness within.

# Ecotone | Christine Bettis

*Spring 2016: 1st Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

How will we ever meet?

You and I and our almost fatal alliance

all crave touch

The place where our ecologies are in tension

You eucalyptus forest, in uncontrollable nearness, to blind clearing me

Listen to me

We'll find each other soon, swoon

then dredge the nearby green lake

and exchange nutrients in the controlled burn

Sound such desperate, bending explosions

and grin

Seeds born to the ash bed stay, honeyed by the pine sun

Want to go wherever we go, we know that, but can't

Not while mother is ash and worms writhe inside the clock

The seeds, in the meantime, imitate our deaths when they want us

Each day they pretend wrap us in graveclothes and pretend bury us

All before the unrelieved creamy line of dawn rolls up

and irons the night away

These children: adapting death: know that this

is where their power comes from

and they stir it, until it's time we won

# Arrhythmimic | Lana Hanson

*Spring 2016: 2nd Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

I make my arrhythmia mimic cricket feet-  
turn all my eyes to pleading blue.  
You waited by the mattress under streetlight heat.

Scuttle past the trash, glass shards and bird shreds, greet  
an omen; moonlit, a jolt-moment for you.  
I make my arrhythmia mimic cricket feet.

What scheming god makes predator and prey meet?  
Day deserted me, grudgingly darkness grew.  
You waited by the mattress under streetlight heat.

Two wet beacons, speechless scowl, swiveling beat-  
brown hair catching bruised sky, you flew.  
I make my arrhythmia mimic cricket feet.

Singing limbs scratch climax sweet-  
my mouth open, last of husk ripped askew.  
You waited by the mattress under streetlight heat.

Back to the spot my morphine cold-blood meat.  
Ground sorrow-soaked- is this how you first knew  
I make my arrhythmia mimic cricket feet?  
You waited by the mattress under streetlight heat.

## next is | Miranda Cooper

*Spring 2016: 3rd Place Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

next is

the end of our rope.

the collective

rope.

made of flesh and fleas

and flowers,

red and white and cream.

next is

the sound of worker boots on conflicted feet

trudging through an ancient forest.

can a deer look at you with anger in its eyes,

or does it just open its mouth?

next is

a fist thrown at a tired

belly. a foot on an

army

of ants. a

finger

in somebody's

mouth. a



goddamn word for a word.

next is

the same sentence for the same people.

the same advice.

the sound of your reflection when it says,

“don’t you have anything better

to do?

don’t you know i haven’t any time?

don’t you know we write

with our left hand and choke

with our right?”

next is

a star named for your great-grandmother.

god bless her soul

and god bless you

and god bless the morning star that ate her up

and spit out

her dirty old bones.

next is

too many heads

and not enough plastic bags.

# Space Gator | Miranda Cooper

*Spring 2016: Honorable Mention Helen Stewart Poetry Award*

## I.

A reptile of epic proportions,  
Space Gator roams the galaxy  
in search of the truth.  
Whether that truth be the mystery of life  
etched in his scaly back,  
toothy ancestors scribbled in the stars,  
or what makes the state of Florida  
so humid  
and unbearable three hundred and sixty five days  
a year,  
Space Gator searches.

## II.

It is unclear as to where Space Gator  
hails from.  
Some say he flew out from a black hole.  
Some say he crawled from the bile  
retched by some long dead dinosaur.  
Others say that he always Was  
and that he is Lord.  
Space Gator finds all theories droll.

## III.

In the year two thousand and four

the president of the United States of America

declared Space Gator

a threat to national security.

Space Gator responded by saying

the country's problems

were personal

and that his own social values and mores

were identical to that

of the American people.

He has since limited his Earth visits

to a select few European countries.

IV.

When a star dies,

Space Gator collects its remnants

and scatters them in the film of his eyes.

This endows him with the ability to survey other stars

and know the exact day,

hour,

and second

that they will expire.

# Datura | Angela M. Brommel

*Spring 2016*

Through the window cast the half-truth of a memory  
not at all like it had been, but shaded with the regret of now.  
It was the night-blooming vespertine, unremarkable by day  
that in a few short hours by moonlight will be called marvelous.  
How peculiar at first, the unrecognizable sight of one's hand,  
the frenetic fingers of a failing gesture. A body no longer one's own. A body no longer  
the other's. Down in the very weeds of it all, sprawling billows of white, innocuous seeming  
blooms at the feet of the pomegranate tree. Had there been no song  
in the garden, had there been no light across your face,  
there would be no tomorrow.

She Keeps | Heather Lang Cassera  
*Spring 2016*

her hair long, a distraction, a reminder that she can commit to something. He kept the cat. Once, when she was young, her teacher marked her height against the wall, the year she stayed the same. The young? They're only here to remind you. Why with time are we somehow lesser? She wasn't nearly as big as her father had said. It must have been her bangs that sunk her face, but she's lived up to it. Is it a question? Is it a narrative? In Beijing she learned that people *eat* their medicine. They do not take. And they *drink* their soup. Maybe somewhere this, too, will make sense.

# Off-Duty Elvis | Jennifer Battisti

*Spring 2016*

Early morning dust and neon  
made fragile by the sun.  
The grit and smut orphaned  
by the goblins of the night.

By noon, the Portland writers conference  
will have me tucked  
firmly in its palm.  
Wearing doubt like a well-fitting garment,  
I check my boarding pass: D gates.  
The Vegas airport carpet bursts  
into patterned blooms of fuchsia, canary;  
a seamless swirling hypnosis pulling me  
toward the shuttle.

Outside the gates,  
a carousel of slot machines lurch like bullies  
waiting to steal lunch money  
and double-knotted dreams.  
I consider the absurdity of my pursuit

And then, there he was, a mere few feet away—Elvis,  
mowing down a Croissan'wich.  
The King was eating at Burger King.  
He was having it his way;

with coffee and hash brown disks.

His sideburns were perfect--

greasy minnows suctioned along his jaw.

The shimmer of rose oil and Vaseline beneath the fluorescent lights left

Presley haloed in the luminous sheen.

The croissant flaked crumb by crumb onto the table

like single roses or undies from vulgar women.

He wore running shoes.

Plain white Reeboks--

His blue suede tucked in his carry-on, perhaps.

Sadly, he was the bloated seasoned Elvis.

And, I suspect, on his way out of the impersonation biz.

A final Heartbreak Hotel for this middle-aged charade.

Then, suddenly, he looked up to check the flight information.

The resemblance was unmistakable.

Those tender, soulful eyes.

This was a costume he never questioned,

nor removed.

Swallowed up into the belly of the bird, I suctioned pen to paper.

Going where I need to go,

to chase the fever which never relents--

That gyration inside my heart.

## Second Skin | Megan Duffy

*Spring 2016*

I am arrested by an animal notion.

In the car on the drive home, the wheel  
beneath my hands feels foreign,  
transplanted from an unknown age,  
an inoperable object to be grasped  
by feral fingers. Panic rears beastlike  
as the eyes in the rearview mirror  
howl savage songs, performing rituals  
under harsh street lamps.

A familiarity slinks beneath the discord.

An ancient need is expressed,  
revealing the secret throne which  
all lovers crawl toward.

I have noticed it before, in the glint  
of the moon on a wolf's fang  
and in the constant way the shoulders  
shake during bouts of weeping and sex.

Just as the spines of cornered  
creatures sharpen in alarm when  
their captors draw near,  
just as roaches scatter back  
into their crevasses when a light



switch is flipped,  
just as tree dwellers skitter  
fitfully toward the promise of fruit  
dangling from unreachable branches,  
I unearth instinct from long forgotten  
dirt, embracing it.

I recognize it now, the song in the mirror,  
rumbling through my blood  
like broken dam water.  
It is the clawing need to adapt,  
to slip off the old heavy skin.

# Desiccant Perspective | Megan Duffy

*Spring 2016*

23 miles from the apartment at least,  
above the stucco-lined labyrinth  
of 24-hour massage parlors and payday  
loan offices, the desert sky scrapes  
its massive weight across a neighborhood  
I've never been before, but recognize regardless.

It must be the mountains.  
Those constant hulking waypoints  
that cradle the southwest  
with their indifferent familiarity.  
One by one across the horizon line  
their jagged peaks strain,  
jutting proudly into the atmosphere  
like hunters' spears into  
a great boar's belly, desperate  
to claim even the smallest inch,  
a jeweled droplet of glory.

Meanwhile the streets below belch  
their waste upward to chase off  
the clouds, pedestrians raise their phones  
and gather crude snapshots  
of the impossible palette of color overhead,  
posting and sharing within minutes,

harboring a skewed sense of pride.

All of us dogs begging for a leftover scrap of heaven.

In the half light of the early sunset

I study the centimeters of a baby scorpion

as it struggles up the wall of a CVS,

as black and weightless as a fallen eyelash

on a pillow, light enough to be swept away

by the smallest breath. I marvel at how unlikely he is,

how narrow his chances are,

and think that you are not unlike him,

a small scampering creature

under a canopy of wild color

with the knee of the world pressed

firmly on your chest, the cruel Mohave

wind leaving remnants of itself in your hair-

cactus needles and red clay,

the dust of crushed animal bones.

From the scorpion's perspective

the raised patterns in the stucco he climbs

must seem like mountains.

And so he is not struggling,

but conquering-

and so athirst you will set off

and scrape mountain dust from your feet.

## Turn | Bruce Isaacson

*Spring 2016*

After my day spent finally cleaning the garage, we start making love and for no reason, suddenly, it's like I'm thirty again, the touch & response, kiss & allure, enthusiasm to spare. We have done this so many times the stages are like a museum where I've written a guidebook. We know the work of these masters, their strokes and light, even the mole on the inside thigh of that model is familiar. But this—this is a whole new school, break open a new wing of the museum, let the light in, crack the ceiling, suddenly, wherever she touches it's my heart, beating, bounding like a stag over snow. Later we lie side by side in the lobby of desire quietly wiping up, breathing together to the blues station. She will look up not wanting to seem surprised and ask 'What was that about?' I've been in love with women now for over forty years, what is any of it about? There's the mortgage, children, frustration, work tension too harried to breathe, after a decade turning away suddenly my wife & I turn to one another again. What is that about indeed? All I can think of in the moment is to blame it on the garage, floor swept, rakes & shovel hung, toys stacked in bins, her close, as she accepts it, the garage, as we laugh in the ignorance of bliss.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW IT WORKS, WE CAN TAKE IT APART &  
LOOK AT WHAT IT WAS

Love *befell*, the sky *befalls*--

the sky candies cotton in the day, a blueness,  
with sugared clouds, spun. Then (or thun) an evening  
out of *things*. The evening settling

the score with the day. The moon's brazen

enough to show its face where the sun can't go. A powerléssness,  
*cýcling*. *Friend-o, yes*, it's *distréssing*,  
you don't want to play your part  
but all that means

is that someone else will play it for you.

One soldier or another, someone's mother  
is going to cry (you can stand up and leave  
whenever you want // you are all free agents).

Supéred, in feels, by the war, boy-little drew up books

about himself, his lovelies and their horrors. There was no

wolf to kill, so he wrote the teeth & the eyes,

the heart

& the hide, inked, softly, each hair. Hidden, himself,  
within the belly, he sang songs about cozyness.

Are you strong enough to stay vulnerable?

Girl-big, of the boy, thought,  
it tastes like candy

but not the kind of candy I like.

## Raised by Wolves | Billy Malanga

There is a wolf at the base of my brain. Pausing, sniffing nose up,  
picking things out of the remote sweltering landscape of ancient red rock  
like a machine. It howls in the exposed barbed ether of cool dark gaps,  
well arranged, spike toothed. It holds me.

# Vegas Drive | Joan Robinson

*Fall Issue 2015*

Life got in under the door:

white-kneed spiders hung their webs on the bathroom ceiling  
a black widow set up behind the toilet.

We lived

an agreement:

do not fall in my teacup or on my pillow or pinch my big pink bottom  
and I will not brush you away with the yellow yarn mop.

I felt something flick my ear in the middle of the night:

a beetle size of an old half dollar a momma  
looking for a place to nest

the neighbor's calico slinked through my door while I did my yoga poses.

She sat next to me, flung her foot over her shoulder,  
and delicately licked her anus.

One day, I opened my door to half a green lizard

agonizing on the threshold

the other half on the walk.



Follow | Rosie Vargas  
*Fall Issue 2015*

the humming-  
birds find  
me through

the branches  
leaves over  
the trees

they feed  
off my  
roots flutter

feathers in  
my eyes  
surround me

one nests  
in my  
chest light

glints from  
my skin  
she pecks

her beak

in my

pores and

burrows her

head in my heart

# Fallen Notes | Andrew Romanelli

*Spring Issue 2015*

In a fifties faded lounge,  
twice-tanned leather booth.  
They smoke coolies and talk up  
semi-scant girls who favor  
passive cum-shots.

The no-name band muddles  
Morgan's The Sidewinder.  
While People slither about--  
pretenders to the dance-floor  
wide but unknowing.

At the semi-circle bar a fool  
sits alone jazzing to the beat.  
Looking tweaked between sips,  
chatting to the smoky air that  
exists in the light next to him.

This place has reduced the  
angle at the joint and it's  
no wonder—elevators became  
the final coffins of Jazz.

# Tin Can Love | Megan Merchant

*Fall Issue 2014*

Today, the terrain is blowing crazy--  
land moving its side winding  
body of loose skin, riding easterly gusts,  
shaking squat mobile homes  
and their tinfoil windows.

Those who live this Mojave life  
want loneliness, heart calendars  
set to the bloom time of a five  
petaled flower, May to September,  
and if late, due to an undue cold,  
the heart will wait, and would even  
if it had something else to do.

It's a tin can kind of love, living on wheels.  
A property line of cracked earth--the dry  
lake bed--a lifeline, a claim. Even desert  
dwellers own some thing.

A collection of topographic recipes,  
perhaps, on inherited note cards--

*For Flax Leaves : crush leaves*

*in a fist, tear the sweet flesh*

*of petals as a cure for swelling any parts*

*of body--lips, hands, even thighs.*

Those wildly inflamed  
take the membranous skin  
in their mouths  
and swallow.

# Haiku and Micro-Poems

# Balloons Rise | Deborah L. Davitt

*Spring Issue 2018*

Balloons rise with dawn,  
catching the wind with nets of  
silk and fire.

Pointed | Heidi Ross  
*Fall Issue 2017*

Pointed cactus pins  
rise from green, sharp flowers  
and we drink the sun



Suburbs | Sarah Verneti  
*Fall Issue 2016*

Pine trees in a row

Shouldn't grow in the desert

These roundabouts suck

# I'm New Here | Sarah Verneti

*Fall Issue 2016*

Please save your money

Keep your dog on a leash

And you'll be just fine

# Flash Fiction

# In The Name of Elvis | Kathleen Wise Pugh

*Fall Issue 2018*

Candi sat in the backyard of her Tuscan dream house on the shore of Lake Las Vegas clutching her last unemployment check. It was August and it was more tolerable to sit outside in the shade of her browning Italian Cypress trees with her feet in the putrid pool than to be baked alive inside. The power had been cut off and if she didn't do something quick she'd lose the house, but no one was hiring fifty-five year old cocktail waitresses. As she stared into the algae green water of the pool, imagining herself sinking to the bottom, she saw Elvis' face in the water. He pointed at her, curled his lip, and sang, "Candi, it's your lucky day! Cash that check and bet it all on Megabucks."

Twenty minutes later, Candi pulled up to the Las Vegas Hilton and was greeted by a life-sized bronze Elvis statue. She rubbed it for good luck then proceeded to the casino cage where a woman with a rust colored beehive handed her nine crisp twenty dollar bills and a buffet coupon in exchange for her check. She found the glittering island of Megabucks in the middle of all the slots, and sat in front of the only available machine, located next to a dying pink hibiscus plant. When she fed the bills into the machine it thanked her with one hundred eighty credits--sixty shots at the twenty-five million dollar jackpot.

