



THE SERAPHIC REVIEW

ISSUE 4 | MAY 2024

Editor's Note

Thank you, contributors, for your wonderful work! Our 'New Wings' submissions have been especially fulfilling to read, and we hope to keep receiving pieces from young, emerging creators.

This issue is our most prose-heavy till date. The creative nonfiction featured in this issue struck us with its ability to illustrate moment in time or a lifetime's story. Please continue sending them our way! As usual, the poetry has been lovely as well :)

Readers, we hope you enjoy these works as much as we did.

Sincerely,
Tanya Rastogi,
Editor-in-Chief

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Ken Johnson

Eating Tako-Wasabi as a Stranger Alone

Sometimes, you're somewhere else,
Somewhere new, on an adventure.
Far from the maddening mundanities
Of the daily grind.

In times like these, I view myself as a fish,
Or some other kind of aquatic creature at least.
One that's smart, fast, daring
and curious.

The kind that reaches out into the great
unknown to grasp at something intangible,
there yet not. Something that licks your
fingertips with volts of static kisses.

I coil and envelop myself in this new life,
pulling it towards me and exploring it fully.
New place, new town, new time, new tongue.
New me.

Sometimes, this change affects me
in unexpected ways. Changing my outlook,
coloring the distant hills with rainbows,
dinosaurs, and King Kong.

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Sometimes, it leads me to new waters,
New trenches that I can fall down,
shipwrecks that can be witnessed
And avoided.

But sometimes you're just simply alone.
Lost in open ocean
(A liquid desert)
—with no sign of shore.

In these depths,
nothing is clear, and everything blends together.
One moment dodging a school of fish, the other in a strange city of a
faraway place.

Sometimes striving;
often just surviving.
Always with the threat of being
swept away from the sea floor.

To be served on a plate
With no lips,
no taste and no ties
—Wiggling to escape.

As the one eating you feels
only the burn of the wasabi as they
chew the gummy-brain-like limbs
Of another of their kind.

Ken Johnson is a new
author from Ontario,
Canada. He has spent the last
decade perfecting his karaoke
skills, working odd jobs
worldwide, and collecting
stories.

Todd Sullivan

The Factory

Deriving worlds from the ether
Do not well pay the bills
When roofs and walls are under threat
A job you must fulfill

Searching streams in digital realms
What can creatives bear
But stomach growls have grown so loud
A circle will fit a square

Dressing in matching suit and tie
Loafers pounding concrete
To a factory you arrive
The journey now complete

In the office, you greet the boss
“Please will you hire me?”
From out the desk, a contract shown,
“Take this and we will see.”

With bright red pen you sign your name
The boss then clears his throat,
“You’re not quite right, but soon will be.”
This promise he invoked

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He dons a cap and surgical gown
Long gloves and a face mask
He leads you to a room of steel
“Training, that’s your first task.”

You see a table stretched out flat
Beside it, tray and tools
“Now stretch right out and don’t you fret
The procedure’s in the rules.”

He gives a shot that numbs you out
And grabs a carving knife
He wildly cuts, and you cry out,
“Please just don’t take my life.”

Your leg removed, and he reveals
New limb of chrome and steel
“A modification,
Rest assured, it’s really no big deal.”

Metal attached, next chops your arm
While you take in the scene
As bit by bit, you are replaced
From flesh into machine

When all is done, repairs complete
From head to toe you’ve changed
Except inside, there is your brain
It could not be exchanged

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"Now you will work, from dawn till dusk
A circle crammed in a square
You'll fit right in, a perfect match
Now please, just don't despair."

And so you toil, without a rest
And if you slow your pace
The boss will jab a button there
To keep you in the race

Todd Sullivan teaches English as a Second Language in South Korea. His fiction, poetry, and non-fiction have been published internationally. He was listed on the preliminary ballot for the Bram Stoker's Awards in 2018, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for poetry and fiction in 2023. He currently has two book series through indie publishers in America. He wrote for a Taipei play and web series that focused upon African narratives. He founded the online publication, Samjoko Magazine, in 2021, and hosts a YouTube Channel that interviews writers across the publishing spectrum.

Zefiro Macera

Hiraeth

After it was all over, the sky slowly wept crimson tears. Over the course of one night, this redness had sprouted from the heavens. Creeping across the atmosphere and sinking into the sea. A beautiful sight- some might say it was. Entrancing reds that reflected off each building and stream. At first people stared up in wonder, but soon enough there was an uproar in trepidation.

Donny was one to admire such sceneries. Always dressed neatly, he revisited the same place every day. He sat for hours on the bench that overlooked the beach just outside of the city, watching, almost anticipating something more to happen. He may have even had a slight smile on his face; eyes absorbing the world tinged red. Most who knew him had no desire to approach. They found him sort of a madman; rambling on to the open air and shuffling around whilst wringing his hands. Who would sit and smile at the crumbling world all on their lonesome anyways?

“You know the world is ending, Donny.” A soothing voice said over his shoulder. Donny was lounging at his usual bench gazing wistfully at the shore.

“And what a hue it makes! A scene my good friend loves to admire. You see it too, don’t you, Lucius? You agree, how brilliant this world can be.” Donny spoke without peeling his eyes from their fixated place.

