

UMBRELLA

FACTORY



MAGAZINE

#41

MARCH 2020



WE ARE A SMALL PRESS DETERMINED TO CONNECT WELL-DEVELOPED READERS TO INTELLIGENT WRITERS AND POETS THROUGH VIRTUAL MEANS, PRINTED JOURNALS, AND BOOKS. WE BELIEVE IN MAKING AN HONEST LIVING PROVIDING THE BEST WRITERS AND POETS A FORUM FOR THEIR WORK.

JUNE
20'

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TO WORK
WITH YOU



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FACTORY

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MAGAZINE

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ACCEPTING

SUBMISSIONS

Submissions

Fiction

Sized between 1,000 and 5,000 words. Any writer wishing to submit fiction in an excess of 5,000 words, please query first.

Please double space. We do not accept multiple submissions. Please wait for a reply before submitting your next piece.

In the body of your email please include: a short bio – who you are, what you do/hope to be. Include any great life revelations, education, and your favorite novel!

Your work has to be previously unpublished – although we highly encourage you to submit your piece elsewhere as well. However! If your piece is accepted elsewhere, please notify us so that we may withdraw it.

Poetry

We accept submissions of three (no more and no less) poems. Please submit only previously unpublished work.

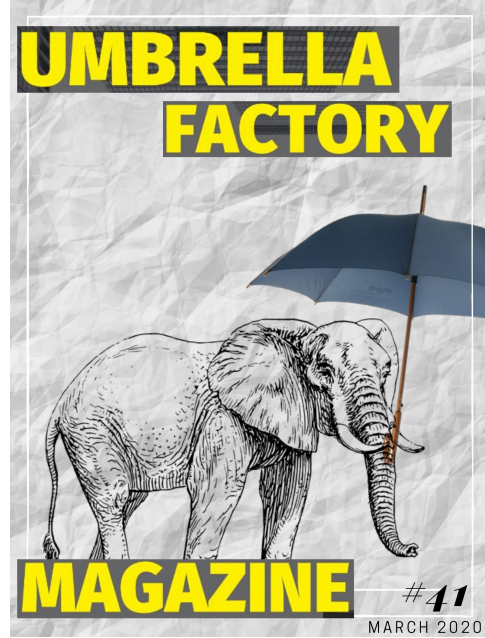
Simultaneous submissions are accepted, but please withdraw your piece immediately if it is accepted elsewhere.

All poetry submissions must be accompanied by a cover letter that includes a two to four sentence bio in the third person. This bio will be used if we accept your work for publication.

Art

We accept all submissions for the cover art of Umbrella Factory Magazine pertaining to the theme of umbrellas, factories, workers/work life, and the modern age. Any art submitted for publication outside of the cover is not restricted to this theme. Feel free to use one or all of these concepts. Image size should be 980X700 pixels, .jpeg or .gif file format. Provide a place for the magazine title at the top, as well as article links.

We also accept small portfolios of photography and digitally rendered artwork. We will take up to six pieces (no more and no less) along with an artist's statement and a third person bio.



Our cover image, "Elephant with Umbrella,"
was created by Sharyce Winters

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Editor's Letter

Happy new year my dear readers!

As we welcome in the beginning of 2020, we participate in the age old tradition of "new year, new me!" We here at Umbrella Factory Magazine are undergoing exciting changes of our own! With the melting of the white snow brings forth the birth of new saplings and colorful flora and fauna. So too, shall the whites and grays of our past seasons melt away to reveal vibrant new colors, and an array of new opportunities! Beginning this year, we are offering our editorial services for your projects at an affordable rate! All you've gotta do is email me at sharyce@umbrellafactorymagazine.com!

Join us in our 41st issue as we welcome thrilling, dark, new fiction from Joseph Cruse and Richard Krause. Accompanying their great works are a fantastic array of poetry from Andrew Wittstadt, Dmitry Blizniuk, Eddie Fogler, and Kate Lutzner.

We've received so many well-crafted submissions for this issue that I simply couldn't fit them all in. In this way, I feel fortunate and ecstatic to be a part of the creative process of so many fantastic authors. While I am wistful that we were not able to publish every piece submitted to us for this issue, I am happy to let you know

that you can expect to read these excellent works of poetry in our next issue set to be published in June!



I remember this time around two years ago, I was bringing in the new year with a positively gentle giant! And this year, I hope to do the same with this modest magazine. How blessed I am to have had so many wonderful experiences, and I hope I continue to be blessed with moments like these.

For now, I hope you enjoy this month's issue!
And as always, Read, Submit, Tell Everyone You Know!
And Stay Dry!
Sharyce Winters

POETRY



Andrew Wittstadt

Andrew Wittstadt was born and raised outside of Baltimore, Maryland. He holds graduate degrees from McNeese State University and is currently teaching in Las Vegas, Nevada. His work has appeared in *Bending Genres*, *New Limestone Review*, *Foothill*, and *Cider Press Review*. You can follow him on twitter @andrewwittstadt

The Seasonal Sacrament of Fruit

You and Mary picked apples from the orchard that advertised (rotten fruit).

Mary thought it might be a good idea to spend the afternoon picking produce and climbing ladders. "A job for peasants," said the dogs

"A family activity," said Mary, under low hanging branches. "Get the fermented ones," said the dogs, "the cheap ones on the ground."