As Candi got comfortable, she remembered a story about a pair of tourists from Duluth who had hit Megabucks. The husband was off playing craps while the wife parked herself in front of Megabucks, tapping the "bet one credit" button instead of the "max bet" button required to win the grand prize. The lucky lady hit the jackpot and started jumping up and down because she won two thousand dollars. When the husband realized that they would have retired as millionaires if it weren't for her stupidity, he grabbed her by the hair, and put her head through the machine. Instant death!

Candi focused and made the sign of the cross while she tapped the "max bet" button with her chipped French-manicured-acrylic nail. The reels spun and settled one by one: Megabucks, Bar, Bar. "Dang it!" She shouted as she saw the other two Megabucks symbols just above the bars.

A trio of flies buzzed in front of the machine. She waved them away with her buffet coupon but they kept buzzing next to her, orbiting the plant. Were they taunting her? She tried to ignore

them by thinking about what she'd do with the money after she saved the house. Lots of folks faced foreclosure. Maybe she'd use some of the money to help them out. Her reverie was interrupted by a perky young cocktail waitress with a perfect set of acrylics.

"Care for a cocktail?" she chirped.

"No, thanks" Candi snapped, "but could you get someone over here to remove this plant. It's growing flies instead of hibiscus."

"Yes, ma'am," she said as she sashayed away.

Candi tapped away at the "max bet" button, but each time the machine mocked her by revealing only one Megabucks symbol. Her eyes grew glassy from the cigarette smoke that hung above the machines like an atomic cloud. Maybe she'd donate some of her money to cancer research, she thought as the smoke tickled her nose. Just then, a fly landed on her hand. As she swatted it away, her thumb hit the "bet one credit" button.

The reels spun and three megabucks symbols lined up.

## Expecting | Ingrid Taylor

*Spring Issue 2016*

The overhead light sucked warmth from every corner. Petra was on her back, spread-eagle, like a dying starfish. Her legs and hands were numb, the wrenching pain already fading. White-gowned figures moved with suppressed urgency as monitors flashed red. An alarm blared and one of the shrouded figures tossed a sheet over her thighs. Her legs felt slick and wet. “Hypoxia” and “arrhythmia” pierced the fog of floating masks. Petra heard a muted clatter and turned her head to follow the sound. A ghostlike form wheeled a cart loaded with syringes and IV bags past her. She became aware of a pressure at her side. Her boyfriend’s hand clamped hers. Jim’s eyes were wide and staring.

She could see her daughter curled up on a shiny metal table. Alien tubes snaked into her little red body. White-gloved hands prodded and pressed her. Time slowed for Petra as the bustle of the room faded. In a bubble of silence her baby’s heartbeat rang clear and true. Skipping like a stone over clanging bells and terse orders, the tiny pulse hovered. It whispered of expectation; that moment of stillness just before a wave crashes on the shore. Petra reached for it. She cupped her hands, holding the pulse over her own chest as if she could bind it to her forever. When she opened her hands nothing was there.

A rustle of white appeared next to her. The nurse asked if she wanted to hold her baby. Petra stared, unable to form words. The nurse patted her shoulder, thin body hunched forward, weighed down by years of explaining the inexplicable. “Some mothers want to see. . . for closure.”

Petra shook her head. The nurse looked helplessly at Jim.

“Petra, are you sure? You should listen to her.” His voice wavered and his hand felt soft and clammy.

“No.” Her voice was clear and strong. She turned her face away. The gentle pulse still thrummed in her ears.

The day after she was released from the hospital, Petra packed up the nursery. She waited until the front door closed behind Jim on his way to work. Then she disassembled the oak crib and matching shelves, fitting pieces into carefully marked boxes. She wrapped the starfish mobile in tissue paper and stowed it away.

After the room was emptied, she found white paint in the garage and covered the green and blue turtles and fish that decorated the walls. The smell of paint stung her nose and made her eyes water. She opened the window and let moisture bead onto the floor. When she finished, sterile walls mocked her with unmet possibilities.

Jim returned home and took in the bare space that hours ago had been a nursery. “Hey, Pets, I would have helped you with all that.”

Petra detected a note of relief in his voice as he knelt on the floor next to her. He squeezed her hand. After a moment, he pushed himself up, his knee popping. She heard the TV switch on as he rattled around in the kitchen. The pungent smell of garlic and onions filled the house. She got into bed and pulled the covers over her head. Her breathing under the blanket was heavy, an ocean tide.

For the next several days, Petra stayed in bed until Jim went to work. When she had the house to herself, she cleaned.

When there was nothing left to clean, Petra washed and ironed her white lab coat and took the bus to the medical lab. The bus’s windshield wipers swished as rain washed the buildings in muted silver. Water dripped from boots and raincoats onto a floor littered with candy wrappers and soda cans. Petra held her breath, nauseated by the stale oily smell of the bus. Shoulders bumped together each time the bus stopped and started. No one spoke.

“It’s good to have you back.” Patty rose ponderously, using one hand to brace herself on the desk.

“We’ll start you out on the centrifuge today. That way you can ease back into things.” The buttons of Patty’s white lab coat threatened to burst over her round belly and breasts as her words tumbled out. Petra saw the glint of teeth in her too-wide smile.

Petra fastened her crisp coat and went to her station at the back of the lab. She spun the blood samples, drew off the supernatant, and mixed it with reagents. When the color changed, she recorded the results in a logbook. She repeated this hour after hour.

The crowded waiting room spilled out into the hospital hallway. Tired parents amused children with greasy coloring books and plastic toys. The children's keening cries as the needle pierced their skin reached Petra's isolated workspace. When she heard the first cry, she whipped her head around. Her hands, moving so precisely a moment ago, involuntarily clutched her chest. Petra, who quantified all day long, had no idea how to measure this absence.

One evening Petra came home to find boxes stacked in the entryway. Jim stood in the hallway with twitchy eyes and a sheepish grin. She felt no anger, only relief when he carried out the final box. After all, he wasn't the reason her chest ached and she listened for sounds she would never hear.

That night she dreamed of her daughter playing on the beach. Her small, strong feet were smeared with wet sand. Foam washed over her toes as the tide moved in. Caught in the space between wave and sand, pebbles surrendered their rough edges to the sea. The little girl looked at her mother and spoke, but Petra couldn't hear her words over the rush of the surf.

Petra woke to the anemic glow of streetlights through open curtains. As she listened to rain plinking like tiny bells against the glass, she decided to leave this place where soggy boots bled thin mud and color drained into concrete. She would go to the ocean and find her daughter's voice.



# In the Event of a Water Landing | Becky Robison

*Fall Issue 2016*

The pills had been in the left pocket of her linen pants—the ones she always wore traveling—but they weren't there now. She imagined the orange bottle bobbing up in the foamy crest of a wave, floating within arm's reach, miraculously. No—the bottle was probably settling into the silty ocean floor, disturbing the habitat of spindly creatures with too many legs. Suicide's out—drowning or freezing it is. With empty pockets, her pants were nothing but extra weight. She slipped the elastic band past her hips and kicked them off.

A boat. It would be infinitely more practical to wish for a passing boat than for her pills. She blamed her poor logic on the shivering. She had been shivering on the plane, too—recycled air is so damn cold—but nothing could have prepared her for the water's shock when it shattered the windows. The only sails on the horizon were jagged triangles of wreckage. None of the metal slabs were nearby, but perhaps the current would favor her. She forced her head to the left, bit the red spout, and puffed a few shaky breaths into her yellow lifejacket.

She'd never believed flight attendants when they pantomimed safety procedures in the aisles; she'd figured there was nothing under their seats, no masks packaged in the compartments above—or if there were, they surely didn't work. Better to have dead passengers than broken passengers with lawyers. But when the pilot gave up the charade of turbulence, she had reached below and found a plastic-wrapped vest, just as they had promised. Her girlfriend often accused her of being too cynical. She wished she could say, you were right. She imagined her phone bobbing up in the foamy crest of a wave, waterproof and with service, miraculously.

# Short Story

## Urban Passage | Brittany Bronson

*Spring Issue 2017*

After he told me our city had no culture, I took him to every museum I knew of—mob, erotica, the Titanic. I made him read placards on conspiracy theories. On silent-film porn. On a set of dishes that stayed precisely stacked, wedged into the ocean floor, after the wooden cabinet that held them eroded beneath seawater acid. We walked out over a replica boat deck, stared at a fake Artic sky, then counted more stars than either of us had actually seen beneath our light-polluted nightscape. We ended in downtown Las Vegas, at an outdoor museum where old neon signs go to die, or are resurrected, and sent curse words toward a massive sign of a yellow duck, one of the original, bright, synthetic yardbirds that had, for our entire lives, kept the stars incarcerated.

In the makeshift aisles, we passed unlit wedding chapel signs with bulbs as dead as our parents' marriages, then followed the one that pointed to "Information." It was, after all, what we were searching for. Some proof. Some explanation for how, despite our best efforts, we still morphed into the city's oldest clichés: A cocktail server and a blackjack dealer, both of us unapologetic gamblers, passing swings and graveyards in the basement of a black pyramid with a beam of light that astronauts can see from space.

We turned the corner to discover a sign of an Asian woman with her hand held high. I was confident that like us, she was a casino worker. It was the way her smile was permanently plastered over her chin, and how her hair was styled in Japanese Geisha buns but she wore a Chinese Hanfu.

"That's our culture," I told him. "Bright lights and appropriation."

"Hey," he laughed. "You're supposed to be converting me."

Beyond the museum, the Stratosphere speared the sky with tourists taking pictures and riding amusement park rides. I had a younger cousin who worked up there hooking hotel guests into bungee jump chords. Last summer, she worked the Fremont zip line. Before that, the indoor skydiving tunnel. She still asked me to get her on the casino floor, but at her twenty-first birthday last year, as her Princess tiara clung off-kilter to her sweat-soaked bangs and the club strobes ignited her skin with a ghostlike sheen, I promised myself and her: I won't let you get stuck here.

“I actually did learn some things today,” he told me.

“Like what?”

“Like the history of the peep show.”

“Sexy and useful.”

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it, but it wasn't romantic. This day—our urban passage—was not a date. It was a walk through the city with a boy I grew up with, who on three separate occasions during high school, packed canned beers for us to drink while we watched the Sands, the Aladdin, and the Hacienda—the hotels the signs around us once belonged to—implode then crash toward earth in a shower of cement meteors.

“Could the beam end up here?” I wondered aloud. “It's not technically a sign.”

“Or neon.”

“But it needs a place. When the pyramid finally goes down.”

“If it does,” he said. “Let's hope we're not still in it.”

He slipped his left hand into my back pocket as we circled a paint-chipped sign shaped like a King. It was tall, with outspread arms that floated above our heads and welcomed us back to a place we had not yet left. Beneath his shadow, I pictured myself twenty years from now still arranging cocktail straws, still pressing briny olives onto toothpicks, but letting my hair go gray around the temples like the real casino lifers. I didn't look unhappy, paused there at the top of the parking garage, admiring the sea of LEDs, which years ago replaced the neon, because they are cheaper, more efficient, are glittering fossils of energy strong enough to outlast even me.

# For the Things in the Cracks Are Always Watching | Lorna Dickson Beach

*Spring Issue 2016*

Today, the woman in apartment number four brings lemon bars to the neighbors. She has decided that she can't go on any longer without knowing what happened in our building.

As she walks across the courtyard, she looks up at us, but she doesn't see us inside. She can only see the boarded up windows and the words written on them in black spray paint: Dangerous, keep out! Prohibido el acceso!

Her hair is pale yellow. Her husband calls her Claire.

Her husband, whom she calls Geoffrey, follows her out to the courtyard on his way to somewhere. He tries to take a lemon bar, but she pulls the plate away.

"I'm being neighborly," she says.

"You're meddling," he says.

"Sharing is never meddling. I've got food for information."

"What information can you possibly hope to find? It's just a run-down building," he says.

"There must be more to it," Claire says. "You've seen what people leave over there."

He says nothing to that.

They are like this often, briefly meeting on their way to somewhere else. He wears a dress shirt and tennis shoes. Today is not a workday but still, he's about to go somewhere work-like. We can

tell by the messenger bag around his shoulder. It's very big, and it looks heavy. Claire has no bag, so she doesn't plan on leaving. She has thin sandals on her feet. The delicate straps are made of a material that glimmers in the sun.

After Geoffrey's kisses her goodbye, Claire moves her sandaled feet over to apartment number five, where Elisa lives. There, she knocks lightly and waits at the door.

When Elisa answers, Claire says, "Good morning! Hope I'm not interrupting."

Elisa stands in the doorway with her broom in one hand. Little Noel peers around her knees. Later on, Elisa will use her broom to sweep the concrete outside her apartment because that is what she does every day. We think she is trying to sweep away ghosts.

Elisa has a very large smile for Claire. She invites Claire to come inside, come inside. When Claire and Geoffrey first moved in, it was Elisa who brought over sweet bread rolls to welcome them to the neighborhood. Elisa is where Claire got the idea of bringing neighbors food because, in her old neighborhood, no one did that.

Claire does want not to go inside.

"I just wanted to bring you these," Claire says. "Do...tus hijos like...ah..." she thinks for a minute. "¿Cómo se dice lemon?"

"Limón." Elisa laughs. "Si, si. They eat. Limón amarillo, yes? Les encanta."

When Claire asks about the boarded up building, Elisa shakes her head.

"Dead birds," Elisa says. "So many—everywhere, sus cadáveres everywhere, here, there..." she points to the concrete between the buildings, the sidewalks that leads from the alley to the courtyard. "The people there before, I don't know. They fight all the time, yell and scream Eran malvados—how do you say malvados?" Claire thinks for some time. She is not as good at this kind of trade as Elisa is. She makes a guess. "...Loud?" she tries.

“Ah, si. Loud.” Elisa accepts this.

Below, Noel tugs on Elisa’s pantleg and whispers something we can’t hear. His eyes are big and dark. Elisa shushes him, smacks him lightly on the shoulder. He argues with her for a moment. They talk very quickly before Noel is convinced to go inside, go away and take Claire’s plate of sweets inside, go, hombrecito.

After Noel has padded barefoot back into the apartment, Elisa tells Claire, “Ya que decía, many dead birds. But the landlord closed up, no more. Now they live there. Los inquilinos no deseados.” Elisa points to the building, and Claire looks.

There are pigeons on the roof. Many pigeons: over forty at least. Some of them peer over the edge of the building, watching, while others strut about or sleep with their heads tucked up inside their wings. We know they’re there because we can hear the scratching of their feet against the ceiling, their cooing through the air ducts. Every now and then, a pigeon hops over the ledge and spreads its wings. As it glides to the ground, it sheds gray feathers that float down slowly behind it.

Claire stares at the birds. She feeds them sometimes, when the maintenance men aren’t around. She gives the birds bread that’s about to go moldy, or corn chips that have become too stale.

Elisa again tries to get her to come inside, for coffee and rolls.

“Oh, I’d love to, but I have work to do,” Claire says.

Claire tells Elisa, “Maybe sometime soon?”

“Okay.” Elisa says.

Claire walks back across the courtyard to number four. She goes inside and does not come out again for some time. Maybe she is baking more lemon bars; maybe she doesn't want to offend Elisa by being spotted outside after refusing coffee. Her curtain is drawn and all we can see is white cotton and pale yellow lace.

For some time, the courtyard is quiet.

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This place is good to watch. It is a good neighborhood. The buildings are pretty: squarish and white, made of stucco. There are two apartments in each building. The stucco is cracked in many places, especially the foundation, and each building has big windows that probably should be replaced. The glass in the windows is thin and old. It breaks easily.

Outside, wild yucca plants and olive trees grow in the courtyard. The neighborhood kids play soccer here. Young men work on their cars and drive past slowly, playing music loud enough to rattle the windows. Mothers dry their children's shirts on the porch and mop the sidewalk with soap. At night, college kids smoke on their porches and talk loudly. In the spring, a woman and her son walk through, selling roasted corn on the cob out of a cooler they push around in a shopping cart. For no extra charge, she will cover the corn in mayonnaise and chile powder. The kids buy corn from her and tamarindo ice cream from the old man who drives the ice cream truck. The maintenance men drive golf carts. The buildings are old, and far from the main office, so the maintenance men are always around; they move back and forth all day, sweating in blue work shirts, as busy as ants.