Lucius Eiran was the only person who seemed to willingly seek out Donny. Perhaps, it was due to their similar peculiarities. Both possessed a lanky figure and a far off look in their glazed eyes. Lucius spoke calmly no matter the situation. Even with havoc polluting the minds of civilians, they remained the same. > > >

"The ocean bleeds more each day. Why not come walk with me instead?"

"Oh, but the trees are so beautiful today. I'd like to stay right here."

"Those trees are dying, Donny."

"Not in the slightest! It was just the other week they were so green and ripe! Me and Jerimoth love to sit here and just watch. It's our favorite spot, you know." Lucius smiled down at him, eyes crinkling in a blush, admiring the back of his head. They strode off down the road, hands in pockets, leaving Donny to the rushing sound of the heavy waters.

The next days consisted of the same routine. Donny dawdled around the city streets, prattling off to the air until he reached the shore. Lucius abided close by, often bringing snacks and the like. Offering them like precious treasure with cold, shaking hands. The skies were smothered with wine spilling more by the day. Confused masses lashed out in desperate hunger for regularity. In midst of this bedlam, Donny tarried in euphoric detachment.

"I ate sandwiches here. Every weekend we would come down and have our lunch. I had peanut butter and banana, but he would always have ham and cheese. We just sat and ate like that! And the view has not changed nor felt different in my heart. Jerimoth loves the sea as much as I." Donny rambled, throwing his hands up, beaming from ear to ear.

"You haven't seen the skies for a while."

"But of course I have! I watch them every day."

"And you're happy with what you see?"

"I see brilliant things, Lucius. So brilliant I never want to leave."

--

"But don't you want to walk with me? We should leave now, together. Everyone is fleeing. The skies are so overcast no one can see anymore." >>>

“That’s all nonsense. This has always been the brightest city- we’re known for it! Everyone loves living here, and we couldn’t be any more content.”

Lucius flashed a soft smile- behind his head as always. Donny failed to see all the stars that danced in their eyes. Donny failed to see the tremble in their hands and the red growing across their face. Donny did not recognize the tenebrous clouds that wrung out scarlet desolation down from the skies and into their shallow breath. Yet, both looked out at the crimson sea, while screams echoed in the maze of buildings towering behind them.

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The day came, when all the blood had been spilt, and the people lacerated their own flesh. Lucius did not go out to see Donny that day. The world was cut open and torn asunder, and Lucius lay in bed unable to emerge. This time, Donny’s delirious sauntering led him to the house where they lay. He wandered in the dark room expecting a warm greeting, but instead was met with closed eyelids and a slight smile. The stars in their eyes would not meet, as Lucius was enshrouded in an ashen hue. Cold breath constricted by the virus that went untreated, unnoticed by a soul. Something like *deja vu* sprung up in Donny, crashing his knees to the floor and his hands to his face. Illuminated by the crimson ether, Lucius almost captured life in their cheeks again, still exquisitely alluring in that final rest. Donny cried out in utter agony, regret coursing through his blood and pounding in his ears. At the piercing sound of his wails, the heavens opened up in beams of blinding white. Red began to drain away from the light, dripping down into the funnel of Donny’s skyward cries. Blazing azure returned itself to the earth, as if Lucifer fell from heaven and into the mouth of remorse. How could he be so blind? So blind to the crimson that crept inside and stained his mind in the hiraeth of an old friend.

Zefiro Macera is a student at Keene State College and the head editor for the school's literary journal, Bricowlage. His favorite genres to write are fiction, surrealism, and psychological fiction. Authors that have inspired him are Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, and J.D. Salinger. When he is not reading or writing, he can often be found exploring the wilderness.

Will Boucher

Snap Decision

Ma barged through the door, promising astonishment, yelling over Saturday cartoons, demanding we *stop being couch potatoes*, willing us into motion like a fanatic aircraft marshaller—little Ty and I side-eyed each other, both of us young and weary of grandeur, two bodies, one mind: *fifteen minutes 'til our favorite show?...why not see what the fuss is about...*

She giddily golf clapped as we slid off the couch, *Get your shoes and get in the car!*—we blinked in the sun and wondered what had her so worked up—the prickle of her latest effervescence always displeased me, like a stubborn hair in my mouth—we got in the car, *It came back!*, her knees bounced with adolescent glee, she threw it in drive, drove for thirty seconds and stopped, our little road was gridlocked, a dozen cars flashing hazards—Ma put it in park and leaned over grabbing a bushel of carrots from the passenger glove compartment, I recoiled as tepid carrot water dripped on my thigh.

Ma's knees clicked as she walked, the carrots book-like under her armpit; little Ty and I jogged to keep up—there was a crowd encircling something on the road, we heard laughter and guffaws, we saw our neighbors nursing cheap beers—Ma reached the circle and forced some space, she turned, flashing her toothy Cheshire and signaled us like taxis.