The mealy apple insides stood out and smelt like liquor. Toilet wine. Pulped to cider and compost, a fine liquid ferment put in gift baskets.

As though someone might slice the skin away from ripe flesh. –Birch tree carvings– Engraved faces in the apple peels piled high. "Blessed be the apples and lamb," said the dogs, "blessed be god damn."

The God Damn Pothole Out Front

"Could you imagine," said Mary, "being a bird, flying around the globe grazing on berries and garbage." The dogs followed her off the front porch and drooled on the concrete, leaving silver lines of slobber –Pollock style– all over the beige sidewalk canvas.

Rain-wet cement and daisies lined the street, a house on blocks to avoid floods and dreams and a salt hole visible from the doorway. "The decay of modern engineering," said Mary. "no dog can stop the cold rock salt from eating the pavement."

"Walkways tend to be the ugliest off-white-grey, a hard surface to fall and scrape a knee. When people lose their teeth in car wrecks, I bet there is no finding them," said Mary, "scattered in pieces, blended into the concrete," as she walked toward the street, nest-building, scanning each curb for little sharp bones.

Sunsets Like a God Damn
Painting

You and Mary liked to watch the
sun set from the shore
where the water tended to edge at
the dock.
Mary rocked her chair to un-
rhythmic lake laps.

It creaked awful and made you
anxious
as the chair was shoved back on
two legs.
A balancing act of self courage and
confidence.
Mary always had more balls than
you,
more of a fuck-you-risk-taking side
to her.

You didn't let on that her rocking
the chair back
made you nervous and worried, as
you imagined

the legs snapping, causing a
broken neck
and the images of spinal cord to
stone pavers
reoccurred as you stared at her.

(The slight ricochet of a body when
it hits ground.
A small bob as the limbs drift
upward from impact
before they settle against the
concrete.
Usually calling for someone to run
over
and check to make sure the body is
breathing
from the places it's supposed to).

Mary saw you staring at her and
said, "what?"
as if you wanted something from
her
and didn't hear what you mumbled.

"Nothing," you said.

Mary, Very Unserious, Considers Changing Careers

Stoned, but comfortable,
Mary spoke to the dogs in bed.
"I love you," said Mary.
The dogs yowled,
smacking wet lips together
and sucking in air.
"Don't you mind if I cuddle
on your back like this," sighed Mary,
"it works so well as a spoon in a
spoon."

Mary hugged them closer
and thought to herself,
Oh, if I were a poet or a dress maker,
wouldn't that be something.
Plumping toilet-colored garments
around too-fat pipe-arms,
two rubber bands around warm
butter.

"I could do it," said Mary.
The dogs yowled again,
"don't kid yourself babe,
love is for sale and you're buying."

"I think I'll make my own," said Mary,
"craft it out of cigarette butts and pipe
cleaners,
the color of leaves in fall.
I think I want love to crunch like that."

Mary Shops Online During the Annual 3-Day Sale

Garbage can shopping online,
Mary knew she wanted a specific
type.
A self closing lid
and a bright shiny finish
with a modern flair.
"Cold to the touch and eye, said
Mary,
"metal is so cliché,"
the dogs huddled around her on the
sofa,
"and white, everyone has white trash
cans."

"I want a piece of art," said Mary.
A hand-painted and sculpted
retro looking robot trash can.
Not red, not white,
not stainless (not really) steel,
something expressive of Mary's
personality.
Art deco. Home deco. Mary deco.
A true one of a kind rubbish
receptacle.
"Avoid the clearance page," sighed
the dogs,
"too much undesired, unsold junk."

A hot ticket item for any kitchen,
a foot pedal for ease
and a butterfly design floral in scent
when you open and close your eyes
quickly.
"A masterpiece," said Mary.
She put it in her cart.
"Hand-crafted to hold waste," said
the dogs,
"a space for all the ugly unwanted."

Dmitry Blizniuk

is an author from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in The Pinch, Press53, Magma Poetry, The Nassau Review, Havik, Saint Katherine Review, Star 82, Naugatuck River, Lighthouse, The Gutter, Palm Beach Poetry Festival and many others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is also the author of "The Red Forest" (Fowlpox Press, 2018). He lives in Kharkov, Ukraine.

A Black Cat that Runs across a Lawn

A black cat runs across a lawn
strewn with bright orange wet
leaves,
stops in the middle
and stares at me.
Are its eyes so highly saturated
yellow,
or am I looking at the fallen
leaves through the slits of the
cat's eyes –
as if I am watching the autumn

through the opera glasses of
the black cat?
I stop dead in my tracks
with a handful of inexpressible
things,
like a school girl with big bows,

but the miracle, it seems, lasts
just a few moments,
and then the truth slips from my
hands
like an oiled snake -
not to bite or crawl away, but to
twist itself around my thoughts,

to snuggle onto my lap.
And the miracle lingers, like a
sound:
I see a bored girl – a dispirited
goddess – sitting on a bench,
who doesn't notice that her
index finger and her thumb

slowly make love, kiss each
other,

stroke and pet each other –
like two lovers with their faces
on the back of their heads.

The Summer Rain

Slanted summer rain whispers
outside the window:
long Muse milks a glass udder.
A herd of unpretentious brick cows
munch leaden grass, sadly and
quickly.
Our apartment is an envelope with a
farewell letter,
with unopened silence.
The silence waits and listens,
but neither of us haven't said a word
yet.
And yesterday's quarrel, like a
wounded lynx
breathes shallow and fast, digs in the
unmade bed.
A plaster animal of animated
bedsheets.
The old sofa in the kitchen creaks;
The fridge, a rectangular white
vampire, makes smacking sounds
with its lips.
And rain whispers outside the
window.
Summer rain outside.