On mild nights, people keep their doors open. When it rains, the courtyard floods, but it doesn't rain very often. Most of the time, it's warm.

We think you'll like it here.

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The next time Claire goes out, she brings lemon bars to the old man in number six, but he says he can't have them because he's diabetic. He does not attempt to cushion her feelings in explaining this.

"I eat that," he says, "and I'll die."

Claire apologizes and pulls the plate to her chest, cradling it. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know." A little line appears between her eyebrows.

The old man waves his hand. On each finger he wears heavy rings of silver and lapis lazuli. In his window, everyone can see the stacks of boxes and lamps and books he has heaped up in a mess behind the drapes. When he leaves to check his mail, he will talk to whomever he meets on the way, but he always tells them he's moving out east soon. His daughter is moving him to her house in New Jersey. Soon he will be gone, he says. Soon, very soon.

Today, when she asks him about our building, all he says is terrible.

"Terrible, terrible." Then he shuts his door.

While Claire is left standing with her plate of lemon bars, Darnell calls out from across the courtyard. "Bring those on over here!" he yells. "I'll take them off your hands!"

Claire smiles and brings them over. She looks relieved.

Darnell sits on a cooler outside his apartment door, where he sits often, waving and smiling at people. Today, Darnell has a white towel thrown over his shoulder and no shirt on. His big belly rolls over the top of his pants.

"These won't kill you, will they?" asks Claire.

"Sure they will," Darnell says.

Darnell eats a lemon bar when Claire hands him the plate. He compliments her baking skills with a full mouth. She does not bother to lie to him and say she made too many, because maybe it's hard to lie to someone who likes lemon bars so much.

Claire says she's trying to find out what happened in the boarded up building. "Do you know?" He eats one more before he answers.

After chewing, he tells Claire, "Those kids who lived there before, they were always screaming and yelling, breaking shit. Probably made a hole bigger than the slumlord wants to fix."

At this, Claire looks troubled.

"It's a bad deal," Darnell says. "Whenever you got an empty building like that, things move in. You know, rats, pigeons, crack heads." He shakes his head, "It's a bad deal."

Claire thinks about this for some time, then she catches herself in silence. She thanks him and says she had better go. Claire leaves Darnell still shaking his head over her plate of lemon bars, and he tells her to come back by whenever.

Don't feel bad about what Darnell says. He's never really seen us.

You should not feel bad. This is a nice neighborhood.

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Claire gets another plate of lemon bars from her apartment. This time, the plate is old ceramic, yellowed, with cracks racing through it like fine spider thread. Painted around the edge is a gold line with little flowers, and the flowers dangle from the line like Christmas lights or jewelry charms.

She brings such a nice plate to Martín and Maria.

Claire knocks on their door, apartment eight, and Maria answers the door. Maria wears sandals of heavy leather today, with straps that bind her ankles in an elegant weave. Martín and Maria feed the pigeons, too. Usually they give them rice cooked in salty broth and pieces of steamed cornmeal. Sometimes, the birds wait for hours outside their door.

Maria smiles when he sees Claire. “What a nice surprise,” she says. “How are you? How’s Geoffrey?”

“Oh, he’s good. Thank you for asking.” Claire smiles warmly. “How are you both? Did you get your car fixed?”

“I’m afraid not. It’s the transmission, a lost cause. But the walk to the bus stop is good for me— keeps me in shape.” Grinning, Maria pats her belly, which is not small, but still it is smaller than Darnell’s. She laughs while patting, so Claire can laugh without risk of offending her.

“I hear you,” Claire says. “I lost a whole pound and a half when we lost the car.”

“Oh, a whole pound and a half? We should write a book.”

“We should! We could call it The Poverty Diet, but I’m sure that title’s taken...”

Maria’s smile tightens when Claire says this, but her smile does not go away. We’re not sure Claire notices.

“Speaking of diets,” Maria says, “What do you have there, on such a beautiful plate?”

“Oh! Yes, these. I was baking all morning and I...” but Claire stops. Her lips pinch together suddenly, like there’s something sour in her mouth.

Then, she sighs. “It’s a bribe,” Claire says.

“Oh?” asks Maria. “If you’re trying to get my recipe for tamales, I will never talk. But I’m happy to make them for you and Geoffrey, if you like.”

“Oh, we love your tamales,” Claire says. “But I wouldn’t dare try to steal your secret. I’m actually here because...well, I’ve been going a little crazy wondering why the landlord closed up that building.” She looks over her shoulder and points to us, to the boards on the windows. “I mean, is it going to fall down? Is it condemned?”

“That place next door?”

“Do you know what happened there?” Claire then leans in closely and whispers, “Did someone die?”

“Oh, I’m sure not,” Maria says. “They had a cat that liked to terrorize the pigeons, but otherwise, they were just kids, I think.”

“Were they gang bangers?”

“No! Where did you get that?” But then Maria thinks about it for a moment. “At least, I’m sure they weren’t. They all had expensive cars. I think they were going to the university.”

“Did they trash the building?”

Maria shrugs. “I suppose they did. The night before the landlord boarded it up, there was a lot of yelling and crashing coming from the place. They didn’t throw parties, but they always kept us up at odd hours with their fights—so loud, like cats and dogs.”

Claire nods and listens.

Maria says, “After that night, nobody ever saw them again. Didn’t take a thing with them, and the next day, the landlord boarded the place up. It took him about two hours. A few days later, I was talking to one of the maintenance men who helped the landlord close it up. Every window in the place was broken, he said. Every last one.”

Claire looks over her shoulder again. We don’t know what she sees.

Maria says, “By the time the landlord got there to put up the boards, they had moved in…” She stops herself, laughs suddenly. “I mean, the birds. The building was just teeming with birds.”

For a moment, it is silent. Both Claire and Maria look across the courtyard to our building. There is a look on Claire’s face, but we cannot tell what it means.

“Hmmm,” Claire mutters.

“Do you feel better?” Maria asks.

She turns back to her. Claire’s eyes seem sad, but she smiles anyway.

“Yes,” Claire says, “But I have these insidious lemon bars that are absolutely going to ruin my diet.”

“Oh, that is a problem,” Maria grins. “Let me help you with that.”

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After promising to bring back the plate, Maria tells Claire goodbye and shuts the door. Now empty-handed, Claire walks alone into the middle of the courtyard. She stops and looks up at our building again, using her hand to shade her eyes from the sun.

She stares at the boards for a long time.

We are surprised when she starts to walk toward us.

Claire walks straight up to the building. She doesn't bother to look around or sneak, or check if anyone is watching. We are unaccustomed to this. Usually, when we are looked at, it is sidelong glares or quick glances, disgusted nods, and only those interested in sneaking in—like you—look close enough to see in fine detail. You may not have died here, but you found yourself here anyway. You are like the pigeons, like us: we must find a place that the living leave empty. We must sneak in.

But Claire walks up.

The neighbors all watch from their windows. Elisa and the old man with the books, Darnell and Maria. The glare on the glass makes it look like their faces are pale, intangible. They only stare.

Claire comes up to the biggest boarded-up window, the one that says Prohibido!

Claire examines the boards, and she finds a corner with a loose plank. It is a thin board, pressed plywood, so there are many cracks. The crack Claire finds is big. (We are excited. We press our eyes to the crack.) Claire is clawing at the crack, we see the tip of her finger and her nail, which is painted bright pink, and she is clawing and the pink paint is chipping off. (Venga a ver, we whisper, you, too. Come see.) The board gives. It cracks loudly. She has made a small hole. We are excited. We press our eyes to the hole and we see Claire's face come close.

We can see every eyelash, every pale freckle. Her eye is robin's egg blue. Her eye darts around, searching the dark. It takes a moment for her sight to adjust.

Then her pupil shrinks. She sees.

Come here, we whisper.

Claire gasps sharply. She jerks away from the hole, almost stumbling.

We watch Claire walk quickly back across the courtyard. She nearly runs. She does not look back. Do not feel bad about this. She goes into her apartment and slams the door, but we shouldn't feel bad.

The courtyard is quiet for some time.

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Today is Saturday, the day they leave things on the porch, under the window. We have seen it before, but now it is much clearer because of the hole Claire made in the boards. We can see more.

The neighbors leave food for us on a paper lace napkin. There is one sweet roll, one ear of corn, one small tamale. There is also a white candle. It is the size of a finger and held up in its own melted wax. We have seen the candles before. We don't know what they mean.

When the candle is lit, we make sure to blow the flame out. If the flames catch the napkin, or the dry wood boards, the whole building may go up. And this is a good place. We don't want to see it catch fire. It's nice that the neighbors leave things for us.

Today, we can see one new thing: a pale lemon bar on a small ceramic plate. This is exciting. We look at it. We can look at it for short time before the pigeons snatch it up. Think of how soft the crust must be, how sweet the filling must taste.

## 4 in the Afternoon | Kim Idol

*Fall Issue 2015*

Annie called me around four in the afternoon, but I missed the call.

I was soaking in the bathtub trying to bring my sciatica under control. I heard the telephone ringing, but it took me too long to stand up and get out of the tub. I had to crabwalk to the towel stand.

In some ways, I like getting older. There's a richness to it that I cannot accurately explain to someone who is young. Your knowledge of the world becomes beautifully complex and your understanding of love and hate simplifies.

But, I hate the way age wears my body out. My teeth are crumbling, my skin is wrinkling, and my hair feels like wire. I'm shrinking. My toes are curling up, my eyes are going bad, and I hurt everywhere that I have ever in my life injured myself. I also find myself wearing shirts, socks, and underwear inside out without knowing it. I think less. I feel more. When my dog barks out the window at strangers, I get it.

I feel a kind of urgency. I still have dues to pay and I'm running out of time. When my dog knocks over the television tray and the television because he needs to get to the ball, I get it. I fixate on news stories about the helpless and defenseless. My therapist says that I have an obsession with horror and heartache. She once asked if it only mattered in terms of dogs.

"I care about people just as much," I lied.

Human beings are okay. It is lonely without the ones you like and boring without the ones you hate. But I rarely feel compelled to ease anybody's sorrows unless I like them -- and I don't like anyone all the time. And human beings author their suffering. Dogs don't, they just run with it until it stops, if it stops. This makes me sad. This makes me angry. Sometimes my dogs and I work my frustration out at the park. I throw the ball a thousand times and they return it a thousand times.



Annie called back.

She had an errand for me to run. Dog related. Someone's teenage daughter had bought a sick puppy from a breeder she had found on Craigslist. The advertisement said that the puppy and his littermates were a mixed breed. It did not mention that they were ill.

The daughter was a hopeful teenager. She withdrew a hundred dollars from her college fund to buy the puppy.

When she and her sister told the story to their mother in my presence the amount evolved to its truthful shape and size in stages.

"I took forty," she said.

"While you lied to me about where she had gone," their mother said to the sister.

"Uh, sixty," said the second girl, glancing between her mother and sister.

"A hundred," the first girl conceded. "He wanted a hundred and forty in the beginning."

"And you met him alone," her mother said.

"He wouldn't tell me where he lived," the girl replied.

The breeder met her in front of an Albertsons in some dusty end of town where the streetlights don't work and they haven't fixed the potholes in years. The girl said that he was a young man in a black SUV. According to her, he drove into the parking lot, slid to a stop, affected the exchange and drove away leaving her holding a dog that was not the one advertised. A lumpy, loose skinned mutt too young to be taken from its mother, it was suspiciously lethargic, and twenty-four hours later it tested positive for Parvovirus. A thousand dollar pop for treatment – just to start. But the dog was theirs and they would find a way.

It also occurred to the women and the doctor that if one puppy was sick, then the whole litter was probably infected. They called Las Vegas Animal Control and were informed that, "Animal control is not the C.I.A. We do not run sting operations nor do we do extractions. If we don't know where he lives, we can't do anything about it, but if you get his address we can do something about that." The girls didn't have a lot of faith in "something."

It is not illegal to sell infected animals, but the sisters, and now their mother, were determined to get this guy and the rest of the puppies before he put anymore sick and highly contagious dogs out into the world.

They called the breeder back while still at the veterinary hospital and bargained for the rest of the litter. They agreed on three hundred and fifty dollars for five more dogs. But the family didn't have the money, which is when they all started crying in front of the doctor.

To be fair I am sure it was a highly charged moment. I cry in doctor's offices all the time. In self-defense the veterinarian gave them the number of an animal rescue. Annie, the head of the organization, felt their pain and offered to defray the medical bills and to donate the three hundred and fifty dollars they needed to buy the puppies. But, she said, they would have to deceive the breeder and get the puppies on their own.

Then she called me.

It never occurred to her that the women would back out. She recognized the tone in their voices that marked them as one of us.

We are the late night worriers. We are the ones who stop reading the news because we honestly wonder what we should do -- and then can't sleep when the answer is nothing. We are the ones who take responsibility for everything going wrong without having the means (or the superpowers) to do much else but worry. So we rescue dogs. They remind us of us. We all wish someone had saved us, once. We are mostly women, ranging in age from the teens to old age. You never outgrow the impulse. Some of us have kids and some don't, but we all share this basic drive to help the broken world by helping dogs. And we run in packs.

The family had to juggle. The guy -- who could have made more money with less effort just by stealing stuff -- was still smart enough to know that what he was doing was wrong. We agreed that it would be less suspicious if the girl, and not an adult, called him back. Again he insisted on meeting in a parking lot and refused to give his address.

Annie called me again from her car to let me know she was looking for an ATM. She felt that the do-gooders needed backup. Someone who would wander into the Alphabet City part of town with a bunch of twenties in their back pocket to meet four strangers. I was to get the money from her and participate in the exchange.

I dressed fast, put my shorts on inside out, mismatched my socks, put on two pairs of sunglasses (one on my head and one over my eyes) and waited outside on the sidewalk for Annie to drop off the cash.

I don't know what it is about dogs, why they cut to the heart of me like they do. I cannot stand their heartache nor can I resist their charms. When I was little I would hide in the actual doghouse to avoid trouble. I would nap in the yard rather than in a bed because the dogs were there and I would be safe with a bunch of dogs around. My first husband understood why he slept alone upstairs while I slept on the floor in the living room with our dogs. My second did not.

It's a kind of madness.

I have spent my entire life beating back the craziness, forcing it into some kind of size and shape so that it makes me creative -- quirky rather than insane. It's an ongoing project. Before I got old I was a junkie and a drunk. I had an eating disorder. I self-mutilated. As a result, I look skinny and kind of stepped on, but if I keep my sleeves rolled down I can pass as civilized.

My obsession with dogs has crazy potential. I have to check the triggers. I cannot watch the sad eyed advertisements on television, and I cannot watch the YouTube videos of horrible animal stories. I once stole two dogs from my neighbors and placed them in better homes. I harassed a negligent family into giving me their puppy. I visited them everyday with suggestions and posted flyers around the neighborhood about their shameful ways until they caved. Sure, they called the

cops, but my dog and I just hid in the bathroom until they went away. It is a nuisance complaint, and cops only have so much time for those.

I digress.

At one time, I had five dogs and a cat. But you cannot do that if you cannot keep a job -- and sometimes it is hard to keep a job even if you're just quirky. So now I have fewer pets. I make up for it by being the one Annie calls for these kinds of gigs.

While I was waiting for Annie, one of the girls phoned. The breeder had called them to say that he was ready to go. They had stalled him by saying they were waiting for their mom to get the money. It bought us an hour. I had a vision of a thug with twitchy eyes sitting in a dented corolla running his car and smoking nervously while squinting at his rear view mirror. Then I had another of him being torn limb from limb. I was to call the minute I got the cash.

“Don't let 'em spook the guy by taking pictures of him,” Annie said as she leaned across the passenger seat to hand me the money. “Don't touch the dogs and don't put them in your car or near you, or your clothes and the car will be contaminated.”

“Also, you're wearing two sets of sunglasses.”