>>>

In the road was a massive snapping turtle, feisty and ancient, on guard with a wrinkly neck stretched to an absurd maximum, its mouth dumbly open, boasting a wormy tongue and hooked beak, eyes fixed on nothing—Sam, our day buzzed neighbor, nodded at me, he held a limp hotdog and approached the turtle, he got on his haunches and wriggled it near the turtle's beak, *ooh la la!*—the turtle snapped down, the crowd hollered, hoisting their beers in a toast, Sam skittered back giggling.

The turtle stood valiantly, smooshed strands of pig bits festooning its maw with pinkish stubble; a camera flashed, a car honked, the crowd flipped 'em off, jeering in unison— Ma gave us each a slimy carrot and pushed us forward, *Look at my little gladiators!*— the crowd wooed and chanted *Billy and Ty! Billy and Ty! Billy and Ty!*—

We were too young to have watches, but when I looked at little Ty, the sadness on his face told me we were missing our cartoon.

Will Boucher is a composer and writer. He came to writing late in life and is thrilled to report he has no idea what he's doing. He is fascinated by struggle, failure, and persistence. His writing has yet to be published, but his music is performed worldwide. Currently, he works in a crisis call center and self-publishes on his Substack: Heavy is the Headset.

Fabrice Poussin

What Worlds He Chose

An old film played at unruly speed
scratches and spots raced upon the silver
images of a man who no longer changed
a strange statue so still it seemed a death.

Yet the eyes still glimmered in the dark
reflection of distant lights so long extinct
there was life in the shell of a man
monochrome but for a flickering candle.

He stared at the night heavens
as he contemplated the sterile sheet
scribbled with languages so foreign
he understood little of his ancient thoughts.

Syllables of eternal fancies floated
within his wrinkled soul as they ventured
shamelessly onto the unwilling page
to whisper words across time and space.

Silent for the moment searching
all he needed was the energy of magic
to invent a single word so he may be known
if of but one soul yet unaware.

Fabrice Poussin is a professor of French and World Literature. His work in poetry and photography has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and hundreds of other publications worldwide. Most recently, his collections *In Absentia*, and *If I Had a Gun, Half Past Life* were published in 2021, 2022, and 2023 by Silver Bow Publishing.

Noel Munguia-Moreno

I Can't Say 'Best Friend' Anymore

Perhaps we were fractured prior to meeting
and the road chipped at the edge of us, waiting
for exoneration, quiet slipping from the knot
tied from unfeeling skin, we lazed in unjust
asphyxia, our own hands on our throats,

you, I: plain abstractions, unknowing forms
of salt and filth, no honorific apart from Judas,
no acquittal in your court. You stay abuzz with
damning song sang to blind sponsors, I still am
acidic vapor oxidizing parts of my frail and still

core. What do I do with your title? Can it be given
a new home, can another body hold the weight we
built on it, or will it be better to leave it to grow
opaque? Were we ripped apart by jackal jaw axe
or did we just fizzle?

I wake in moon-soaked room and become
anguished for my car keys, for engine spark
and axel roar on hollow roadways, I yearn for quick
blaze in January snow piles lining black veins of once-ours
suburb, here in wild fury I find you once again.

>>>

When you severed us, the valley split in two: prohibited and routine. Streets became unpassable, no exit, and I was not keen on jetting through our memory-speckled highway lattice, I strung pearls on my rearview to bring the ocean and more and more people question the milky pendulum but not the razor.

This came to end, and now I haven't a clue as to how I will face those we once knew; will I see a thing of knowing behind eyes of judgement? Please be gentle. Give me time to equip myself in this maze of melting wax if not, should I stay in one place and suffocate?

You are unseen, you full of zeal, you the path, you the heart jab, you the ghost, you the vulture, you the hearth, you the dark dance, you the cascade, you the wound, you the hellbox, you the glory, you the qualm, you who heard my restless beats on your door and froze me out anyway.

You still own that thing individuals call this body by, soon I will liquify and conjunct into indistinct blizzard to coax stagnant dirt to absorb my body and spill my distraught form into our last pumpkin patch so I may finally rot.

>>>

Speak. Weep. I've carried out my half of it. Do you remember
the promise we swore on the star set to dip? We claimed to persist
tethered through our jagged lives, to be ubiquitous, I promised to be
there to cover you from buzzards and offer foxglove if you so desired,
however, I failed to promise to stop myself from saying I miss you,

for that was the point of it all. To know there was a piece absent from
the whole (another word for us) then to fix it, to patch the leak before the
jackknife split the image, now I see it was built from paper and we never
meant to triumph for your palm sent the spike. There was constant
assurance

the quartz ought to persevere, though I chose not to see the brittle cracks.

Eve

We are drumbeats. Cerulean feathers we hold between teeth to show the moon where to land. We will weep her sisters, the stars, from eyes who know of creation. We will strike the loam with wrists we've plated in gold to roll the planet once again, to thaw the winter and kiss primavera, the rivers will know to delta the green horizon while we shimmer ayoyote on our ankles to guide the tears into the disappearing dark, hear the panthers, black with waiting, scrape upon the wood and grab your family who have never known language except dance and hold them in the gloam, let your hips and collars tell a story of memory and forgotten, dress in galena spit from the churning mantle until the moon thanks you and becomes a white rose and stay there and brew sugar cane and anise stars.

And again, the sun.