The Recovery

A boy bites on a bitter fig
and pulls a face – a Charlie Chaplin
of kids' silent movies.

Aunt Alla's birthday party slowly
simmers and boils over.

Heavy oxen, my father's relatives,
clink their glasses.

Forks musically clink against gold
fillings.

Locks of hair, now without hair
rollers,

jump up and down with a stupid
grace of poodles.

Vodka and champagne, banal
salutes and toasts:

we don't fail to keep up with the
Joneses.

I hate the bright light.

A bony woman with crooked teeth
shouts, "La-li-la-la!"

You whisper something to my
unshaved cheek

(the warmth of your breath pulses,
and the smell of Olivier salad
accompanies it like a page boy.)

You stretch a thread of silk through
my mind.

Sort of dental floss for the brain.

It's tickling. We haven't seen each

other for two years, since school.

The sleepy waterfall of curtains just
touches the parquet.

Yes, I'm happy too. Classmates are
kind of uterine twins,

born by the ugly past,

where there was shouting and
screaming and

silent monkey business at the desk,

the tinkling of the school bell,

the smell of paraffin and cheerful
idiots.

A periscope of an alert tedium
grows in me.

A giraffe soaked in gasoline,
but excluded from the crazy
masterpiece of Salvador Dali.

I'm like Venus de Milo on a squalid
nude beach:

I don't feel very comfortable,

and I'm very out of place and out of
time.

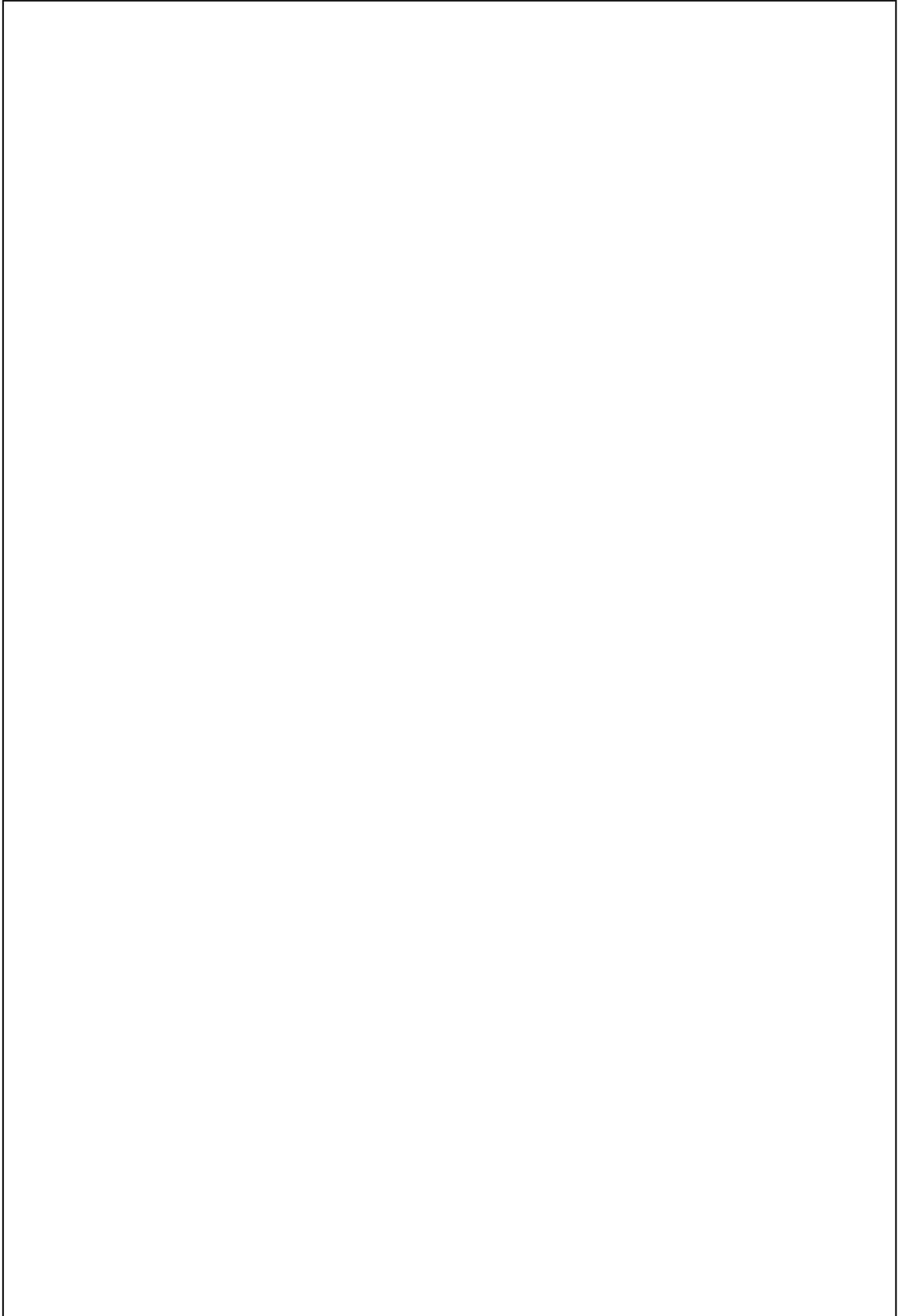
I'd love to be swallowed by the
drunken evening,

but I'm sober like a frosted glass.