I called the girls and set out. Fifteen minutes in, feeling a little like I was in a silly episode of Miami Vice, I freaked out that I was going the wrong way and would blow the whole thing by driving to Wisconsin before I realized I was lost. I called the girls and they sorted me. I was headed the right way. I turned off the radio and focused on getting there without ramming into the back of another car.

The area got dirtier and dumpier. Then I saw the spot and pulled into the lot, my tires skipping over broken pieces of asphalt. I saw the girls immediately. They had been worried that we might not recognize one another. I assured them that we would. What I did not say was that we would find each other because crazy people just find each other -- in any crowd. It's a kind of resonance. We were four frumpy ladies who were ready to strangle this guy if the Animal Control did nothing -- spoon out his eyeballs or something.

While we waited, we talked crazy dog talk. We discussed how dogs were better than people. How we didn't really like people. How we thought some people needed to be disappeared. And we wondered in unison, "How could someone do this?"

The guy cruised up to my right in a car that grumble and squeaked. It was not an SUV. He was Hispanic with short dark hair and an economical, sociopathic smirk. He seemed put off by four of us being there. He braked too late and rolled up and off the curb, then, he looked us over while the car grumbled and spat black dust out its tailpipe. Finally, he rolled his window down part way and gestured to a laundry basket filled with puppies. The girls went to the passenger side of his car while I stood just out of his reach, cash exposed. Once the girls had the puppies, he could have the money. , We tried to give the basket back, but the guy was dust before we had finished putting the puppies in the back seat.

"I know him," one of the girls said. "He was in my science class this semester."

"Which means he is in your year book, doesn't it?" her mother asked.

"No one buys a yearbook," the other girl replied.

We took the puppies straight to the veterinarian and waited outside for 45 minutes until we could safely move them into quarantine. Then we waited another 45 minutes for the vet. As we waited, we talked dogs some more and named the puppies -- you need names when you're going to have to say things like "this one lived" and "this one didn't."

The doctor showed. I signed the paperwork as Annie's representative and then left the family to it. We agreed to keep in touch. The mother of the puppies still needed to be saved, and if anyone ever did arrest this shitty human being we all wanted to show up and spit on him.

As I drove away from the vet's, I realized that I knew the puppies' names, Reeve, Morely, Jesse, Annabelle, and Tanner, but I didn't know the girls' or the mother's. And they did not know mine. I'd find them again. People like us, we run in packs.

# There Used To Be Cowboys | Chelsea Sedoti

*Fall Issue 2015*

This used to be a cowboy town. Most people don't know that.

Too easy to be dazzled by the twenty-four hour lights. Everything obscured by glitter and neon, the ring-ching of slot machines. This is the land of no clocks, no time. You spin the wheel of fortune to see where you'll land, arrive as one person and leave as another.

This is a western town, built on the blood of hard men, but people don't remember anymore. They're fooled by the flashing-light facades. They don't know there used to be cowboys.

When I was little this was a different place.

Back then the castle-wall mountains surrounding our valley couldn't hold off the Mojave. It crept in. Oh, we pretended we had all the power. But in our hearts we knew we were at the mercy of the desert. We'd been allowed to settle, build our homes, make our roads. But at any moment it could be taken back. The tumbleweeds reminded us. The days so hot thermometers shattered. The shiny red-bellied spiders that swarmed during summer months. Back then we treated the Mojave with respect. We understood how easily it could destroy us.

Today the stucco and Spanish tile housing complexes, the florescent shopping centers, stretch right up to the mountains. It makes people forget that just a few miles out of town it's still shotguns and whiskey and rattlesnake venom. It makes people forget the way it used to be.

When I was little I told my mom I wanted to be a cowboy.

She said, "You mean a cowgirl."

No. Not a cowgirl. I saw them at rodeos with their rhinestone western shirts and beauty queen hair. Megawatt smiles as white as blizzards and just as cold. I wanted worn down boots, lips

chapped from the hot, gritty dust that blew around on windy days. We used to put towels under the doors to keep the dirt out, keep the cool in.

This town tries on personalities like hats. It reinvents itself; strips away everything worn down and builds it back up newer, shinier. Old is bad, only the future matters here. Always looking ahead to something bigger and brighter. This has been a mob town, a gambling town, and a party town.

Everyone forgets it was a cowboy town first.

When I was little I ran away. I ran away to be a cowboy.

I left the house with juice boxes and cookies stolen from the pantry. I left without a plan. Perched on my head like a crown was the cowboy hat I'd gotten for my sixth birthday, already too small. I had to settle for tennis shoes instead of boots, my wits instead of a revolver.

I left at dawn and walked towards the mountains, sun and neon lights behind me. I imagined I was my favorite movie cowboy, that dazzling hero my parents had taken me to the drive-in to see. Looking back, I don't know what I was hoping to find out there. Lost silver mines. Gangs of bandits. Or maybe something harder to name. A place, a feeling, and the life I felt I should have been born to.

How do you describe the desert to someone who's never been there? How do you describe the Mojave to someone who imagines all deserts to have the sand dunes of the Sahara, the saguaro cacti of the Sonoran? The Mojave is something else entirely, stark and ugly, alien. There is no shade. There is no shelter. The sun bleaches everything, the Joshua trees with their spindly leaves, the desert shrubs growing low to the ground. The world is washed out, cracked, drained. Only the sky has color, the endless blue sky. When the clouds roll in they come fast, bringing flash floods with them. In the distance, in every direction, ragged mountains rise from the earth, seeming to never getting closer no matter how far you walk. Distance isn't the same in the desert. Everything looks nearer and farer than it is.

The Mojave isn't a place people were supposed to live. Only rattlesnakes and scorpions thrive here, creatures with as much venom in them as the desert itself. I always thought if you could survive in the Mojave you could survive anywhere.

By early afternoon on the day I ran away I was ready to go home. I'd found no adventure in the desert, just a lot of dirt. I was worn out; I could feel the sunburn spreading across my face. I turned towards home. By the time night came I still hadn't come to the edge of town.

The desert has so many ways of fooling you. Even when you think you're walking in a straight line, following the sun, heading towards the neon glow coming over the horizon, still you can get turned around. A gust of wind and everything changes. A pause, a moment to wipe your brow on the hem of your tee shirt, and when you open your eyes the landscape has shifted, suddenly you don't know where you are or where you're going.

I walked and I walked and that night I cried myself to sleep while listening to the lullaby howls of coyotes in the distance.

The desert comes alive at night. Summer days are filled with silence, only the wind for company. But as the sun goes down things start to stir. All those creatures that spent the day hiding from the heat crawl out of their holes. Every cactus, every bush is filled with sounds. Chittering, rustling. Stalking. Creeping. Roaming in the light of the moon.

If you've never closed your eyes on a warm Mojave night, and listened to coyote songs coming from the hills and valleys, then you haven't really lived.

But that first night I wasn't thinking of living, I was thinking of dying. I was young enough to quest for adventure but old enough to understand my error. I knew how many people died in the desert each year. Sometimes a fall from a ledge or a scorpion sting. Bodies have been found with the insides all melted from the heat. Everything in the Mojave wants to kill you.

The snacks in my backpack lasted until afternoon of the second day. Still I wandered. I walked until my legs gave out. My sleep was filled with dreams of cool, clear water and when I woke my tongue felt shriveled, my lips cracked. Even my skin seemed to lose its moisture, turning brittle and



thin. I got up. I walked and I stumbled. I walked more. I sat down to rest and the world seemed to spin. I no longer thought of staying on course, knew only that I had to keep walking.

When you stop walking you let things catch up to you. Slinky, ragged things that have been stalking, watching, waiting.

On the third day I came to a rocky outcrop. Had I seen it before? It was both familiar and strange. I might have crossed it ten times already. Or maybe that was in a different life. I didn't know anything anymore. I scrambled up the rocks as quickly as I could, skinning my palms, my tennis shoes sliding on loose dirt.

I was almost at the top when I slipped. My foot went into a crevice. There was no time to hear the rattle. The rattle is a warning. It means there's time to back off. I'd already done the unthinkable, something I'd been warned against my entire life. Rattlesnakes sleep in the secret places between rocks. Never play there. Never stick your hand in a hole.

My ankle was gripped, punctured, the surprise enough to bring me out of the daze I'd been in for the past day. I screamed, shook the snake off. It felt like I'd been burned, stung by a hundred bees at once. The snake slid out of the crevice, rattle waving, that sound every child of the desert has been raised to dread and fear. It looked at me and I looked back at it and I knew it was telling me to leave, the desert was his, and I didn't belong there.

"Don't move," someone said.

Then a callused hand appeared and closed around the rattler. The snake whipped around, lunged, ready to bite again. But the man was faster. He flung the snake into the desert. Those hands picked me up next, took me down the outcrop, placed me on a tall rock, one with no holes for rattlesnakes to hide.

I raised my leg to examine the bite.

"No," the man said, "Keep it lower than your heart."

My heart. My beating heart. Racing, skipping, darting like a desert lizard.

“Don’t panic, it’ll spread faster,” he said.

He peeled down my sock, looked at my bloody, punctured ankle.

“Lucky it was full grown.”

The burning sensation was spreading. My leg was already beginning to bruise and swell. I could hear the man, but from far away. The world around me was coming in and out of focus.

“Stay awake,” he said to me.

I looked into his eyes. Eyes as blue as the desert sky. His skin was leather, his face lined and unshaven. A flat brim hat sat on his head. He smelled like dust and tobacco. My cowboy.

I’d never seen anyone so handsome. Weathered but strong. Beaten by the desert, but never broken. A cowboy comes straight from my imagination. Come to save me.

“What’s your name?” I asked. “Where did you come from?”

“This will hurt,” the cowboy said.

He lowered his lips to my wound and sucked. Spit blood and venom onto the cracked desert floor. Sucked again. I was dizzy and sweating. I could feel the fight in my veins, venom trying to spread, him pulling it out. A war buzzing through my body.

I fainted.

When I came to it was night and I was lying on a blanket by a small campfire. The cowboy sat next to me rolling a cigarette.

“Drink this,” he said when he saw I was awake.

I took his canteen and let the cool water wash down my throat, clearing the grit from my mouth, bringing me to life.

He handed me a battered tin bowl filled with beans and chunks of meat.

Nothing had ever tasted so good.

The food, the warmth from the fire, the sweet smell of his tobacco. It felt like being embraced, wrapped up in loving arms and told everything was going to be okay.

A coyote howled, closer than I'd ever heard before.

“They smell the food,” the cowboy said.

“Will they hurt us?”

“They don't like the fire.”

“I think they've been following me.”

“Nasty beasts. They'll prey on anything weak.”

He took a flask from his hip and drank deeply. He offered it to me. I knew the smell of whiskey. I took a sip. It burned all the way down, a rattlesnake bite all over again.

“You’ll sleep well tonight,” he said, and already I could feel my eyes getting heavy. “I’ll keep watch.”

That night there were no dreams.

The cowboy woke me with the sun and told me we would ride. His horse was tethered to a Joshua tree, dull brown with a tangled mane. The cowboy pulled me into the saddle in front of him. Despite my grogginess and the throbbing in my ankle the world seemed new. The mountains in the distance looked like a painting.

I breathed in the scent of him, leather, tobacco, and whiskey. I wanted to hold it inside myself and become stronger, tougher. I wanted to become him.

We rode through the day, through the blistering sun. He never asked me what I was doing in the desert. He never asked me anything at all. He anticipated my thirst and passed the canteen. He stopped to rest before I realized I was tired.

How many days did we wander the desert? Time stopped existing. The sun rose and set at seemingly random intervals. A week could have gone by. A year.

At what point did the desert become my home? As we navigated through the broken terrain, at what point did I begin to understand it? I could feel it whispering to me, inviting me to stay. Telling me I belonged there. I would always belong to the Mojave. I could be a cowboy. Maybe I already was one.

Then, unexpected, the edge of town. Street lights. Paved roads. Life. Dread welled up inside of me. Everything the same as I’d last seen it, but it no longer meant safety. The buildings would confine me. The bustling town would be my prison.

“Don’t make me go,” I said.

The cowboy climbed off his horse.

“I don’t belong here,” I said.

He lifted me, set me on the ground in front of him.

“I want to stay in the desert with you,” I said.

He crouched down, his bright blue eyes locked with mine.

“There’s nothing but death in the desert. You have more living to do.”

There’s no arguing with a cowboy.

I limped into town and I felt him watching me. I turned back once and he raised his hand. That was the last time I saw him, silhouetted against the setting sun. My cowboy. Then he was gone, returned to the desert he came from.

I knocked on the door of the first house I came to and asked to use their telephone.

Then, a flurry of activity. My parents, doctors, newspaper reporters. It was a miracle some said, a miracle I was alive. They treated me different at school, with reverence and fear. They said I was a hero. That spring I rode on a float in the annual Helldorado Days parade.

The doctors didn’t believe in miracles. They told my parents I should have died. They said it didn’t make sense, it didn’t add up. The rattlesnake bite should have killed me. I went too long without food, without water. I shouldn’t have been able to cross that distance alone.

“I wasn’t alone,” I told them, “the cowboy was with me.”

There was no cowboy. That’s what they said. They called him a dream, a hallucination.

But I had felt him, smelled him, and heard his voice. I went into the desert to become a cowboy and I almost died there. But he rescued me.

“Oh honey,” my mom said, hugging me too tight, “there aren’t cowboys around here anymore.”

They called it a miracle. They called it a mystery. Like most things it was eventually forgotten about and I was left to live my life.

I’ve grown up since those days in the desert. Long years have passed and my cowboy town has grown and changed around me. Joshua trees cut down for grocery stores, mountains blasted through to make highways. And the neon lights, they just get brighter. No one thinks of this as a cowboy town anymore.

But it was.

In its heart it still is.

I’ve had happy times. I’ve had hard times too. And sometimes in the dead of night, the worst nights, when everything seems dark and hopeless and I can hear the howls of the coyotes closing in, I get a whiff of leather and tobacco. And I know he’s near, after all these years he’s still watching over me, ready to suck the venom from my veins.

How many small deaths has he saved me from?

My cowboy.

This used to be a cowboy town. People think the cowboys have all gone, or never realize they were here at all. I know the truth. This town can build hotels as tall as the mountains, drown the streets in champagne, erase the past and make the future of their choosing, but still I know. I can

see past the glamour and glitz. As long as this town lives and breathes there will always be cowboys.

## Passing Birds | Judy Salz

*Fall Issue 2015*

How did I get up here? Jessie peered down at a bird's eye view of the center of what used to be her childhood neighborhood. The elegant filigreed hands on the tall brass clock on the corner of Sixth and Elm, polished to a gleam as always, said nine-seventeen. The trolley car, only half full, came to a halt directly beneath her. Her mother's voice, somewhat muffled by her hat's veil, sounded fretful as she called to the little girl dawdling behind her to hurry so they wouldn't miss their ride.

Jessie opened her mouth to answer, but heard only a loud caw. She cleared her throat and tried again.

Her mother pointed to the tree, laughing. "Jessie, even the crow up there in the tree wants you to speed up!"

Crow? Tree? Jessie? She blinked, and then cautiously looked down at herself. Her feet almost lost their grip on the branch and her wings fluttered to regain her balance when she saw the black feathers covering her body. The scream she attempted only summoned another crow, which landed beside her with a rustle of leaves and feathers.

"Not too bad for a beginner. You'll get the hang of it." Her branch partner lifted one foot up and scratched its neck without losing its balance.

"Just takes practice. It took me nearly a year."

"Why are you speaking English and I can only crow?" Jessie stared into the beady eyes. None of this makes any sense at all.

"I know it doesn't," it said, answering her unspoken thought. "The people down there hear only two cawing birds. Only we can understand what we are saying to each other. When did you pass?"



“Pass?”

The other bird shook its head. “Pass. Die. Don't you remember dying?”

“No! I'm alive! What on earth are you squawking about?” Her claws alternately held on to the branch and let go as she hopped from foot to foot, agitated and confused.

“Okay, okay. I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers. Calm down. I'm new at mentoring. Obviously, I'm not very good at it.”