Noel Munguia-Moreno is a writer and poet from West Valley City, Utah, who writes of heritage and the land, and how the line blurs between here and there. His writing can be found in Sequoia Speaks Press, In Parentheses Magazine, and Sanctuary Magazine, among others. He has been awarded a Juliett Gibson Prize in Poetic Excellence and has been nominated for an Association of Writers & Writing Programs' Intro Prize in Poetry.

Anne Mikusinski

The Concert

At first, there's
Silence.

Then
Loops and whorls of sound
Fill up the room
Rising and falling
Feeding on all emotion and
Anticipation
Of the waiting crowd
A flash and flood of light
Reveal
The players, at their places
Settled into
Tonight's temporary home
And for a while
No outside world exists
Just words
And music
And connection
A fleeting smile
A brush of fingertips
Or brief clasp of hands
There's a middle, then an end
A mournful keyboard fades
Into a last goodbye
A quick embrace exchanged
And then
Silence.

Anne Mikusinski has always been in love with words. She's been writing poems and short stories since she was seven. Her influences range from Robert Frost and Dylan Thomas to David Byrne and Nick Cave. She hopes that one day, some of her writing will impress others the way these writers have had an impact on her.

CJ Anderson-Wu

Grandpa Fu's Suitcase

Following Grandpa Fu's funeral, his children took the necessary steps to prepare the house for sale, because none of his three children lived in Taiwan. Relatives were invited to inspect his belongings, including a desk, two chairs, a bookshelf filled with books, and a pair of leather shoes that he had only worn a handful of times. In addition, a few inexpensive trinkets from Grandpa Fu's collection were also given away.

They found that beneath Grandpa Fu's bed lay a suitcase made from genuine leather and sewn with sturdy thread. In the case, they discovered a meticulously crafted interior of durable fabric that concealed the leather seams. Nestled inside was a dark gray suit, untouched and never before seen on Grandpa. Though it was slightly mildewed, its delicate texture still could be appreciated by touch. Alongside the suit lay a first-aid kit, a water bottle, and a pack of dehydrated food that had expired around the time before Grandpa Fu fell ill. In addition, there were provisions for personal hygiene, including a toothbrush, a small tube of toothpaste, a clean towel, fresh underwear, and a pair of new socks.

Under everything else lay a photo of Grandpa Fu's parents. The image was so faded and brittle that it threatened to crumble at the slightest touch.

>>>

Obviously the suitcase was Grandpa Fu's preparation in case he had to embark on a hurried trip with very short notice. Grandpa Fu moved to Taiwan in 1949, he was a soldier first, then a refugee, then his prolonged exile made him one of the millions of the Chinese diaspora.

All the relatives witnessing the revelation of Grandpa Fu's secret suitcase were bewildered. Did he still believe he was going home to China? The dried food was still good a couple of years ago, Grandpa Fu wouldn't still expect to return after more than seventy years of the civil war. Grandpa Fu was never affected by dementia or delusion, his mind remained clear even his frail body betrayed his strong mind during his last days.

Grandpa Fu's eldest son Ming-Cheng carefully retrieved the pictures of his grandparents whom he had never met. He brought them to a photo development business for digital repair and ordered several copies of the digitally restored photos for his brother and sister, and his own children.

Ming-Cheng went to study in the US after completing his college education in Taiwan and fulfilling his mandatory military service. He pursued a degree in information technology because he was advised that this profession had the highest likelihood of providing opportunities for foreigners to settle down in the US. Following in his footsteps, Ming-Cheng's brother, Ming-Chih, also moved to the US several years later. Ming-Chih's expertise was in biotech and pharmacy, which were highly sought after in the US during the 1990s. Meanwhile, their younger sister, Ming-Jen, went to Japan, where she became an interpreter of Chinese-Japanese languages for diplomats. >>>

The three siblings hardly had any chance to reunite, they usually took turns to visit their parents in Taiwan. Even though both of the brothers were living in the US, one was in Chicago, another in San Francisco, they also rarely met. After their mother's passing, the siblings hired a caretaker to prepare meals for Grandpa Fu and ensured he received medical attention and renewed his prescription medications. Ming-Cheng was aware that he and his siblings faced criticism for being absent during their parents' old age and illness. However, in their fifties, their careers were demanding, making it extremely challenging for them to take time off from their jobs..

Around twenty years ago, Ming-Chih was offered a position in a prestigious institute of research and development in Taiwan, when Taiwan's government was investing in the rising industry of life science. Ming-Chih had seriously considered moving back to Taiwan with his family, but Grandpa Fu was against it. He told Ming-Chih the education in the US was better for his children.

Ming-Jen took their father's suit to a dry cleaning service as she planned to bring it with her to Japan, wanting to keep it as a lasting memory of her father. Why did their family members end up so far apart from each other? Upon reflecting on their situation Ming-Cheng realized that his family was just one among many in Taiwan whose members had dispersed. They had spent limited time with their parents during their adult lives, and their children had little knowledge of their grandparents.