The reality is stuck like a broken
elevator

full of well-dressed patients of
Bedlam.

Well, let's celebrate recovery.



Eddie Fogler

Originally from Ohio, Eddie Fogler currently lives in Virginia with his husband and two spoiled dogs. While overseas, he received his MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University. His work has been featured in From Whispers to Roars, Haunted Waters Press, Literally Stories, Exoplanet, The Sirens Call, and Capsule Stories. You can see his antics on Instagram @eddiewritesthings.

Of Course It Was Raining

There was a glaze over your eyes
Mirroring the rain on the outside of the
car
It made it hard to see you
Truly see you
As if every minute
Every pattered drop on the roof
Flooded you
And kept your soul from breaching.

I wanted to give you breath
Give you life
I held your hand but couldn't reach
you
You spoke words but they burbled
And my silence didn't know how to
save you
So you drifted away
Into the comforting cries of raindrops
And left me with your ring
My ring
Anchored to the moment
To drown in it.

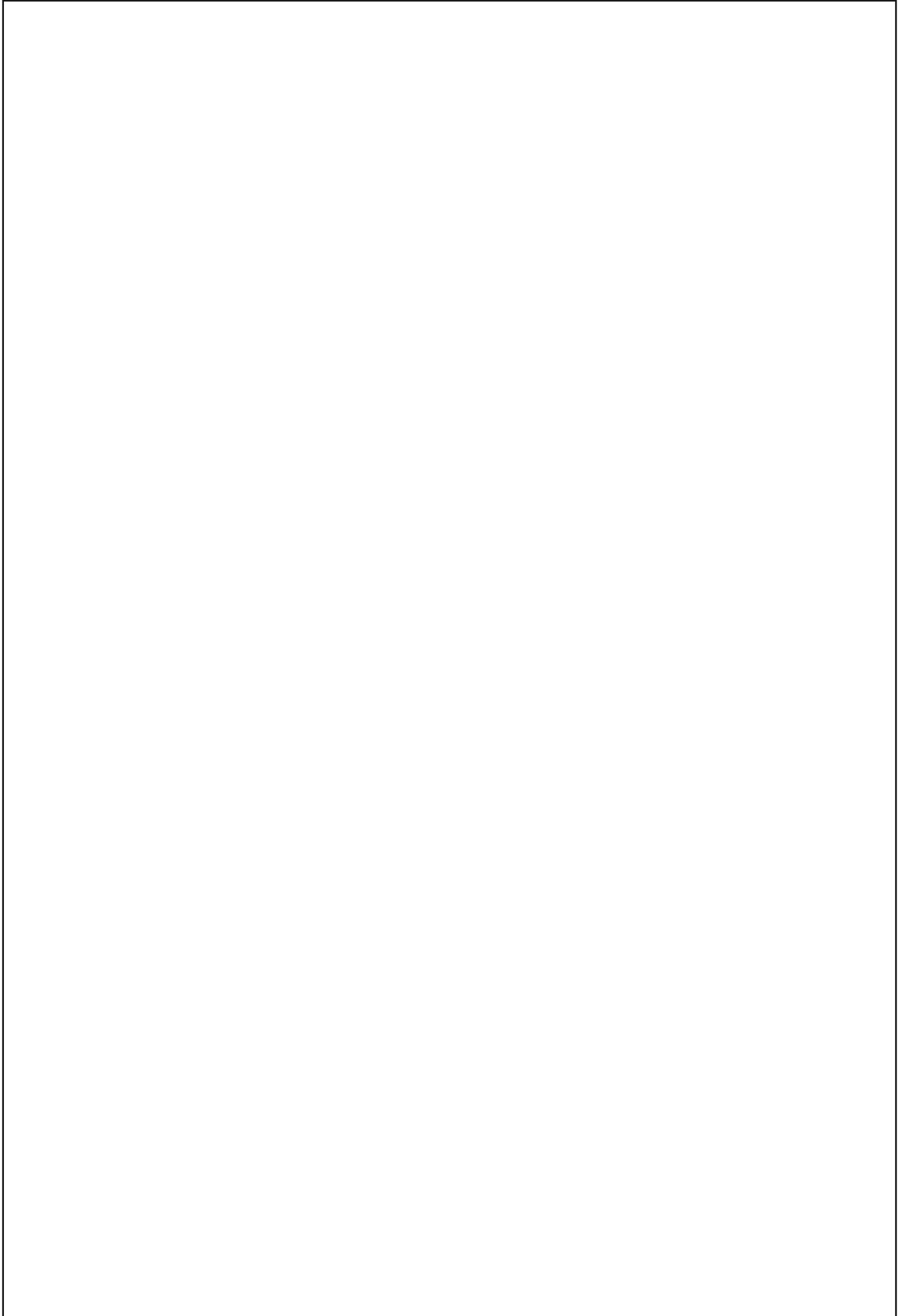
All Aboard

Sit with me
Let their muttered words flutter by
Hear only the joyous laughs of my
heart
As it skips through the minutes
The seconds
Of our moment
Loosen your grip
Walk your nervous fingers back
From the edge of the bench
Glide them over to mine
So they can embrace
Let their proud entanglement give
You the courage
To scoot over the gap between us
Press into me
Coupled together
On our wooden island
We will drift into our own existence
The rest of the world
Will stay sunken
And any of their judgement
Will be lost to us
Into the depths

Please
Sit with me
So we can set sail.