Jessie's eyes narrowed to a slit. She tried to make a time-out sign, but her wings wouldn't cooperate. “What in the name of whoever is going on here? I'm not a crow. I'm Jessie Anderson, human. I'm alive and yet here I am in the body of crow sitting in a tree with another crow that says I'm dead. And crows don't speak, they caw. And why am I seeing my childhood home and my mother and me as a child? This is not ‘Our Town.’ Thornton Wilder didn't write about birds. And birds don't read minds.” She was angry and her voice was a shrill squeak.

“Cool down.” Her mentor casually preened its wing feathers. “Let me try again. You're the first one who reacted to the idea of passing the way you did.”

“What did the others do? Jump for joy?” Jessie's face would have been twisted into a sarcastic grin, if she had lips instead of a beak. “Maybe they were old and sick and ready to die. I'm young and healthy with my whole life ahead of me.” Her tail feathers were trembling. “Who decided I should die young?”

Her companion squeezed its eyes shut and was silent for a while. She could imagine the wheels turning in the little birdbrain as it framed an answer.

She mentally rolled her eyes and gritted her nonexistent teeth. “Well? I'm waiting.”

It let out a long low caw, almost a sigh, opened its eyes and turned to face her. “There is an out of sorts, if you really want it.” Its voice trailed off.

“An escape clause?” If she had an eyebrow, it would have been raised.

“Yes.” The head bobbed. “Young people who pass have the option of postponing it to a more suitable time.”

“How did I die?” Her voice quavered just hearing the words coming from her beak.

“Car accident. Head on collision. No suffering. Instant death.”

“Anyone else die?” She held her breath.

“A small child.”

“No!” Her heart lurched in her chest.

“NO!” she shrieked. “Undo it! Now! For both of us! This is not a suitable time! When I’m old I’ll come. Let the child grow old, too.”

###

“Mommy? You awake?” She felt her daughter’s small hand on her shoulder.

“I’m scared.”

Jessie reached out and lifted her daughter up on to her bed without opening her eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“Listen!” Her daughter crawled in close.

The din of the cawing crows in the elm tree outside her bedroom window was loud and raucous.

“You were sleeping and you made the same sound,” she whimpered.

“I must have heard them in my sleep and imitated them. They’re migrating.”

She pulled back her cover, plucked the black feather growing from her arm and crushed it in her fist. Her alarm clock said nine-seventeen. “They’ll pass,” she said.

# The Atomic Milk Run | Todd Tavalazzi

*Fall Issue 2014*

May 25, 1952

Forty minutes from the end of a two-hour return trip from Reno to Sky Haven airport, in North Las Vegas, I noticed the low oil pressure on the number two engine. It was the same engine Frank worked on all night for today's flight. The engines were loud and shook the wood and fabric Cessna T-50, nicknamed the "Bamboo Bomber" by the flyboy cadets in World War Two, like you were sitting inside a washing machine. My instructors in the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, or WAFS, called the engines "Shaky Jakes" for just that reason. Despite the fact that I had to stuff cotton balls in my ears under the radio headset and felt like I'd been through a full Maytag wash cycle after a flight, they were some of the most reliable engines in the skies, with the exception of today.

This particular engine had been giving Frank some trouble recently, but he seemed to think he had the problem licked this time. Our little airline had three "Bamboo Bombers" we bought at a government surplus auction after the war. We'd been getting steady work flying building contractor executives, architects, some small cargo and even a few movie stars who wanted to keep a low profile while they visit the casinos on the Las Vegas Strip.

Today, Frank needed me to check out the number two engine and pick up a load of steaks for our monthly airport barbecue and some replacement parts for the second of our three T-50s that had been grounded for a few days. Frank had agreed to a charter that required all three of our airplanes to transport a whole team of financiers from Los Angeles to meet with the mayor of Las Vegas and his chamber of commerce with an eye on giving Reno and Lake Tahoe a run for its money in making Las Vegas the next hot tourist attraction for all of southern California.

Because of the importance of the meeting and the requirement for all three planes, Frank didn't want to give up the charter to one of our competitors. I offered to fly up to Reno to get the parts quicker and let Frank sleep after his long night working on the engine. We had other pilots on the pay roll, but I figured a milk run to Reno and back would be a welcome change from the daily business at Sky Haven.

I was flying at six thousand feet above ground level but figured I should have a bit more altitude for better radio reception just in case this engine gave me more problems. I increased the throttle on the number one engine and set the nose for a steady climb at five hundred feet per minute. I could see the tiny collection of Pahrump's buildings just below my right windscreen. It would only be about forty more minutes before I was in the familiar comfort of the Sky Haven traffic pattern.

Six minutes later, I leveled off at nine thousand feet as I hawked the number two engine oil pressure gauge. It seemed to be dropping by the minute. I was just able to tune in the Sky Haven base operations frequency in the two-way radio when the number two engine finally let go. The cockpit shook so much I could barely get a hold of the engine controls to shut it down.

I managed to pull back the throttle, cut the fuel with only my right hand and steadied the yoke with my left. The number one engine on the left wing was producing all of the power and the uneven torque was making the airplane yaw uncomfortably to the right. I eased in some left pedal to compensate and set the trim as best I could with one hand before I reached over and selected the FIXED HIGH PITCH switch on the number two engine to allow the propeller to wind mill freely with the least amount of drag.

Once I had things under control in the cockpit, I figured I should call Frank to let him know my situation just in case something happened to my only good engine.

Sky Haven base, this is November Charlie one-niner-one," I said into the microphone.

I heard nothing but static in response.

"Sky Haven base, this is November Charlie one-niner-one, Frank are you there?"

"I'm here Doris," came Frank's tinny voice through the static. "What's your current location?"

"I'm about fifty miles north of Pahrump."

“Good, how are the winds?”

“I have a slight headwind from the south.”

“What’s your airspeed?”

“Right now all I can make is one hundred knots.”

“Why so slow?”

“Because I had to shut down the number two engine. I guess it didn’t agree with your fix.”

Frank didn’t answer for a few seconds. On the whole, a single engine failure wasn’t a big emergency. It would just take a bit longer to get back home as long as the good engine held out.

“Frank, did you copy?”

“Yeah, I copy Doris.”

“I think maybe I should put her down on Highway 160 near Pahrump, the winds are good for that. You could call Earl out there to come get me. I’m sure he’d let us park the plane outside his restaurant. It may be a good attraction for him for a day or so.”

“No Doris, you need to make your best speed back here.”

It wasn’t like Frank to pass up an opportunity to joke about old Earl, the only restaurateur in Pahrump. Something had him on edge.

“Why? What’s the matter Frank?”

“I can’t say over the air but we just got word that the little appointment up north that’s been postponed for the past few days is going to happen any minute,” Frank said cryptically. “What’s your altitude?”

“I’m at nine thousand so I could get you on the radio.”

“Don’t land. It may be too dangerous on the ground. Just go as fast as you can and I’ll make a few calls to see what I can find out. They’ve been late in the past, let’s just hope they’re late this time.”

“I copy Frank.”

“Don’t worry Doris, you should be far enough away by the time it happens. If you see a flash, close your eyes and don’t look to the north. I’ll call you back in a few minutes with an update. Hang in there honey.”

“I copy Frank, I’ll see you soon.”

It must be worse than he’s letting on, he never calls me honey unless he’s nervous.

I couldn’t help myself, I scanned the horizon to the north and could make out Yucca Flats just west of the glimmering water of Papoose Lake. I turned my attention back into the cockpit and increased power on the left engine to its maximum power setting and compensated the onslaught of torque with full left pedal and set the trim wheels to ease the pressure on the controls. I was only making a hundred and twenty knots. At that speed I’d be home in thirty minutes.

I snuck another look toward Yucca Flats and hoped those military boys out there delayed their nuclear test until I could get safely on the ground.

#

Ten minutes later, the northern sky lit up like a lightning flash that lingered. It took all of my willpower not to look, but I knew that the Woolworth sunglasses I wore wouldn't do any good shielding my eyes from a nuclear blast. I squeezed my eyes shut as hard as I could but the searing atomic blast bored through my eyelids and into the back of my skull as if the full power of the sun was focused directly into my cockpit.

After several seconds, I sensed the intensity of the flash had waned and I peeked back out into the world around me with only one eye at first. I looked over my shoulder to the north and saw an eerily odd column of white smoke as it rose above the flat, sandy brown desert floor. I opened both eyes and stared at the sinister beauty of what would become the iconic symbol that would dominate human kind's worst fear for decades to come: the nuclear mushroom cloud.

As I took in the awesome sight of the scene below, I noticed a perfectly round and pale white shock wave traveling unbelievably fast across the desert floor, leaving an immense dust cloud of destruction in its wake. My heart skipped a beat and then pumped double time when I realized that that same shock wave was going to arrive in seconds. There was nothing I could do but brace for whatever this unbelievable power would do to my little Bamboo Bomber.

The plane shuddered violently as it absorbed a tiny fraction of the distributed energy of the nuclear blast that had just occurred over fifty miles away. I screamed at the top of my lungs, closed my eyes again and held on to the yoke with both hands as the plane bounced around the sky at the unyielding whim of nuclear physics.

All I could hear was the deafening roar of wind over the fuselage as the plane's nose dipped below the horizon and the airspeed indicator steadily climbed to two hundred knots as I rocketed out of the sky. I pulled back on the yoke to control the airspeed and checked the engine instruments to confirm my worst fear: somehow the shockwave had disabled my electrical system.

I looked out at the left engine and saw that the propeller was slowly winding down. With the loss of the electrical system, there seemed to be no more spark coming from the battery or backup magnetos to keep the cylinders firing.

"Oh Jiminy Christmas. Isn't this a tight fix," I said to myself.



I reached over and pulled back the throttle and fuel levers and engaged the FIXED HIGH PITCH switch as my only hope of maintaining the airspeed that would keep me in the air as long as possible. I was now at the controls of a heavy glider. I looked at the altimeter and saw the hands winding down as the numbers descended through eight thousand feet.

I raised myself up as far as I could in the cockpit as I searched the desert floor below for a spot to land. I could just pick out the unnaturally straight lines of runway 12 at Sky Haven carved perfectly into the scrub brush far below and ahead of me. It looked like the size of a postage stamp in the windscreen.

I worked the yoke in my sweaty palms and set the angle of the nose to maintain ninety knots, the airspeed I needed to achieve the best glide distance. I worked the trim wheels to re-compensate for zero torque from the engines and shouted at the altimeter with my eyes to slow down its descent.

After six minutes of constantly working the stick and rudder, I was descending through two thousand feet and the airfield had grown from a speck to fill my windscreen. My entire body sang as I realized that I wouldn't have to muscle a dead stick landing into the scrub brush within sight of the runway.

A second later, I realized that I hadn't put the landing gear down. As I was busy with the controls, I had forgotten that no electrical power meant no electrically powered landing gear. I reached over and pushed the landing gear lever down to unlock the mechanical release. I reached for the manual landing gear handle, inserted it into the crankshaft housing where my seat met the floor and started cranking.

I fought to keep the nose steady as I labored to spin the handle. I remembered from my flight training in the WAFS that it took at least fifty to seventy revolutions to fully extend the landing gear by hand. Without the gear down, the wood and fabric fuselage would most likely disintegrate upon impact.

I began counting to myself to help me track my progress and steady my nerves, "One, two, three, four..."

I was already winded and had over forty more revolutions to go all while keeping one hand on the yoke to maintain the best glide angle. A hopeless dread permeated every pore in my body. My hands shook with fear and frustration but I kept cranking.

Fifteen hundred feet, twenty-five revolutions, theoretically, I was halfway there. I looked out and saw two cherry red fire trucks parked at the approach end numbers, lights flashing, waiting to scrape me off the runway and put out the fire in the smoking hole that would mark my arrival.

Twelve hundred feet, thirty revolutions. I heard the wailing cry of the stall warning horn go off in the cockpit and looked up to see I had accidentally pulled the yoke back as I was cranking the gear handle which caused the nose to come up dangerously high. The plane was stalling and I would be too low to recover. I wasn't going to survive a dual engine failure and a nuclear shock wave just to kill myself in a stall at the end of the runway.

I pushed the yoke forward and everything went weightless for a second as the nose pointed back toward the ground. The cartons of steaks slammed down on the passenger seats behind me and shook the plane so hard I thought another nuclear shock wave hit the plane. I watched the painfully slow progress of the airspeed indicator as it crept back up: 70, 80, 90 knots. I kept cranking away on the landing gear. The increased airspeed and nose position finally silenced the stall warning horn.

Five hundred feet, fifty revolutions, but the landing gear indicator didn't show down and locked. I kept at it. Five more revolutions, nothing. Five more, nothing. Three hundred feet, five more revolutions, still nothing.

I looked out the cockpit window and saw Frank's powder blue T-bird parked next to the fire trucks. I knew he could see both engines wind milling. I could hear him in my mind cheering for me, "Come on honey, you can grease this landing."

Two hundred feet, five more cranks and then the crank handle finally wouldn't move. I looked up and saw two little tires in the landing gear indicator window that told me that the landing gear was down and locked. I pulled the crank handle from the crank shaft to save my legs from getting pummeled by the spinning lever in the event the gear collapsed upon landing.

I took the yoke with both hands and made constant, tiny changes as I flew over the giant white twelve painted at the approach end of Sky Haven's runway. The plane slammed into the deck so hard the right tire blew out and veered off the runway to the right and into the grass. I managed to wave and give Frank a stupid smile from the cockpit as I narrowly missed his T-bird and one of the fire trucks as I careened past. I was just happy to finally be on the ground.

When the plane came to a stop, I opened the cockpit door and climbed out onto the left wing on wobbly legs. At the trailing edge of the wing, I fell into Frank's arms. He walked me to the T-bird and he held my head next to his chest and his strong arms encircled me. He pulled himself away, looked into my eyes and gave me a tender kiss.

"I'm glad you're back."

"Me too," I said. "I got the parts and the steaks."

After a second, we both laughed and hugged again.

"Well, you'll have a helluva story for everyone at the barbecue about your atomic milk run to Reno."

"Just another day in Vegas," I said and tucked in for another hug.

# Creative Nonfiction

## Viva Home | Caroline Horwitz

*Spring Issue 2016*

“How often do you fly here?” the woman seated behind me asks the flight attendant.

“I live here,” he says.

“But how do you live here?” the woman’s friend asks, her voice full of query, not insult.

“A suburb’s a suburb wherever you are,” he says.

The women pause to consider his words, then resume the same line of questioning.

“Do you live near the Strip?”

“No.”

“Do you go there all the time?”

“No. Every once in a while.”

They seem perplexed, unwilling to accept that someone who lives in the self-proclaimed entertainment capital of the world could have a life comparable to their own, punctuated by supermarkets, movie theaters, and other mundane fixtures.

I often find it funny when tourists say they can’t imagine anyone actually living in Las Vegas, as if a place with tens of thousands of hotel rooms, hundreds of restaurants, and seemingly limitless plumbing in the middle of the Mojave Desert could actually exist and operate without the presence of full-time residents.

“There’s more to Vegas than the Strip.”

Most locals have uttered this phrase-turned-cliché at one time or another. Tourists think they mean the Hoover Dam or Red Rock Canyon or Fremont Street. What they mean is, “We live in a place not unlike yours. We don’t spend our days rolling dice and slurping hurricanes. We pay our bills, take our kids to the park, and stop by Walgreen’s when we’re out of shampoo.”

I admit, when my husband informed me five years ago that he was being transferred to Las Vegas, the typical fantasy reel played through my head. Date nights strutting along the megaresorts. Becoming a cardsharp and dominating the blackjack tables. Sampling the cuisine at every Zagat-rated restaurant. Attending shows, concerts, and performances in lieu of a mall AMC. And the sun, always, the glorious sun.

Since we don’t possess an unlimited entertainment budget, most of these practices are, predictably, occasional treats rather than mainstays in our lives. Also, my lack of interest in card games did not dissipate even after moving to a gambling mecca, so my blackjack skills remain sub-par. The only one of my decadent expectations that came to fruition in full was the weather—the Las Vegas sun is an irrepressible beast.