While the three siblings were asking around which columbarium they should shrine their parents' ashes, a relative told them they should bring it to the US. "Taiwan might be at war soon. It's safer to bring it with you." >>>

As Ming-Cheng touched the meticulously crafted leather suitcase, a sudden realization struck him—they had never truly escaped their identity as refugees. It was Grandpa Fu's decision that all his children should leave Taiwan as soon as they reached adulthood, recognizing the ongoing threat of war looming across the strait. Now, memories resurfaced of his father obtaining his first car through loans when they were teenagers. One thing that puzzled him was his father's habit of keeping a full tank of gasoline, even after a short ride that barely consumed a quarter of it.

Grandpa Fu was constantly prepared for the possibility of being on the run once more. The experience of fleeing from China to Taiwan had surely left deep scars of trauma within him, and he wanted to ensure his family would be better equipped if a similar situation arose. However, on such a small island, where could they possibly escape to? Naturally, he made the decision to send his children away to places he deemed least likely to be engulfed in war.

Although Ming-Cheng and Ming-Chih had scholarships or tuition-free for their graduate studies in the US, it was still very challenging for his parents to support their lives in the very expensive US. Their father worked as a middle level public employer and their mother earned some income by a home assembly for small toy manufacturers. They lived in a very cramped apartment, almost never traveled, and hardly dined out. Every penny they earned, they saved for their children's studies overseas. During the summers they used the air-conditioner sparingly, and as the old apartment really needed remodeling, they repaired everything with their own hands. When a high-rise building was constructed next to their humble dwelling, they considered it a blessing as it provided cooler summers. >>>

When their children started working and began to have savings, they offered choices that they could buy a newer apartment or have their apartment remodeled, but Grandpa Fu told them they should invest the money into the education of their children, instead of on the living of two old people since there wouldn't be many years left for them. Ming-Cheng assumed that it was difficult for older people to make big changes.

Even in his old age, Grandpa Fu still had the nightmares of fleeing from war. The water bottle, the dried food, and the fine suit he packed in his suitcase were for a dignified escape. But where could he run to? Ming-Cheng looked around the place their parents spent five or six decades of their lives, thinking almost nothing but to provide their children and grandchildren safety and peace. He recalled the inquiries he received from colleagues and neighbors in Chicago, questioning the safety of traveling to Taiwan due to escalating tensions across the strait. It dawned on him that, throughout their lives, they had never truly shed their refugee identity.

It must be tough to be on the run all his father's life, Ming-Cheng thought. When could they stop fleeing? Ming-Cheng seriously considered the idea that perhaps he and his brother and sister should maintain this apartment, and when he retired he could move back; if war did not happen.

C J. Anderson-Wu (吳介禎) is a Taiwanese writer who has published two collections about Taiwan's military dictatorship: "Impossible to Swallow" and "The Surveillance". Currently she is working on her third book "Endangered Youth—to Hong Kong." Her short stories have been shortlisted for a number of international literary awards, including the Art of Unity Creative Award by the International Human Rights Art Festival. She also won the Strands Lit International Flash Fiction Competition, the Invisible City Blurred Genre Literature Competition and the Wordweavers Literature Contest.

MaxieJane Frazier

Tuna Casserole and Me

You didn't know I would hate my name. You brushed off my anger: childish tantrums. But my fury burned white and hot, flaring when someone said "Martha."

I was ten years old and, on the chairlift overhead, the other family's kids shrieked "Martha Bertha Vice-a-Versa." I wanted to die. If only my flaming face could've melted a hole into the ski run. I would have jumped from any height and let myself wash away to some underground ice cave. Waiting there, my flame would've burned me free.

In college, a hip hairdresser said, "You look like a Max to me." Like the tumblers of a lock, my childhood Tonka trucks hauling toy horse trailers along with my apathy for fashion and lipstick lined up behind this name. A name with enough spark to make my femininity unique.

You wouldn't, then you couldn't, manage to call me by my nickname. I saw disrespect. You said, "That's silly."

Three decades later, sitting across from me at Denny's, you told me the story of a widower and a wall of books. I wasn't named after her, you said, but you always liked that my grandmother's best friend had the same name. I almost heard the rustle when a tentative truce tried to reconcile me to your choices.

You think it's a beautiful name. You also love tuna casserole. Sometimes we agree to disagree.

MaxieJane Frazier is a writer, teacher, editor, and retired military veteran from Riverside, WA.

Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in Cleaver Magazine, Booth, SoFloPoJo, Scribes*MICRO*Fiction, Bending Genres, The Ekphrastic Review, The Bath Flash Fiction anthology, and other places. MaxieJane holds an MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars and co-founded Birch Bark Editing where she is a co-editor for MicroLit Almanac

Peycho Kanev

In My Mind

The night over my long forgotten hometown
is the night over every town everywhere.

I used to count my lovely sheep in a half-sleep
but not anymore, now I know that every speech after midnight develops
a Kafkaesque feeling combined with the surreal technique of a man
suffering from insomnia.

But during the day the sky hits the horizon with
its prayers, roosters proclaim the new sun, hidden behind marble clouds.

And the light grabs and holds of everything that still keeps
a little bit of the night's shade.

In the ragged buildings of the brothels leaky radiators have
more ribs than the starving kids on the dusty streets,

the air smells of rust and forgotten baths and a short-lived sleep
and at the end the night comes again, squeezing the last bright molecules
from the daylight.