Passerby

He is
 or on the verge of
 Death
 A stumbling silhouette of a man
 With one flip-flop
 Perfectly at home along the ditch
 Wading through the muddy discarded
 Poverty had sucked his skin close to his
 bones
 He was beaten and bruised
 By a gang of time and weather
 Still he crept forward
 Draped in his finest finds
 A barely distinguishable Disney t-shirt
 Shorts bound to him by frayed rope
 In his hand he held a sickle
 Splattered in colors of fall
 On his back
 He carried a few dozen sugarcanes
 Anymore would have grounded him
 As he approached
 His thinning white hairs
 And wrinkles of misfortune
 Gestured towards me
 Through a crippled smile
 I wanted to give some change
 Possibly a folded bill of hope
 But all I had was a ten
 So I let death pass me by.



Kate Lutzner

Kate Lutzner's poetry and stories have appeared in such publications as The Brooklyn Rail and Mississippi Review. She has been featured in Verse Daily and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize as well as the Best of the Net. Her chapbook, *Invitation to a Rescue*, was published by Poet Republik.

The Brooklyn Botanic Garden

I followed you, a puppy dog, a useless piece of string. I am always waiting for someone to love me. You told me at the cherry tree you wanted to tie me up later, that you promised not to cause any nerve damage. The Japanese Toad-Lily was in bloom, little flowers that resemble orchids but persist. I see their purple spots on the inside of my eyelids, like a trapezoid flush with color. I have done things you would not approve of, have done things to men. Your plea to tie me up makes me uncertain, ending things between us in a few weeks. I don't want injury any more than I want a pineapple upside down cake to turn up on my kitchen. There were late-blooming flowers that day, interesting seed heads. What seed head is not interesting, as you were to me once, when now you are just a banker, a man with many degrees pleading on my phone to keep me, to glass me in like a flower, under glass.

News

We sit at the kitchen table
cutting chicken hearts for the cat.
Someone is deciding
whether to ask someone else
to marry them. They don't want
me, a consolation prize, a clumsy
biscuit or a fluorescent Sno Ball,
a piece of cake to argue over
like we're arguing over the president
and his family, what should be sacred,
but no one can break my heart the way
he can, standing there for fifty minutes
calling a woman who was raped
beautiful. One stupid afternoon
this happened, and I want to find something
I can fasten my hope onto, a shell
or a leaf, anything innocent that is left.
I don't see anyone as a failure, or
everyone, every last one of us seated
at the table waiting for a bird to populate
the feeder, to lend its beauty to our
mouths fighting for space, word over
word over word -- not quite an argument,
but not civil, either. I compare this
to moments of pure joy, which the bird
should inhabit, or we should.
This is a moment lodged in my heart
and throat, like the singer whose daughter
died in the papers today, too young
to pray.

A Hornet's Nest

I gift the hornets their size,
let them run around me, magnified:
a basketball, a pair of shoes.
They knock inside my head,
that pinball machine. The hornets
are so large because I am afraid
of loving you, so I focus on them
instead. I am guilty of wanting
too much, lying
in a pile of snow, a messy
sunset, enough touch.
I am guilty of wanting a servant's
heart, a warrior's heart,
of deciding what I have
and distracting myself with your
hands on my body, underneath
the nest, right there on the road
in Vermont, a street I cannot name
beyond tracing it
on my phone, leaning towards
what you are doing, forgetting
I am too cold to love.
When we walk by the hornet's nest
the day we are due to leave, I realize
I am jealous of their simplicity,
how easily they work together,
maybe love. I don't know the emotional
structure of any sort of bee – I look up
do bees love and come across acts
of pollination and optimism.
Maybe that is all I am capable of, desire
and goodwill. I accuse myself
of so much and so little. The stars,
spiked in the sky tonight. You will be able
to see it all, but we will be on our way

FICTION



Joseph Cruse

Joseph Cruse is a writer, actor, a teacher, and a bad painter. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhetoric and Composition, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other recent work can be read in Fleas on the Dog Magazine. His other short story work has also been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press.

The Pool Purist

The pool bar was two stories.

Lawrence walked in, his wife's dog's blood on his shoes, disillusioned. He heard music in the background, but he'd been having trouble discerning what anyone who sang said. He would catch phrases of the words in his favorites, but nothing that could be considered knowing a whole song. Lawrence didn't like to think that music was dying for him, because he did enjoy the feeling of songs that connected with him, so he concluded that it was not music dying but him. And, since everyone dies, he simply acquiesced to never knowing the words.

A row of pool tables lined the wall ten feet behind him, extending perpendicular, with barely space for the players not to hit the wall or someone's' ass. The bar went lengthwise down the opposite stretch of wall - easy reassurance another drink was

only a step and shuffle away. The cacophony was overpowering, and Lawrence turned back towards a less talkative selection of statues. The bartender was young and the ink in her arm, still fresh, was colorful, and Lawrence couldn't help but travel from wrist to shoulder.

"What are you drinking?"