It’s true that Las Vegas means something because I never intended to live here but do; because I made friendships when I needed them most, when I had no one here but my spouse; because my child was born here. Las Vegas’s identity is, for me, unalterably linked with these parts of my personal life, as I suppose it is for countless others. But don’t most people have a past or present home that fits this description? These feelings of nostalgia hardly speak to the city’s individual character.

I hope the next time a stranger or far-flung friend asks me what it’s like to live in Las Vegas, my response won’t be curt or contain a shrug, that I won’t fault them for their assumptions. I hope I can tell them the truth.

Living here means having a next-door neighbor who’s a retired magician and a hair stylist who moonlights as a Dean Martin impersonator.

Living here means a lackluster job market for professional-level post-grad work, and the humbling realization that in this city you can make more money parking cars than writing copy.

Living here means meeting a law student who drives downtown, dons a Pokémon costume, and takes pictures with tourists to earn extra tuition money.

Living here means regularly losing friends to relocation. For many, this is a stopover city, a layover in habitation. But you will become even more grateful for those who remain alongside you. Finding close friends is tricky in this land of transients. Such events as “speed friending” actually exist. You approach friendship with hesitancy as well as eagerness, fully knowing the odds: Neither you nor she will likely live here in ten years.

Living here means getting used to smoke again. The other places you’ve lived have all passed legislation exiling smokers outdoors, but not Vegas. Smoke is the blood that flows through her veins.

Living here means idiotically making a reservation at a Bellagio restaurant on your first Valentine’s Day in the city, after which you’ll wise up and swear off the insanity of the Strip on all holidays.

Living here means blue skies in January, blossoms in February, and cookouts and swimming by March. It also means shutting yourself in the air conditioning through most of June, July, and August. Day after sweat-soaked day of one hundred degrees by eight a.m., one-fifteen by four p.m. Everyone bears the same scent of sunscreen until Halloween. You can feel the sizzle of the asphalt through your flip-flops.

Living here means mountains in every direction. “I never thought of mountains being here!” says almost every guest who visits you. “I just pictured flat desert.” Perhaps it’s because you grew up in horizontal Ohio, but their grandiosity and enormity are always at least in the back of your mind. Soak this up, you tell yourself on routine commutes and errands, staring at the horizon. You won’t live near mountains like this forever.

Living here means being wary of wildlife. You know there are rattlesnakes in the desert even if you've never seen one. You've heard about tarantulas encountered on hikes and scorpions lurking in toddlers' bedrooms. You've twice spotted a tiny but positively evil-looking black widow on your own patio. There are the carcasses of coyotes on lonesome northern stretches of 95. There were the wild burros near Bonnie Springs who took offense to your staring at them from your car and stalked toward you with ears pinned back and teeth bared. Your brain finally registered the threat just in time to pull away before the male stuck his head in your open window. As you peeled out of the vacant lot and spotted his mate and dark-coated foal, he gave a last-ditch kick from his hind legs. "And stay out," he seemed to snort.

Living here means squinting out the bright airplane window over Lake Mead and knowing you're almost home. Spotting the reflective surface of the Wynn, the New York-New York roller coaster, or the Stratosphere tower does not announce the beginning of vacation but the end (that godawful, familiar Strip is your hometown skyline). It means that, after flying for a full morning, yet somehow arriving by nine a.m., you will be on your couch within the hour.

How do I live here? How anyone lives anywhere. I tick off its shortcomings while wearing it with the ease of a favorite t-shirt, knowing full well that nowhere else, for the present at least, encompasses my life the way this city does.



# Joy Division | James Joseph Brown

*Spring Issue 2015*

Downtown Las Vegas is cold tonight and we need a place to get warm while we wait for friends. My boyfriend and I decide to duck into our familiar haunt, The Beat, which is a calm beacon amid the crowded hipster havens along East Fremont on a busy Friday night. Every other spot has a long line corralled by a velvet rope and a bouncer. From their open doors spill the same DJ beats more fitting for a Strip nightclub than these venues which started as alternatives to the mainstream. But things are changing. Already edgy downtown Las Vegas isn't what it used to be.

The Beat is nearly empty. The bouncer is at the bar holding a coffee. He nods to us as we make our way to the back and take a seat on a comfy sofa. There is a band playing, filling the empty space with distorted sound. We order drinks, loosen our scarves and settle in. We are not happy about the cold, the long walk, the lack of parking, our friends making us wait so long. But there is free live music, so we put on brave faces and try to make the most of it.

The lead singer announces it's time for his ragtag crew to play some Joy Division. No one in the anemic audience stirs, but I sit up and take notice. I have to explain to my younger boyfriend the significance of this moment. He needs a quick history lesson, starting with Joy Division, moving on to New Order, the band formed in the wake of their lead singer Ian Curtis's suicide, and followed by a brief summary of post-punk, goth, and the emergence of alternative music in the eighties. Things were different back then, I swear to him, not quite believing the way these words

feel coming from my mouth. Who is this person I've become, on the other side of a generation gap I didn't realize I had bridged?

And then the haunting synth chords of *Love Will Tear Us Apart* begin and I'm done talking. I'm transported to another place, my eighties youth, that misunderstood era, when wearing black was a statement, your taste in music could literally define you, swearing allegiance to a band or a genre of music could be an act of rebellion. Music was dangerous. But it also had the power to save you.



In the eighties, before it was possible to download any song by any band in an instant, things were very different. We had to actually discover new things, like explorers. We came upon new bands and songs by chance, or fate. From word of mouth, obscure college radio stations or bootleg cassette tapes passed hand to hand by friends. It created a division between being mainstream and being on the cutting edge. Getting turned onto a band before anyone else was a badge of honor. It took leg work. It required a sense of adventure, the right connections, luck, and chutzpah. It also required courage to flash that badge of honor, to have the balls to go out on a limb as the first, the one who would take a chance and pop that cassette into the tape deck, wear the concert t-shirt of some obscure band. It put you at risk of being labeled a freak, a weirdo, or worst of all, a fag. This was the cruelest label of all for a closeted teen.

The kids who turned me on to bands like Joy Division were used to being taunted and ostracized. They weren't self-conscious and hungry for approval. They ignored the Top 40 playlist on every radio station and scored bootleg cassettes of post-punk, industrial, and alternative music for us to share.

And they didn't seem to care what anyone thought about it.



I first met these daring friends before we even started high school through a game called Dungeons & Dragons. Now played by millions throughout the world, at the time it was something of a cultish hobby known almost exclusively to socially awkward teenage boys. It was also horribly misunderstood by much of the American public, accused of being a gateway drug to Satanism and suicide. These outlandish claims unfortunately gained traction throughout the eighties. It made proximity to the game a dangerous prospect, banishing those of us who played it to a special category of social pariah. Dangerous to ourselves and others, akin to being placed on group suicide watch. There were sideways glances, whispers behind our backs. Even bizarre accusations that we had indoctrinated ourselves into a devil-worshipping cult.

So at a certain age I made a decision. I shared a bond with my Dungeons & Dragons companions that would always be there. My best memories were with them. But they belonged to

a world that was far removed from the harsh social circles that high school occupied. As we grew into teenagers and the world shifted around us, I felt the pressure to distance myself from them.

They were quirky kids — interesting, different, smart beyond belief. But they were nerds. They didn't fit in. And they weren't popular. One had curly red hair and glasses. He was smart and kind and hilariously funny. But that carried no currency once we got to high school. One was talented in every way and had an IQ that was off the charts. But he was scrawny and uninterested in sports, had Jehovah's Witness parents and evil genius tendencies that creeped other kids out. I didn't see anything wrong with these friends. They were simply uninterested in being cool or blending in. This put them in conflict with an odd set of strict rules. And as long as I wanted to be on the other side of the nerd divide, I had to play by this set of rules.

I wanted desperately to be accepted so that I could avoid outcast status and the bullying and physical violence that came with it. I had the added burden of being in the closet, a secret that would have carried very real and horrific consequences if it had gotten out. But there was also a part of myself — that I didn't even realize was there — that enjoyed being popular. And it was an ugly, tenacious thing. It refused to back down, no matter what I had to exchange in return for this new status.

So what if I had to compromise some of the things that made me unique? I didn't give them all up. It was always a tug of war. I kept some quirks but smoothed others over. It didn't seem a bad trade off. But there were some things I could never reconcile. I was acutely aware that I was

selling my former friends out. And I felt awful, like a betrayal. I swore to myself I would try to find a way to apologize one day. I didn't realize they wouldn't care. They wouldn't need an apology.



I used to spend countless hours making mix tapes that I likened to works of art, juxtaposing songs so that they were almost having conversations with each other. The end result needed to be cohesive, but not predictable. It needed to maintain a comprehensive style, but still contain elements of surprise. It had to make sense as a collection of songs that belonged together, but still have a few twists, a few complications, to make things interesting. I took what I did seriously, and those that listened to the finished product appreciated the effort.

One day I got picked up in front of my house by Matty, my new best friend, one of the popular kids. I popped in a mix tape I had made for our trip to a nearby college town. I told him the names of the bands as they played, strumming air guitar along with the melody. Most of them were new to him. He didn't care what we listened to as long as we were hanging out and driving around. We always had a good time when it was just the two of us.

The next time he came to pick me up he had two other guys from the football team along for the ride. I played the same cassette. The guys made horrified faces, as if they were witnessing a gory accident. They ridiculed us, said it was fag music, told us to turn the shit off, said, now I know

why you two have been hanging out so much. Matty ripped the cassette out and tossed it through the window. They laughed as it skittered along the potholed road behind us and disappeared into the wild grass. I laughed, too. Where'd you get that shitty ass tape anyway? I named one of my old gaming pals, the first one who came to mind. Judas to the end. You still hang with those faggots? It was a long time ago, I said.

So no more listening to the bands I loved.

No more Echo and the Bunnymen, no more Siouxsie and the Banshees, no more Dead Kennedys. That music was for fags.

They'd never heard of any of it. They listened to Guns N' Roses. They listened to Bon Jovi. They listened to AC/DC. When I was with them, that's what I listened to. It was the price I paid to fit in, to not be made a target.



It felt great to get invited to parties, to have somewhere to go every weekend, to have the guys who used to push me into lockers and sneer at me now high-five me and feed me drinks, put their arms around my shoulders and whisper secrets in my ear. It felt good to be on the inside looking out. I had performed some sort of intricate voodoo ceremony. I had sacrificed something for this.

No more Smiths, no more Depeche Mode, no more Cure.

No more Sigue Sigue Sputnik, no more Psychedelic Furs, no more Ministry.

No more Joy Division.

And no more Dungeons & Dragons.



The band finishes their song and moves on to the next. My boyfriend grabs my hand and holds it tightly to his chest. No one here pays any attention to two men holding hands. When we walk down East Fremont Street we rarely get a second glance unless it's from girls in their twenties who make the same wide-eyed pouty faces they might make when they see a cute puppy they want for themselves. We are precious to them, a happy couple, not afraid to show our love, and because of this, they approve. They seem to have some notion that we are superior to the straight men who disappoint them. I smile at them.

The very young crowd at The Beat seems to enjoy the music, but of course they didn't sit in their bedrooms at night when they were teens and listen to these lyrics until their cassettes wore out, didn't cling to their few moments alone with these melancholy tunes with the same desperation. I don't fault them for this. They came late to the party after all. But how odd it is that this music that was so powerful to me, which I had to sacrifice on the altar of survival and self-preservation,

which once flew like a flag of rebellion and subversion, now floats in the air as little more than background noise?

The lead guitar guides the band through another set. I recognize every song. More Joy Division, Morrissey, then some Smiths covers. The band is hitting all the right notes tonight. We settle in and wait for our friends. The music and nostalgia wash over me.



If I were the main character in an eighties movie the plot would be predictable. I would learn my lesson before it's too late, realize it was all a big mistake. If I could just go back to the way things used to be, when my gaming buddies and I were playing Dungeons & Dragons in the basement, listening to bootleg mix tapes, when I felt respected for who I was, quirky, different, interesting, not like everyone else. And then I would come out of the closet and they would say, we knew all along, we love you no matter what. Why don't you play a gay elf paladin, and in our next adventure, you can rescue the elf prince, instead of the princess, cause you're gay and all, get it?

In real life of course none of that happened. Not enough of the world had changed for a story like that. And I'm not sure how the gaming geeks would have reacted to a coming out. Who knows? Maybe they weren't the saints I remember them to be through the haze of nostalgia. And then of course there was part of me, a big part of me, that had changed, that was too far gone. It



felt good to be popular. It didn't matter to me that the kids who went from scorning me to inviting me to their houses for parties were blatant hypocrites. Not at first.

There are hidden parts of ourselves that are in conflict with each for a long time unless we pay attention to them. I didn't think it mattered to me that the kids who once tortured me were now my best friends, that the same kids who used to taunt me for being different now praised me for being interesting, now that I had sanded down my edges. But as time passed, I knew that I was seething with resentment.



The lead singer of Joy Division, Ian Curtis, committed suicide in 1980, just before the band was about to make their first American tour. It added to their tragic, mythic allure. When I was in high school I became convinced the only way out of the mess my life had become was to kill myself.

I was in the closet and miserable. Death sometimes seemed like a reasonable option. The music of those who felt the same way resonated with me. Any adult who preached that suicide was not the answer, that it was a permanent solution to a temporary problem, simply wasn't speaking the same language. Music that embraced darkness and flirted with despair and obliteration spoke to me.

The haunting lyrics and gloomy melodies of the post-punk, pre-alternative music of the eighties, the music that was there for those of us who dared to step out and find it, was vital and necessary for me. Instead of being something that drove me toward suicidal thoughts and depression, it was something that let those thoughts find an expression, let them live and breathe. A pressure valve, a way to know I wasn't alone in experiencing them.

This sort of music was a lifeline for a kid like me, depressed, closeted, angry and frustrated, living a lie, surrounding myself with popular kids just to escape being tormented by them, all the time pretending to be one of them, when I had abandoned who I was.



I was inspired by this music of rebellion, of anti-establishment sentiment, of screw authority rage. And yet there I was letting these dumb jock conformists take a mix tape of music I loved, a creation I had made which meant something important to me, and toss it out the window like trash, just because I was afraid it identified me as a freak, a weirdo, a fag.

How was I supposed to combat that? How was I supposed to face that day after day and not turn myself into a target? I had to do something to avoid being the lightning rod of their misplaced hostility and aggression.

I had a secret that could destroy me. I was helpless, the slightest chink in my armor, and I was dead.



The band finishes its set for the night and we leave the Beat and walk back out into the cold on East Fremont Street. The music from the clubs competes for attention on the busy sidewalk. Our friends finally arrive. At one club after another we are told there is a steep cover for the men. My boyfriend and I would have to pay twice. Other than that we don't feel different. It doesn't feel like discrimination, just the way of things. Men pay to get into lots of clubs in Las Vegas. Usually just on the Strip. Downtown didn't used to be like this. Apparently now it is.

We ditch East Fremont, where we don't recognize the pricey tourist traps our familiar spots have become overnight, and head to a new place, where there is no cover charge and the drinks are cheap. The music is better and we are happy to be in from the cold. My boyfriend and I dance together. Several strangers are watching us, smiling.

A group of tourists stop us when we leave at the end of the night, to tell us, you guys look happy. A beefy guy in a Raiders cap says, man I wish my girlfriend looked at me the way your guy looks at you. He looks pretty drunk but still, the sentiment seems sincere, and it's nice to see some things have changed.

# Gardening in Las Vegas | Margie B. Klein

*Fall Issue 2014*

“You can’t garden in the desert!” After all, this is Las Vegas! Or Hades, as some refer to it.

Temperatures up to 130 degrees F. “But it’s a dry heat.” Yeah, like walking into a blast furnace.

And soil like ... soil? No, rather, the crust of hell – impermeable and nutrient- and biota-free.