The daytime is a deceiver, the music stops too suddenly
and the trains depart from somewhere just to end up in the middle of
nowhere.

Peycho Kanev is the author of 12 poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the USA and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as: Rattle, Poetry Quarterly, Evergreen Review, Front Porch Review, Hawaii Review, Barrow Street, Sheepshead Review, Off the Coast, The Adirondack Review, Sierra Nevada Review, The Cleveland Review and many others. His new book of poetry titled A Fake Memoir was published in 2022 by Cyberwit press.

Subramani Mani

Love Letter and the Skeleton

We were sitting around a table by a large window on the second floor of a well-appointed vegan restaurant. My son and I had window seating, his girlfriend sat beside him, and my wife was by my side on the right. The waiter brought a circular cake studded with nuts and dry fruits as toppings, and a fruity aroma filled the air. On top stood the number thirty with a shine like a neon sign, in blue and pink, made of glazed sugar. I looked across and saw my son's widened pupils reflecting the number thirty. My wife and I were getting ready to cut the cake, holding the knife together, when my son turned towards me and asked: *dad, so what is the real story behind your thirty-year marriage?* Well, I started slowly, glancing towards my wife and back to my son—you were born three years after we got married; you are privy to most of our life, starting with your earliest memories, I guess from the age of four or five. What I am going to narrate is a peripheral story which started many years before you were born, and exactly seventeen years before I met your mom. You know, sometimes the peripheral, like a cover or a border defines and holds the form and the content; if you remove the peripheral layer, the shape of the object will become distorted and it won't retain its properties. Think of it like a circle with the center marked as a dot. If the circular outline goes, only the dot will remain. And I continued with the story.

When I was seven my uncle took me to a magic show. I am unable to recall the name of the magician after six decades. I remember well that he was wearing a splashy silk dress and a tall black hat.

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He had a *magic wand* in one hand and would talk intermittently in bursts in an animated manner while using the wand, sometimes making circles in the air or shaking it for emphasis. At intervals he would perform some tricks. The hall was packed with children of all ages and their parents. Everyone was squealing with laughter, nodding their heads in approval and clapping. Periodically, the hall would fall silent while tension and anticipation built up. It was soon followed by gasps of wonder and amazement.

Near the end of the show the magician took off his hat again, turned it upside down and put it back on his head. Then he called for a volunteer. The kids near me nudged me; hesitantly and shyly I stood up. The magician called out to me to come up to the podium. He instructed me to close my eyes and silently make a wish. He then took off his hat and pulled out a bag of candy and gave it to me. Everybody clapped. Putting his hat back, he pointed to a group of adolescent girls in front and asked one of them to come up. A girl in a green frock with yellow borders, who looked twelve or thirteen, mounted the stage and closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes, the magician pulled out a pink bra and handed it to her. She flexed her elbows and flapped her wrists like a bird as she walked towards her seat and her face wore an embarrassed look. Everybody else including her friends clapped and roared with laughter.

A young man seated in the front row made a loud taunting comment—*You could have easily hidden these two items in the hat!* The magician was not amused. He invited the guy to come up to the stage, removed the hat and showed him that there was nothing inside. The magician then put the hat back on his head and asked the guy to close his eyes for a minute and hope for the best.

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When he opened his eyes, the magician took off his hat slowly as if it had gained weight, put it on the table, shook his head, and waved the wand over it, sketching three elaborate circles. The magician then peered inside, and sporting a scared look, slowly pulled out a small human skeleton, probably that of a young child. Seeing the skeleton, the guy jumped backwards looking pale with a frightened expression on his face. He almost fell off the stage. He returned to his seat breathing heavily and sat silently with a sullen and deflated look on his face. The hall became quiet, and then everyone started clapping. I sat frozen in the chair for the rest of the show, too scared to move.

Later, whenever I saw the danger symbol, a skull and two long bones placed underneath in the shape of an “X”, I would start sweating and my heart would race. Even the sight of a dinosaur skeleton in the museum of natural history sent a shiver down my spine. Finally, I came face to face with the human skeleton in all its glorious and gory details in medical school at the age of seventeen.

The first year of medical school was challenging in various ways for most of us still navigating our teen years. But it also broadened our worldview, opening our eyes to the mysteries of the human body, from the anatomical, physiological, and biochemical perspectives. The breeze of freedom prevailing in the medical school campus atmosphere also influenced our personal lives, thinking, and outlook. I noticed romantic feelings budding in some of my classmates. The bug soon caught up with me also, and I developed a crush towards a classmate of mine, a girl of seventeen. One day after watching a Bollywood movie starring Nutan I scribbled the following love note on a piece of paper, folded it twice, and handed it to her after class telling her—*Read it in the comfort of your home, not right here in front of me.* It happened on a late Friday afternoon.

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“You remind me of Nutan; I can see complex emotions gather and move across your beautiful face like light and dark clouds transforming the face of the setting Sun. Your smile resembles the pensive and mystic expressiveness of the mythical Mona Lisa. Can we take a walk through the campus and talk more about our interests and life in general. I want to know more about you as a person.”