The man walked up from behind to stand on the immediate left, and Lawrence wondered how he always attracted the kind of person who would rather breathe directly next to him at an empty bar than let him drink alone. He answered, curt, "A beer and rye."

"Jackie, darling," the man's voice poured, "gin and tonic, lime, and his round's on me."

Although he wasn't towering, the man was taller than Lawrence. His mustache was grey and well-kept and curled upon itself at the ends. A slight bulge of skin over the top of his belt was the only thing that stuck out apart from his eyes, piercing grey eyes

with flecks of blue. Lawrence envied how easily this man could move throughout a crowd as both a commanding presence and a ghost

“You didn’t have to do that.”

The man smiled.

“You’re welcome. And no, I didn’t, but you look like you needed a drink and I need a partner. I was wondering if you played?”

“Look. Thanks for the drink, but I’m gonna stop you. I’m married and straight.”

He turned his nose upward as if the word came out of Lawrence’s mouth rotten. Then he laughed and waved his hand towards the tables.

“Marriage doesn’t mean anything. I meant do you play billiards?”

Lawrence looked back at all the pool tables and understood.

“You’re asking me if I want to play pool with you?”

“Exactly. A quick round of eight-ball. No money. I always

come into this bar to play, and tonight there is no one.”

Lawrence hadn’t touched a pool cue in years. His family had a table in the basement as he grew up and he played against his brothers in a room too small for such a large form of entertainment. He learned how to hold the cue, to repeat his stance the same way, every time, the bounce of the rails, and how the cue ball connected and reacted to the others on the table. He got good enough to win some drinks in college but couldn’t remember any specific time that he stopped playing. He never owned a pool table after his parents sold theirs with the house and he never played the game with his wife.

“You keep buying the drinks and I’ll play a few rounds. Don’t expect much.”

Lawrence stood up and surveyed the table choices. Everything looked full.

“How do we get a table?”

“I have one reserved.”

“Of course. Name’s Lawrence.”

“Edgar.”

Walking up the stairs, Lawrence looked at the ceiling and thought about the conversation with his wife in bed that morning.

He had awoken from a dream in which he was very deep inside his former boss.

“Baby, baby. Would you touch me?”

“No. Go to sleep or get a job. No touching.”

“Jesus. What? I’m trying to be playful.”

“I’m tired, and that’s not playful that’s trying to come.”

“I figured we’d start, and you’d get into it.”

She rolled onto her shoulder, back to Lawrence, and stuck a pillow between her legs.

“Fine. I’m leaving.”

Lawrence pressed on her ankle, hard, clamoring over the covers, and grabbed his pants. He put food and water in the dog’s bowl, stormed down his front

porch to the car, wrapped both hands around the wheel, and shook the whole of his body against the morning.

The light above the felt was dim and the wooden legs were old but shined. The table looked sturdy and level and reminded Lawrence of mountains that always had been there and always would be there. Edgar put his gin and tonic down on a shelf that lined the tables and grabbed the rack that hung off the light.

“I always like to grab the last table. Only the people who have been here the longest know about the extra foot of space that goes around this specific table. It isn’t much of a distance, but, in billiards, the small space counts most. You rack.”

“Why not.”

“You know how to, yes?”

“Sure.”

Lawrence didn’t know how to. Fuck. He knew the one ball goes in the front and he knew that the eight ball went in the middle of

the third row. He slowly took out the balls, dredging the rest of his memory for any other rules that may be in place for racking fifteen balls. He got the yellow one spot-on (nailed it) and, except for the eight, he filled the rest randomly—taking care to lift one or two only to place them in the same exact spot and give full appearance of knowledgeable adjustment. Placing fingers between rack and balls, he made sure there were no gaps and good pressure.

“Your rack is wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“According to international regulations, the one-ball goes at the apex, the eight-ball must be placed in the fifth spot, one striped ball and one solid ball get placed into the corners, and the rest can be strewn however you damn well please. Some people go by numbers. Other people alternate stripes and solids.”

“No bar I’ve...”

Edgar cut Lawrence off short, “We’re not playing by some

assbackwards bar rules. We’re playing by *the* rules.”

“I told you that I haven’t played in a long time.”

“You can break first.”

Lawrence picked up a cue where it had been left in the rails of the table. The cue ball looked like the unwanted stepchild of a smurf, beaten off white by years of blue chalk. His shot six inches off the back rail, Lawrence set his left palm flat on the felt and the cue into the crook of his thumb and pointer finger – making sure the polish slid along his skin without getting stuck. With his right hand, spastic and darting, Lawrence took the handle of the cue and pulled back to test his aim. Lawrence reared back and struck the cue ball with the force of all breaks missed from years past and hit the felt right before and underneath the cue ball. The ball leapt from the table, projectiled upwards, and landed in the pocket. Lawrence felt his head go down with the ball.

“According to international regulations, Lawrence, the game is over when you scratch on the break.”

“You better get another round from the bar then.”

Lawrence reached for the rack, feeling sorry for how overlooked its importance was to the game of pool: whose sole design made sure the disorder could be realigned once over.

“You shouldn’t play with Edgar”

The girl stared with eyes that had watermelon seeds in them.

“Why shouldn’t I play with Edgar?”

“You’ll have to hear all of the rules,” she responded, “at length, and he doesn’t hustle for money.” She looked at the bar and then back to her table, “It’s my turn,” and walked away.