The moon would be easier to garden. The only thing it does contain is salt, so much salt that it precipitates out like the coating on a margarita glass every time you water. And water you must, for the desert saps moisture out of every pore of every material thing, drying skin, noses, plants, and furniture. Summer here is quite like winter in the north. You have to stay locked up in your house and live in an artificial atmosphere. And if you want to make a garden, that may have to be artificial as well.

The first thing we noticed outside of our new house was the barrenness. The pretty little stucco house we had not even moved into yet was already coated with dust. The builders were nice enough to put one inch of sand down in the front yard, but that was just so they had something to lay the sod on. The sod has done well enough, but only because of a sophisticated subterranean irrigation system and the fact that we watch and care for it like a baby. Every night we test the soil with a moisture meter and adjust the irrigation schedule as necessary. We’ve learned that the best time to water is right before sunrise so it won’t scorch the plants by reflecting the sunlight and also so fungal diseases won’t grow in the warm humid night hours. We aerate it, we dethatch it, we fertilize it – high nitrogen to build the grass crowns for looks in the winter, and

high phosphorus and potassium in the spring to build strong roots for the oncoming summer stress. That's just the lawn.

The flower bed in front of our picture window also had that nice one inch of sand, but I ended up digging it up, along with a million rocks and stones. Then I filled the bed with manure, mulch, and backfill, along with the required amendments for desert "soils": bone meal and soil sulfur. Then you water with vitamin B, and later add fertilizer - best added through the irrigation system, as fertilizer burn is a problem in the heat. The whole point is, you have to add elements of nature to this non-living landscape. Oh yes, I know the desert is "alive" with its own highly adapted creatures, but for gardening it's dead.

Another thing you have to make sure of is that there is drainage at the bottom of your garden. A good portion of the area's soil contains caliche. How shall I describe caliche? Cement? No, that's too soft! Suffice it to say that the number one cause of plant death in the Vegas valley is overwatering. That's because there is little drainage and the roots sit in water and rot. That's why you have to dig... and dig and dig. Oh, and the things you dig up – from three-foot boulders to construction debris. It's rather like an archaeological excavation, only you don't have to be so careful. Shovels break, so my husband and I use pick-axes. The ball-and-chain analogy seems appropriate. Wee picture ourselves on the chain gang. Some people use jack hammers to drill "chimneys" through the caliche for drainage.

Just as important as soil preparation is the selection of plant species for this extreme climate.

Some people think this is a wonderful climate for growing because it's always warm. What they don't know is what makes a desert a desert: extremes of temperature in both directions, high winds, and extreme aridity. All of these, along with the "soil" make it very inhospitable to plants. Let's see, what do you think of when you picture Las Vegas? Glittering casinos with gleaming pools and fountains, palm trees and birds-of-paradise? Flamingoes? Now let's take a trip to reality. Native species of this area include yucca, cactus, sagebrush, and cactus. Now there is a trend to start using native species in the landscape, but for us holdouts who still cling to greenery, our search for plants that will live here is a tedious one.

My first attempt at filling my flower bed found me flailing with verbena, lantana, morning glory, heliotrope and lobelia. Very pretty, each of them. Mixed together, they floundered and failed. Ok, I went for looks. But some of them liked it dry, some liked it wet, some disliked heat, and some disliked cold. It's hard to find species that can tolerate extremes. So all the plants either died or were plucked out before they would. And then another flower I had planted took over the garden. Evening primrose – it looks like a purple-pink poppy, but it should be listed as a noxious weed. It filled up the whole garden, and then it started coming up in the lawn. We couldn't get rid of it. We plucked, we dug up the roots, we sprayed. Finally, we just dug up the whole garden, dumped the soil, and applied herbicide to what was left of the bed.

Then we started over. We dumped in all new soil, but it was better soil this time. And then we picked out plants more commonly used here, betting that they were popular because they

worked. They did. Geraniums, periwinkle, dianthus, false heather, snapdragons, and African bush daisy. Their requirements seemed to be pretty much the same: they loved the sun and average waterings. They took off and filled up all the blank spots in the garden. The only care I give is to pull an occasional evening primrose and surface-till the soil as it gets crusty.

You can garden here, but it will never compare to the gardens of other climates. So the next project will be a raised bed, built off the ground, filled with imported soil, and covered from the elements. Sometimes you have to opt for the facsimile and use your imagination.

# Friday Night Specials



# A Girl & Her Horse | Leslie Hoffman

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

I watched from a distance  
girl mount bareback  
a horse called Moon.

Spine straight, blonde hair flowing  
black mane billowing  
platinum and ebony  
resolute, vigilant  
nostrils flared.

*If I were a horse*

*I'd be you, Moon,*

her words rode on the wind.  
Moon whinnied  
her fluid gait uninterrupted.

Rider and mount challenged to trust  
each other, inner-selves  
their collective power.

## Second Springtime | Michael Kroesche

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

Two days' warmth this November

the hackle snapped irises

riot one last

in flowerbeds along the walk

The bright blossoms

genuflecting back in

crumpled blue

and purple habits

My love's hounds nip,

yipe my ribcage restless

waiting for a thin scrap

to fall from her table

I'm good

at feeling nothing, peeling

onion petals inward

around a hard

white center

into a single

garden pearl

## Moth One/Moth Two | Joan Robinson

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

Alights on the office window  
White body feathery, pristine  
against the square of blue.

Somewhere behind, a Southwest  
jet lowers its orange and blue hull  
to the runway.

Moth busy with moth ablutions  
Licks tiny forelegs, wipes first  
one antenna, then the other, next  
hastily scrubs downy abdomen,  
tips backward gently, assuredly  
to reach nether regions, stops,  
puts all legs on glass,  
pauses a moment, then wings away.

\*\*\*

Perched, wings  
folded, motionless  
Mottled brown markings  
perfect disguise for tree trunk, but  
pathetically obvious on  
beige stucco.

# Progress | Sandra Ocegüera

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

The therapist left a voicemail.

I feel as if that's progress.

At least I reached out.

Her voice is on my phone.

## Red Rock Canyon | Guilliean Pacheco

The Joshua trees are brown now, the color of the grains of sand that rise up to meet their fibrous skeletons. The paint had long ago evaporated from the husk of the car, leaving behind its metal frame in reticent testimony to God. She hauled the memories of that ominous night on her back through the births of her seven children, the last time she saw the ocean for the first time, the death of her favorite pitbull. It's a Sisyphean task to remember anymore, as she squinted through the burnish of Vegas that slipped through the slant in her eyes. No else is left to remember.

# Once and Future Kinks | Becky Robison

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

“Looking for lodgings?” asks your phone. “Attempting to locate comfortable rooms at an affordable price?”

You know it is your phone and not your mother because only your phone would use such formal language. Also because your mother has been dead for fourteen years. You figure your phone has chosen your mother’s voice because your mother cared about you, because she wouldn’t want you living in your ex-boyfriend’s truck. You want to reassure your phone-mom that this is a temporary situation, but you’re not sure.

You are aware that you should ignore the message because it’s from the government. Only the government and a few select companies have that kind of access to phones, and the only housing you’d qualify for is government housing. Part of you thinks this would be better than living in your ex-boyfriend’s truck, especially because government housing comes standard with food credits, and you’re hungry. But government housing doesn’t come standard with internet, and without internet you’d basically die. You can’t do your job without internet, or get off without internet--same thing, really. You also can’t video chat with your ex-boyfriend to convince him that you still love him so he’ll let you keep the truck.

You stole the truck because he wanted to get married and because the truck has internet. Your ex-boyfriend still pays for it.

Your job is reviewing tech-free porn movies. You think it’s hot when people fuck the old-fashioned way. So does your ex-boyfriend, which is why you started dating in the first place. He read your reviews, commented on them all. Problem was he never wanted to go there. Sure, it’s risky, and it’s a pain to remove all the equipment, but you wanted to do more than fantasize about all-natural sex.

Facing a lifetime of cold, whirring, mechanical connection horrified you. Horrifies you. You want hot-sweat-skin-hair-juice-germs-squelch-throb-real love, not metal-wire-sterile-designed-by-scientists-for-maximum-pleasure-modern love. You can’t love someone who won’t touch you.

You might love his truck, though. It's an older model, with seat heaters. You turn them on when you watch your movies, and it's almost like you can feel your blood pulsing down there.

## City Music, Frontier Past | Kayla Dean

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

I often think, as I turn up the music and turn onto the freeway, that we live in a city of conflicting visions, two different visualizations seen through the lens of sound.

As I hurtle past the towering brown walls of the freeway, the roofs of stucco houses jutting out from above, I look towards the mountains that loom over the valley. On a clear day, I can see every rock face, crevice, and line that marks the mountains. The orange, red, and brown tones jump out in contrast as the light shines on the natural edifices.

When I see these rock faces, I'm reminded of Las Vegas' frontier past. I think of the first people that must have lived here, that traveled over the land I'm now driving over. They must have seen the orange dust and cacti that we've now subjected to the outer reaches of the valley. When I allow myself to drive in unison to the rich notes of a cello song, I see this vision of Las Vegas.

Many people see Las Vegas as a city of lights- a place where they can spend a weekend, a world of brightly-lit casinos, clubs, and pools- a city that never sleeps. A loud place filled with music and sound- cacophonous or in unison. To many, it is a world of color and novelty, of techno music and parties.

As I round the bend in the freeway, music beating and thrumming through my speakers, I start to see the highest buildings in the valley, the skyline expanding, my first view of downtown the buildings that populate the southern reaches of the Strip.

I let the music sweep me away. Techno has this strange power over me- its melody singing a song that seems distinctly Vegas. The sound of it reminds me of the way traffic sounds on a busy Friday night, a music of its own. Or the deeper, more personal experience of looking out at the beauty of the world, of noting its shadows and edges from the view of a mountain into a valley.

I suddenly see the entire reach of the Strip finally within my grasp. At just the right hour of the day, the Luxor shimmers and glitters so brightly that it's blinding to look at. At night, it's another



sort of blinding- the ever-powerful behemoth flashlight that shines out every night, seemingly into infinity.

I imagine, as I watch the road, the city from above, myself removed from the picture. The streets are like lifeblood in a big city, like arteries carrying different platelets-people- along. It bleeds and courses with light in the navy darkness, little pinpricks of golden streetlights dancing constantly on the valley floor. This is the city from above, from a high point on the Strip, or from the vantage of a mountain top. The era of silence on my radio.

The mix of these visions shows that the views of Las Vegas are as vast as the sky. We see our city one way, the rest of the world sees it as somewhere else entirely. The music is like a litany of our city- theme music to an ever-changing landscape, a contrasting place of old and new, which, on days like this, seemingly blend into one.

# Desert Rain Melody | Kayla Dean

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

When I woke up this morning, rain drumming on my window, a persistent knock against the glass, there was an electric sort of energy floating around, the type of thing that isn't usually part of the dry, desert air.

I got up from the warmth of my covers, my feet brushing against the soft carpet, and felt immediately the foggy chill of rain. I slipped over to my window, and peeked through a slat in the blinds, catching sight of the dim clouds hovering. I heard the hush of the storm as it wound its way down my street.

I pressed my ear against the glass- that cold, smooth window that mirrors back the room behind me in the obscuring gray of the sky-and listened to the storm.

They say it never rains in the desert. The dirt never looks like soil, the plants store all the water they can get, and the streets collect dirt. But there's something magical about the day when it does rain, something pleasant about the tapping sound that comes from the patter of raindrops falling on the ground.

There's something like truth to the soothing music of rain, the pulse of the sky. Something that washes away our frustration, expectation, and doubt.

Rain is like all good music: it lets you lose yourself in its sound, be soothed by its tone, and refreshed by its melody.

# Haiku | Joshua Musicant

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

Is it bad luck to  
Question whether luck is bad,  
Or even worse luck?

# Cheesecake | Andrew Romanelli

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

The allure of the dual proclivity,  
vis-à-vis so damn vigorous yet--  
tender to the very smooth touch.  
Perfect foils for each other.

Comping a shade down lower,  
expeditiously predicting the  
movements, never squandering  
one swinging note. Go.

Improvise with hints of the pain,  
sharp vertical bounds  
unpacking and prolonging,  
until it is thick and heavy,  
slathering the soul indefinitely.

# Stella by Starlight | Andrew Romanelli

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

I found her swinging down  
my boulevard one new born night.  
In the soft piano keyed rain  
where the clouds rolled thin.

Underneath the starlight  
I spoke alto, spoke tenor,  
to her bass like dreams  
washed in soft cymbals.

Until a smile crept then folded,  
to be pressed against my lips.  
How it kicked like a trumpet!  
Just before the keys finished us off.

# Bi-ome | Jennifer Patino

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

*Poem of Merit in the Helen Stewart Poetry Award 2017*

1.

When I was flat as the plains,  
skin-thin, bones jutting,

Spinning spirals around  
suspicious circles

Back when betrayal was a misstep-

a mistake-

a wheat field mound,

yellow with pollen

and cheap wine breath-

I was never more ashamed

of how ugly I felt I was

Until now

I am the soft hills

With jagged lightning

across my skin

2.

“How many minutes can I  
walk today?”

A doughy hand  
across the lace

How pretty does a girl have  
to be to lose all grace?

I can hide the face with  
earth tone colors, paint myself exotic

3.

I was a pixie,  
Now I'm Mab

The older I get,  
the darker I grow

Wild twigs flow out  
of my scalp

4.

I burned the prairies down

when I crossed them

All those years ago,

I was rushing

Always rushing

and now I'm the tundra,

an iceberg,

a stagnant obstacle

I keep myself too rooted

out of fear

When no one bats an eye

here or there

When I am anywhere

or nowhere

When I wear a permanent snow cap

I want to be a mountain-

Unmovable and rocky,

a turbulent terrain-

Rising up from humid jungles, crying,

“Is human nature Mother nature's pain?”



# Villanelle for America in the 21st Century | Autumn Widdoes

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

We wind the darkest threads around the day.  
And pull ourselves into fear's wooly arguments.  
We perform the fool in a thousand death morality play.

When reality is nothing but a magician in grey  
whose language is a tricky pattern of meaningful nonsense,  
we wind the darkest threads around the day.

The world sits on a small ridge of an animal's vertebrae,  
Time is a (in)tended landscape carved into happenstance;  
we perform the fool in a thousand death morality play.

Lives unmoored under endless battles sway.  
Love crumbling under the gold pillars of great expense.  
We wind the darkest threads around the day.

Greed has built inside us a monument to which we pray,  
Fueling the production of drone-violence.  
We perform the fool in a thousand death morality play.

Everything we've allowed will come to ricochet,  
Freedoms slipping away in monumental increments.  
We wind the darkest threads around the day.  
We perform the fool in a thousand death morality play.

# Neon Boneyard | Jeanine Diehl

*Friday Night Specials (discontinued blog series)*

*Honorable Mention in the Neon Museum Prompt Contest*

like a pearl grown beautiful  
from the strains of the sand and the waves hidden  
and kept safe  
within the hands of a clam  
harvested from the depths of the sea  
fit for a king of kings  
a love from unlikely beginnings

# Contributors

**Jennifer Battisti**, a Las Vegas native, studies creative writing at Nevada State College. Her work has been anthologized in *Legs of Tumbleweed*, *Wings of Lace*, *Where We Live*, an anthology of writing and art in response to the October 1st tragedy and is forthcoming in *The Good Fight*. Her work has also appeared in *The Desert Companion*, *Minerva Rising*, *The Citron Review*, *FLARE*, *Helen: A Literary magazine*, *The Red Rock Review*, *300 Days of Summer* and elsewhere. She is a contributing writer for Las Vegas Woman magazine. In 2016 Nevada Public Radio interviewed her about her poetry. She is the coordinator and a participating Teaching Artist for the Alzheimer's Poetry Project in Clark County. In 2018, she was the recipient of the Helen Stewart Poetry Prize and was voted best local poet or writer by the readers of the *Desert Companion*. Her first chapbook, *Echo Bay* was released in 2018 (Tolsun Books).

**Christine Bettis** is an MFA candidate in Poetry at UNLV, where she teaches composition, reads for Witness, and works in the English Department as an assistant to the Creative Writing Coordinator. She is originally from Detroit, Michigan.