Monday morning, during class, I observed her face closely from a few feet away for any signal as a response to my note. Her face seemed calm, focused on the lecture and the instructor.

After class she came and chatted with me as usual as if nothing was amiss. I invited her home and she agreed to come the following week. In those days you met your classmates and friends in class, hallways, the library or the coffee shops and restaurants on campus. If you shared a subdivision or locality, you could meet your class friends nearer home. If you lived in the dorm or the hostel you could easily meet up with your dorm and hostel friends there. In my class of about two hundred students only a handful of households had a telephone. Folks just dropped in unannounced at the homes of friends to meet up. That was the norm in those days.

My mind was opening up and getting pulled in multiple directions. Apart from learning medicine I was drawn into a discussion club which met frequently to discuss national and international events, the inequalities and injustices in society, and the human condition in general. A distinguished speaker and literary critic had arrived in the city from Calcutta. I was fascinated by his powerful, intense, and involved discussions on various topics which I attended throughout the week. I also missed some regular medicine classes due to this foray into club activities. When I got home late one evening my mom told me that three classmates had come looking for me and she had served them tea and snacks. >>>

That weekend I sat down at my desk to study anatomy. I pulled out the Gray's anatomy textbook from the nearby shelf. A folded sheet of paper which looked like a large bookmark caught my attention. My heart began racing, I felt sweaty and my arms started to flail, shiver, and fumble. I quickly put the book on the table, opened it to the page with the marker and unfolded the note. My love letter to her had been returned neatly folded as before along the same creases, without any addendum or markings, an unresponsive response, an understated or even overstated rebuff. My gaze latched on to the open centerfold of the book. A human skeleton, eyes gouged out, was staring frontally at me. There was an explicit smirk in the form of a wicked smile, composed and configured by the gaping hole between the maxilla and the mandible, a far cry from the *Mona Lisa*.

Cease and desist, my neurons fired. We remained friends and there was no mention of the note. Over the next few years many of my classmates fell in love, got engaged, married. For the next *seventeen* years I never mustered up the courage to write another note. Any feelings were quickly smothered by the thoughts and memories of the skeleton and skull etched in my mind.

I would look at a girl and start thinking—she is cute, isn't she? I would then let my gaze linger for a few seconds. Her skin would peel off first and then the underlying muscles. It was as if someone was performing a macabre dissection. And suddenly only her skeleton will be visible and the surrounding world would darken.

There had been talk of finding a suitable girl for me in my house from time to time. Whenever my mom brought up the topic I would step out of the room, or even get away from the house as the situation demanded, to prevent getting sucked into the dialogue.

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I also still kept my hopes of one day falling in love, but the image of the skull and skeleton serving as the screensaver for my brain somehow prevented me from taking even baby steps in that direction. Over time most of my classmates and friends got married and the pressure to get yoked and settle down gradually increased. One day my mom cornered me, sat me down and asked, *do you have anyone in mind? If so, let me know. I am getting many inquiries from parents of potential brides. Remember, your thirty-fourth birthday is coming up.* I said, *Mom, alright, just relax; give me a couple of days to think everything over.*

That night I lay wide awake in bed ruminating over the things mom had told earlier. Suddenly I was transported to the huge anatomy hall in our school campus. About a dozen skeletons were propped up on pedestals and spaced apart, each surrounded by eight to ten students trying to make sense of human skeletal anatomy. Animated conversations and discussions about various bones and their structural features were happening around almost all of the skeletons. In one corner stood a solitary skeleton set further apart from the others. While all the others were well illuminated by artificial light, the corner skeleton came to life, lit by moonlight from a large skylight above. I peered through the sky window and saw a giant full moon illuminating a cloudless but uniformly dark sky. Closer to the moon I couldn't make out any stars but they gradually became visible in the peripheral sky. It seemed the rays of the big moon coupled with the breeze from the ceiling fan above had choreographed a sad dance performance for the lonely skeleton. It was swaying in slow motion like a long pendulum with multiple joints.

A boy and a girl were standing near that skeleton. The boy looked like an earlier version of me at seventeen or eighteen years.

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The teenage girl whose face I could not see well craned her neck towards the boy's face and began telling something in hushed tones. I became curious and moved closer behind the girl.

Girl: She had warned him not to pursue her; never to write to her again.

Boy: I agree, he should not have written again. But then love is strange and reckless; nobody has defined it adequately; artists have time and again tried and failed to draw and paint it in all its beauty, joy, pain, and sadness; it is really sad. Maybe love is like water; it takes the shape of the container it is poured into, and finds a level of its own.

Girl: All I know is that it can be felt; it cannot be expressed to the satisfaction of anybody else.

Boy: That seems probably right, you little wizard. Girls seem to have a better grasp of these things. Love, pain, and memory look to me like vertices of a triangle. They are interconnected and triangulated; one gets transformed into another seamlessly. Pain and memory ultimately remain as residues like white powder after a chemistry experiment.

Two things started happening in unison. The boy's face turned pale and the skeleton which had been swaying slowly started moving its arms and legs like a tall, elongated and animated puppet in a puppet show. I couldn't hear any skeletal voice. It was also not clear to me if the skeleton was trying to communicate and tell its version of the tale.