Edgar, carefully walking up the steps, held the g and t like a vice, yet, in his left, Edgar balanced Lawrence’s shot and pint glass in the palm of his hand and

he watched his drink sloshed out of the glass and onto Edgar’s shoes. Lawrence thought about the girl at the next table but didn’t look at her. He lifted the rack without hitting any of the balls and stood upright, hearing his spine crack out of a stretch he hadn’t thought he’d done.

“Sorry,” Edgar said, “it always takes the girl more time to come the second time around,” he laughed, “Always.”

“Any pointers?” Lawrence waited as Edgar measured the exact point in which his imaginary lines intersected to place his cue ball.

“Well, Lawrence,” he said, “this is billiards.” Edgar stopped and looked up, “What is your profession?”

“Job ended a month ago. ‘Not enough state funds.’ I’ve been looking for a week. The other three have been spent doing nothing or drinking – which are considerably close.”

“Good. There’s always work

somewhere. What were you before the listlessness?”

Lawrence thought Edgar looked like a statue that had broken on the same table in the same position for years, never moving, “I worked for a university.”

Edgar pulled his cue back smoothly with his left arm.

“Here is my advice then. You’re not a blacksmith,” he set his right arm in position, waiting to see if Lawrence would interrupt.

He didn’t.

“And, since you are not a blacksmith, there is no need to hit the ball like you are wielding a goddamn hammer.”

Lawrence was surprised how explosive the shot was. He pulled back and struck the ball as if he were shuffling a small child forward. He got the thirteen, seven, and three balls in the back two corners.

“Goddamn, I got a hold of that one,” Edgar yelled, “you can

be stripes. You’ve got some catching up to do.”

“You spend a fair amount of time playing pool, Edgar?” Lawrence asked.

Edgar didn’t reply but slammed the four ball into the corner pocket.

“Do you always end up playing alone then?”

“I’m playing with you right now.” Edgar looked Lawrence up and down, “You’re the only person I’ve ever seen walk into this bar not to play billiards. You walk in without a glance. Straight to the drink for you. Why?”

Lawrence grabbed the chalk off the table and rotated the cube around the tip. The chalk was blue and used but knew the perfect amount of play to fit like saran wrap.

“I hit the goddamn dog this morning. My wife’s dog. Our dog. And she really loves that dog. I woke up early to start looking for work. Stupid thing was sleeping underneath the back tires. I

couldn't see him in my mirror. The fucking back wheel rolled up and over. I thought I hit one of the new plants. Got out. Walked behind." Lawrence paused. "She really loves that dog. We must have fifteen bandanas for the stupid thing. She keeps buying them, says color makes him pop. I don't know if she'll believe me when I tell her it was an accident."

Edgar was listening, his cue leaning against his shoe, "Why wouldn't she?"

"Once before, the dog broke his collar and ran towards the car. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, tried to brake. SMACK. Ran his head into the car. Hard enough to knock him back a step or two. She saw the whole thing, standing there, yelling the dog's name - like it knows its name. Gets up, unfazed. Runs back to my wife. My wife who, at this point, is tearing into my ass about how I tried to kill her dog. Now, I've gone and killed the dog."

"It died?"

"In the car, driving to the vet. He was done, but I had to at least attempt to save him. I've been driving, dog in trunk, all day. I needed to drink for a while, and you asked me to play a game of pool. Here we are. Can't get a job. Can't go home. Can't face my wife."

Edgar was scanning his shots and looked up like a cat who doesn't believe you, "Did you like the dog? Are you sure you didn't mean to kill the dog? You woke up and somewhere, deep, in the bottom of your brain you knew you wouldn't mind if the dog died, so you casually 'rolled' over the dog?"

"I would like to think that I wouldn't do that to my wife or to another living being."

"Yes, but you're not really sure?" Edgar took aim at the six in the middle of the table, narrating his thought process. "You know, Lawrence, with a shot like this the nuances of the game can be revealed. Hit the cue ball too hard

and you'll lose control – too soft and it won't go anywhere. Angle's wrong? You scratch. That's the beauty, you need accuracy, precision, and a delicate, but firm, hand to see you the finish. Like you, you firmly and accurately ran over the dog," Edgar laughed. The cue ball made contact, but harder than intended, and the six struck the lip of the corner and rattled between the pocket's edges.

"Seems your power was off," said Lawrence, walking up to look at the wreckage of his game. The stripes, strewn alongside the rails, prevented the others any space to maneuver. Edgar's solids covered two pockets and the eight was in front of the cue ball. His lackluster alternatives: bank the shot and try the fourteen or jump the eight to break up the rail. He drove the cue forward, stammering the tip on the ball, and fishooked his shot into the side pocket.

Lawrence exhaled, frustrated, "only thing I can hit today is a fucking dog."

Edgar walked over, putting a hand on Lawrence's shoulder, "Lawrence, according to international regulations, a scratch, having not touched any other ball, goes to the other player with ball-in-hand."

"You don't get ball-in-hand, you shoot behind the headstring."

"Not according to the International Billiards Tour guidelines."

"Fuck your guidelines – it's a game."

Edgar reached, arm down to the elbow, into the side pocket and pulled the cue ball out, "No, Lawrence, the rules give this game its order. If we cannot stick to the set of principles already established, then what are we doing here?" He leaned over the rails and took aim, finishing off the six-ball left in the corner. Edgar had only a lame duck two ball in the corner and the five at an angle to the side pocket. If he left himself a good enough lie off the two, then the cue ball would

square up behind the five and give Edgar the eight. What was clear to Lawrence was even clearer to Edgar. He walked around the table, barely taking the time to look.