**Angela M. Brommel**, is a Nevada writer with Iowa roots. She is the author of the *Plutonium & Platinum Blonde* (Serving House Books, 2018), and has been featured in *The Best American Poetry Blog*, *the North American Review*, *The Literary Review-TLR Share*, and *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, among many other journals, anthologies, and art exhibitions. Her full-length poetry collection is forthcoming from Tolsun Books in 2019. She is the Director of Arts & Culture, as well as a part-time Humanities faculty member, at Nevada State College. You can also find her at *The Citron Review* as Editor-in-Chief.

**Brittany Bronson** is a writer based in Las Vegas, NV. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Times of London*, *Bitch Magazine*, and others. Brittany earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2014. She has received awards and recognitions from the Nevada Arts Council, The Pinch Literary Awards, TalkPoverty.Org, and *Vegas Seven Magazine*.

**James Joseph Brown**'s fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in *The Stockholm Review of Literature*, *Desert Companion*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Hot Metal Bridge*, *Connotation Press*, *Red Rock*

*Review*, *300 Days of Sun*, and other publications. His work in *Desert Companion* was awarded the 2015 Maggie award for Best Essay by the Western Publishing Association.

**Miranda Cooper** has been writing poems since middle school. She is currently an English major with a creative writing emphasis at UNLV. Cooper has lived in Vegas her whole life and is an avid skier and a musician.

**Jamison Crabtree** is a Black Mountain Institute PhD fellow at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. His first book, "rel[am]ent," was awarded The Word Works' Washington prize. Other poems from *WOLF!!!* appear or are forthcoming in *Deluge*, *The Destroyer*, *Fence*, *Glittermob*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Hobart*, *LEVELER*, *Nightblock*, *Printer's Devil Review*, *Redactions*, *Similar::Peaks*, *smoking glue gun*, *Whiskey Island Review*, and *White Stag*.

**Deborah L. Davitt** was raised in Reno, Nevada, where she attended UNR before receiving her MA in English from Penn State. She's worked as a technical writer in industries including nuclear submarines, NASA, and computer manufacturing, and currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and son. Her poetry has garnered her two Rhysling nominations, and her Edda-Earth novels are available through Amazon. For more about her work, please see [www.edda-earth.com/bibliography](http://www.edda-earth.com/bibliography), or contact her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/eddaearth>.

**Kayla Dean**, a Vegas-based writer, is a regular contributor to Vegas Seven. She holds a BA in English from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and will pursue her Master's degree this fall. When she's not writing stories, you can find her on her blog [kayladean.com](http://kayladean.com), where she interviews writers she admires. You can follow her on Twitter @kayladeanwrites.

**Lorna Dickson Keach** is herself not haunted, but she does write and read about haunted things. An English tutor and composition coach, Lorna recently traded the lights of Las Vegas for the desolate, high desert landscapes of Winnemucca, Nevada. The ghosts are better out here. Her short fiction has appeared in various publications over the years, including *The Harrow*, *Necrotic Tissue*, *Helen: a literary magazine*, *Black Ink Horror*, *Scrutiny*, and *Jersey Devil Press*. She attended the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and graduated with a degree in English for some bizarre and terrible reason.

**Megan Duffy** is a Michigan born poet currently living and working in Las Vegas, Nevada. She studied creative writing at the College of Southern Nevada and in the annual Marge Piercy Intensive Poetry Workshop. Her work has been widely circulated locally.

**Victoria Elghasen** is a freelance editor from Nevada. She graduated from the University of Nevada Las Vegas with a Bachelor of Arts in English. She is also the co-editor of *Déraciné*, an online literary magazine.

**Jeremy Gregersen** is a graduate of the Universities of Utah (BA), Michigan (MFA), and Oregon (MA). His work has appeared in a wide variety of journals, including *Potomac Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Juked*, and most recently in *The Maine Review*. Last year he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son, and works as Head of School at The Meadows School.

**Lana Hanson** has no college degree, enjoys no "touring poet" accolades. She's blessed to run a brush through multiplying grey head-hairs, to feel crows' feet deepening grooves around her eyes. She's finally learning to admire herself. She aims to help raise women and children up from poverty, oppression, doubt and silence because she has faced all these herself. Lana's been published at [www.desertcompanion.com](http://www.desertcompanion.com) and also at the distinguished poetry e-zine, [www.thehypertexts.com](http://www.thehypertexts.com), where some time ago she was Spotlight Poet for two months running. Among her publications, her award-winning poem "ARRHYTHMIMIC" first found print at *Helen*, a leading Las Vegas cultural journal. Lana's been a regular columnist at the women's health website [www.hormonesmatter.com](http://www.hormonesmatter.com) and has co-hosted open mic poetry venues and poetry workshops in the Las Vegas, NV, area. Born in Flint, MI, Lana now lives with sardonic teen sons, three perpetually vomiting cats, a farting old rescue dog and a boy-toy-spouse at her Crazy Quilt House in N. Las Vegas, NV.

**Leslie E. Hoffman** works as an independent copy editor of fiction and nonfiction while moonlighting as a poet. Results of her midnight sojourns have appeared in *Helen: FNS*; *Mojave River Review*; *Nevada State College's 300 Days of Sun*; *The California Writers Club Literary Review*; *Caesura*, *The Journal of Poetry Center San Jose*; *Mused*, *BellaOnline*; *They Said*, *Black Lawrence Press*; and various anthologies.

**Caroline Horwitz's** work has appeared in *Brain*, *Child*, *Animal*, *bioStories*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Mothers Always Write*, and *The Summerset Review*, among others. An essay of hers was nominated for

the 2015 Best of the Net Anthology, and another was listed as a notable entry in *The Best American Essays 2014*. She has an MFA in creative nonfiction from Chatham University and lives in Las Vegas with her husband and son.

**Kim Idol** is a writer/instructor partial to dogs, guns and rock climbing. Her short stories have been published in *Danse Macabre*, *Portland Review*, *Toasted Cheese*, and *Dead Neon* and submitted to the Kulka Best American Voices anthology. She is currently at work on a collection of essays on chaos theory and detective fiction.

**Bruce Isaacson** was the first Poet Laureate of Clark County, Nevada—a community of two million souls. He earned degrees at Claremont McKenna, Dartmouth, and Brooklyn College, where he wrote a thesis for noted American poet Allen Ginsberg. He is known in New York as a surprise finalist in the inaugural Nuyorican Poetry Slam, and in L.A. as a poet in the Helena's-Largo-Hollywood Review readings featuring film & entertainment celebrities as poets. In San Francisco, he was a coordinator of the Cafe Babar reading, an infamous free-for-all that was part of the 1980s San Francisco Spoken Word resurgence. He is publisher of Zeitgeist Press, with over 100 poetry titles to date, and has lived in Michoacán, Mexico, New York City, Los Angeles, Berkeley-San Francisco, and Leningrad, Russia. He lives today in Las Vegas, Nevada.

**Margie Klein** has been a resident of Southern Nevada for 23 years and have worked in the environmental field for almost as long. She began her career by inspecting outdoor environments and retired doing environmental education. Her writing experience stretches from a natural history blog on DesertUSA (Discovering Southern Nevada) to technical articles in trade magazines and also some poetry and prose published in books and literary journals. Most of her writing is about the desert locale.

**Stephanie Kutner** holds an MFA in fiction from Emerson College and a BA from UNLV. She adjuncts at the College of Southern Nevada and as a result, also works at a call center, though the highlight of her career was working as Jacquelyn Mitchard's assistant. Her writing has appeared in the *Huffington Post* and *The Culture-ist*, among other places and her latest essay is forthcoming in *Kiweli Journal's* spring issue.

**Heather Lang Cassera** holds an MFA in Poetry with a Certificate in Literary Translation. In 2017 she was named Las Vegas' Best Local Writer or Poet by the readers of KNPR's *Desert Companion*. Her poems have been published by or are forthcoming with *The Normal School*, *North*

*American Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and other literary journals, and have been on exhibit in the Nevada Humanities Program Gallery. Heather curated *Legs of Tumbleweeds, Wings of Lace, an anthology of literature by Nevada women*, funded by the Nevada Arts Council and National Endowment for the Arts. She serves as World Literature Editor and book reviewer for *The Literary Review*, Faculty Advisor for *300 Days of Sun*, and Co-Publisher for Tolsun Books. At Nevada State College, Heather teaches Asian Literature, Composition, World Literature, and more.  
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**A.R. Martin**, a Vegas local, writes poetry and short fiction. Her work has appeared in *Hothouse Literary Journal* and *Echo Literary Magazine*, both publications at her alma mater the University of Texas at Austin, and *Yés, Poetry*.

**Megan Merchant** graduated from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas after completing my M.F.A degree in poetry. Her poems and translations have appeared in publications including the *Atlanta Review*, *Kennesaw Review*, *Margie*, *International Poetry Review* and *The Poetry of Yoga*. She was the winner of the Las Vegas Poets Prize, judged by Tony Hoagland. Her first children's book, *These Words I've Shaped For You*, will be released in 2016 through Philomel Books. After living in Las Vegas for twelve years, she recently moved to Prescott, Arizona, where she spends her days writing, volunteering at a community school, chasing around two adorable, curious sons, and living a hilarious, messy life of deep meaning.

**Svetlana Larionova Miller** is a native of Moscow, Russia, and has lived in the United States since 1997. She is a linguist (teacher, translator, writer) and an artist. She lives in Henderson, Nevada, with her husband and their 17 year-old son. Her illustrations have appeared in *Vegas Seven*, *Las Vegas Family* and *OC Family* magazines, as well as in the 2015 short story collection *Decemberlands*.

**Charlene Stegman Moskal** lives and writes in Las Vegas, Nevada where she is part of a vibrant, multi-faceted arts community For three decades She has taught visual arts, theater and speech in the Southern-most city in the U.S., Brownsville, Texas. Through many arts incarnations she has been a visual artist, actor/director, and always, a writer. Her writing has been published in numerous anthologies, magazines, e-zines, and most recently, *The Esthetic Apostle*, *Multibilis*, *Dash*, *Chaleur Journal*, and *The Raven's Perch*. Zeitgeist Press has recently published her poetry chapbook *One Bare Foot*.

**Joshua Musicant** is an artist, educator, entrepreneur, and gentleman adventurer exiled in the fine city of Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. Working in various incarnations, multidisciplinary, and multimodal outlets such as poetry, prose, photography, video, performance, and innovation, his work has been featured at North Las Vegas City Hall, Nevada, the Studio City Library, Burbank, California, in the Gambler magazine, and beyond!

**Guilliean Pacheco** is a short fiction author, creativity concierge, and empress of *City of Writers*, a digital literary journal. She has an M.F.A. in Writing from the University of San Francisco. She's a misplaced California girl who lives in Las Vegas normally if one could call living there normal. Tag along with her storytelling adventures at [gpacheco.org](http://gpacheco.org) or follow her on Twitter @reginaverba.

**Jennifer Patino** has been writing poetry and short stories since she was six years old. She has work featured in *FONT Magazine*, *Door is Ajar*, *Half Mystic Journal*, *L'Éphémère Review*, *The Ginger Collect*, and elsewhere. She currently resides in Las Vegas with her artist husband.

**George Perreault** has received awards from the Nevada Arts Council, the Washington Poets Association, the International Dancing Poetry Festival, the McCabe Poetry Prize, and the Fischer Prize in Poetry. He has served as a visiting writer in New Mexico, Montana, and Utah, and his work has been nominated both for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Recent work appears in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Timberline Review*, *High Desert Journal*, and *Weber – The Contemporary West*.

A native of New York who holds an MBA from UNLV, **Kathleen Wise Pugh** is a running coach, author and business owner in Washington, DC. In an effort to emerge from her own postpartum depression over 10 years ago, Kathy trained for a marathon during the summer in Las Vegas by running at 4am on the famed Strip where she collected material for her stories. Now a three-time Boston Marathon qualifier, she shares her passion for running and wellness through her More Than Miles Running Bootcamps for Women, her play and motivational talk, *Marathon Mama*, and in her new book, *More Than Miles: A Woman's Guide to Running for the Body, Mind and Sole*.

**Elizabeth Quiñones-Zaldaña** earned a B.A. in English from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her poetry has been published in *From Snowcaps to Desert Flats: An Anthology of Latino Writers in Nevada*; *Legs of Tumbleweeds*, *Wings of Lace: An Anthology of Literature by Nevada Women*; *Clark: Poetry*



*from Clark County, Nevada;* and *300 Days of Sun*. Her chapbook, *Bougainvillea*, is forthcoming from Tolsun Books. She lives in southern Nevada with her husband and three children.

Originally from Chicago, **Becky Robison** is a recent graduate of the Creative Writing MFA program at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her work has also appeared in *Paper Darts* and *PINBALL*.

**Andrew Romanelli** is a recipient of the John Oliver Simon poetry award and Steiner's New Voices poetry award. He is an Editor of *300 Days of Sun* and lives in Las Vegas where he is completing his BA in English and plans to pursue an MFA in poetry next fall.

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**Joan Robinson** graduated from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas with an MFA in creative writing. She teaches English at the College of Southern Nevada and leads poetry workshops in rural Nevada schools. Her work has recently appeared in the anthologies *Clark: Poetry from Clark County, Nevada*, and *Legs of Tumbleweeds, Wings of Lace*, as well as several journals including *Blacktop Passages*, *Helen*, *Fox Adoption*, *300 Days of Sun*, and *Interim*. When not writing, she enjoys creative wandering with her husband Gregory in the Mojave's vast spaces.

**Judy Salz**, a semi-retired physician, draws on her years of medical practice, patient encounters and life experiences for inspiration. Her short story "Mikey," published in *The Literary Nest*, won the 2015 fiction contest. Her stories, "Reunion" and "First" were published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*. "What Does Old Feel Like?" appeared in *MUSED – the BellaOnline Literary Review Magazine*. "Diaspora," will appear in the Fall 2015 edition of *Poetica* magazine. A native New Yorker, Judy now lives in Las Vegas enjoying the sunshine and lack of slush; the only thing missing is the beach. Visit her website at [www.judysalz.com](http://www.judysalz.com).

**Chelsea Sedoti** lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. Her short stories have been published in *Pantheon Magazine* and *BALLOONS Lit Journal*. When she's not writing, Chelsea spends her time rock climbing, baking and exploring the Mojave Desert.

**Todd Tivolazzi** is a screenwriter and novelist living in Washington, D.C. His debut thriller novel, *Looking Into The Sun: A Novel of the Syrian Conflict*, was published in February 2016. He adapted his novel for the screen and it is currently in pre-production. He has also gotten ten other short stories published in print and online magazines. He has a Bachelor's degree in History from the US Naval Academy (1998) and a Master's degree in International Relations from Norwich University (2009).

**Ingrid L. Taylor** is a speculative fiction writer, veterinarian, and animal rights advocate. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Red Rock Review*, *Dies Infaustus*, *Legs of Tumbleweed*, *Wings of Lace: An Anthology of Literature by Nevada Women*, *Gaia: Shadow and Breath, vol.3*, and others. She received a Playa Artist Residency in 2018, and she is currently completing a science fiction novel set in the Southwest. Follow her on Instagram @tildy\_bear for pictures of her animals and updates on her writing.

**Rosie Vargas** is a UNLV graduate. She currently lives and writes in Las Vegas. She's had work appear in *Polaris*.

**Sarah Verneti** lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. Her writing has appeared in *300 Days of Sun*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *Vending Machine Press*, and elsewhere. You can find her online @SarahVerneti.

**Autumn Widdoes** is a poet, writer, and theater artist. Her poetry has been published in journals such as *Magma*, *White Stag*, and *Helen*. She has shown performance work in NYC, SF, London, Las Vegas, Tampa, and Japan, and is a member of the performance collective *TASK* 沖繩. At one time in her life, she hosted a literary and performing arts series called New News, which she hopes to re-launch soon. Autumn received her MA in Performance Studies from NYU and her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is on the editorial staff of Interim Poetry and Poetics.

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