Girl: On full moon nights the skeleton performs a puppet show at midnight. Love sure does strange things.

She moved closer and whispered into his ear.

Girl: This is that lovelorn boy's skeleton!

Boy: (Letting out a mild shriek) Oh, my skeleton.

Girl: Before they signed off on sending her to medical school, her parents made it perfectly clear to her— "We will find a suitable match for you when the time comes. Focus on your studies, absolutely no hocus-pocus with boys."

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Boy: But how did he end up as a skeleton? I still don't get it.

Girl: That is a big mystery. This is what I heard. His parents went on vacation and when they got back, he was missing from home. After a frantic search they found his skeleton in his closet. The parents donated the skeleton to the medical school. They thought that is where a skeleton belongs.

Boy: That is so strange and scary!

Waking up in a daze I washed my face with cold water. Later, sitting at the breakfast table I said to my mom— *Yes, introduce me to one of the girls whose parents contacted you about me.* She looked taken aback, puzzled, and at once suddenly pleased. I spared her the details of the long night.

Looking into the eyes of the girl sitting across from me I chatted away for a long time. I was nervous initially, worried that I would see a skull or a skeleton instead of her face. When that did not happen, I was immensely relieved. I proposed to that first girl my mom introduced me to and she accepted. That is your mom sitting right here, I added.

My wife and I proceeded to cut the cake after carefully plucking out the number thirty sitting on top and putting it on the side with our pinched index fingers and thumbs.

Subramani Mani trained as a physician in India and moved to the US to pursue a PhD in Artificial Intelligence. After teaching graduate students and medical students at Vanderbilt University and the University of New Mexico for more than a decade, he started writing, feeling the urge to share the memories of certain life experiences and perspectives which could not be done within the bounds of normal day-to-day interactions. He believes that honest story-telling can change us and our world for the better. His stories have been published/forthcoming in *The Charleston Anvil*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *New English Review*, *Fairlight shorts*, and *The Phoenix*, among others.

Judy Valentino

That Storied Ushanka

Once I told you that it seems like either I live long enough to watch everyone around me die young or I die young myself. You responded by telling me sometimes both things happen, because life's really just a bitch like that.

Now you're no longer with us. I hadn't tried to reach you ever since you cut me off last year. I get why you did it.

I still remember all the crazy stories you used to tell me: how you came from Hell's armpit and how the Devil had been following you around ever since. Sometimes I wonder what I'd be like if I had an upbringing like yours. You knew I grew up middle-class, even though I'm nothing now. I think that's why I latched onto you like I did; I wanted to feel your pain so I could accept myself. Now that you're gone, I don't think I want to feel that kind of pain anymore.

I still remember when we'd go to the pantry together and I'd feel a bit of it. We were getting free food, and yet there was so much existential dread surrounding it. It wasn't just that I felt like a burden on other people, but that now I was finally wading through the viscid marsh of poverty; it was official. You didn't have as much of a problem with it as I did, but I don't believe that can be attributed entirely to your childhood. I think it's ultimately because you don't hate yourself like I do.

Sometimes I try to hate myself less, but I never can. I think about how many people I've alienated in my life and how much I wish I could bring them justice somehow.

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I wish I could stop hurting people, but we're all fundamentally selfish by existing, I think sometimes; we're all guilty of taking up too much space. But leaving is a lot harder than staying.

I read your note you posted online when a mutual friend told me of your suicide. After the initial shock passed, I realized there was something much deeper about it that was troubling me: that the actual emotions you described being hidden within you for so long were such primal feelings of discontent; they were feelings that I think at one point or another, anyone who's experienced serious hardships for an extended period of time has felt.

Sometimes I contemplate suicide, but then I think about how much worse it could be after death. It's not that I think suicide is a sin that will condemn you to Hell or anything; it's that having no idea what death would lead me to makes me hesitant to commit to it. I don't like committing to things; I think that's how I ended up hurting you like I did: because I couldn't commit to our friendship.

I still remember the day it happened. I remember what frame of mind I was in. I would say there was something seriously wrong with the person I was back then, but I realize that would imply I'm a better person now. I don't think I really am a better person, though. If I was, I would've been able to make things right with you.

Sometimes I dream about you: always the same dream. I've been doing so intermittently ever since you cut me off. I dream we're in a park together, our hands enveloped in magnetized mittens, both charged with the same polarity. We try to hold hands, but the magnetization prevents us from doing so. And that's when we shake off the mittens. We hold hands, and then everything feels peaceful again.

I'm sorry you never got that peace. You deserved it.

Judy Valentino (she/her/hers) is an author and underground actress from New Jersey who is now based out of Portland, Oregon, where she writes about living on the margins, inspired by her experiences dwelling all across the United States. When she's not writing or reading, she can be found watching old B-movies, messing around with obscure technology, and performing her poetry at coffee shops.

William Crawford

Rhyolite Ghost Town, Nevada--California Line



William C. Crawford is a prolific itinerant photographer based in Winston Salem, NC. He constantly shoots mundane subjects hoping to elevate them to pleasing eye candy in photographs. Look at more of his work at [bcraw44](#) on Instagram.