“You are here out of shame,” he continued, “how did you start your day? Racked, arranged, full of potential energy. Then you shoot off and connect. Hard.” The two went down and the cue ball, lulled by a malevolent kamikaze wind, rolled beside the five. “The dog is broken, and you stand here with a sad violin in your head wondering why you can’t play the game.” The five was so easy Edgar didn’t move from where he shot the two, “Eight ball. Top right corner.”

The eight struck the leather on the back of the pocket and piled on top of the balls below. The cue ball, a rotund child scaring all the kids in the pile by threatening to jump, followed and landed on top of the eight.

“Edgar, according to any bar

with a pool table, if you scratch on the eight you lose. I’d even bet your rules say the same thing.”

Edgar stood in grimace, rigid as his cue, silent and leering at Lawrence.

“Thought so.”

Lawrence rolled the stick into the same rail he had found it and walked out of the bar. The air was cold, and he looked up at the sky but couldn’t see the stars because of the orange glow of the streetlamps. The taco vendor down the block shouted something at him in Spanish he couldn’t understand, and he coughed when the chill hit his lungs. Lawrence looked at the dog, wrapped up, quilt ruined, through the back window of his car, the red bandana around the mutt’s neck was stiff with blood and surprise. Lawrence sighed, got in the driver’s, and headed home.

Richard Krause

Richard Krause has had two collections of fiction published titled *Studies in Insignificance* (Livingston Press, 2003) and *The Horror of the Ordinary* (Unsolicited Press, 2019). A third collection, “‘Crawl Space’ & Other Stories of Limited Maneuverability,” will be published by Unsolicited press in 2021. He also has had two collections of epigrams, *Optical Biases* (EyeCorner Press in Denmark, 2012) and *Eye Exams* (Propertius Press, 2019). He has a story upcoming in *GNU Journal*. He lives in Kentucky where he is retired from teaching at a community college. His favorite novel is *Snow Country* by Yasunari Kawabata.

Beets

The beets are cut up almost as an afterthought. To everyone's surprise he gobbles them down immediately, avoiding all the rest of the food. They stain his plate with concentrated juice that seeps into everything. It is all but on his clothes, broadens his lips as if they have been bruised, dyes the already pink tints of his skin. Beet juice is poised to dye everything with its own peculiar metaphor.

The family is surprised at his appetite. The father cuts the little boy more beets and the boy immediately digs his fork into them as if they are the last food on earth, as if he hasn't eaten for days.

"He eats like he's starving," the mother says.

"He thinks it's candy," his six-year-old sister giggles.

Where does the gusto come from? It can't quite be that peculiar sweetness with the tart reminder that it is only a vegetable.

Is there something in his past that transports the boy back to Europe where his ancestors harvested beets? Is it embedded in his bloodstream, the pulse of blood brought over by salty ocean currents that now informs his tiny arm holding the little fork that spears another wedge of vegetable?

Undoubtedly his ancestors were on their knees

in fields untold hours pulling at the taproots to dislodge them from the stubborn earth.

Could their very subsistence not have depended on the one root that grew all those winters when everything else died? The swelling redness that endured a cold that destroyed all other crops. Could a mythology not have grown up around beets, conferring on them a special status that the little three-year-old now felt in his blood?

To support the harvest and give thanks to what saved their lives, did the Europeans not build altars to the beet and offer blood sacrifices to insure a good crop for the coming winter? Could the original idea of a blood brother not have been born with a food that so obviously fuels our notion of nourishment almost bleeding like us?

The little boy cries for even more beets and his family looks on amazed. Even his sister who normally stalks his high chair during the meal, bobbing up to scare him, despite her parents' admonitions, is not entirely free of the memory of having occupied what, now that the beets are consumed in such an unusual manner, seems to her an exalted seat just because she is not sitting in it. She smiles broadly at his devouring so lustily a food she doesn't like, though you can read in her eyes that she is missing out on something.

"Ugh, gross," she says, "it looks like blood, Tristan how can you eat that?"

He pays her no mind. He is leagues beyond any brother sister rivalry. In fact, he is already in the old country after a particularly harsh winter, a near famine that has taken the lives of the elderly. He is crowded amongst a group of partially clad figures, as big boned as he is now small. They wear the skins of animals and are surrounded by baskets of beets.

They are discussing the upcoming sacrifice.

The little boy has a determined look away from his six-year-old sister, as if he is engaged in matters of more importance. She'll not torment him this evening, tying him up, operating on him, making him wait on her, give her foot massages, forcing him to bow as she pushes his head to the carpet. She can make him scream on cue, knows just what toy to take away or wave in his face, what excites his curiosity, or his rages. Any emotion she wants she can elicit from him on a moment's notice. She knows which building block to dislodge, what piece of the puzzle to hide; she's the master of misalignment, engineer of every collapse. She knows her little brother up and down with the prescience of one who senses that she herself might one day be sacrificed.

But the beets come as a stunning surprise to her. She is amazed at how comfortable he is in his high chair this evening, how content and impervious to her taunts. She can feel his elevation. She can't circle and pop up to scare him. He's too immersed in the vegetable.

The little boy is in his own world, his fingers all red, stained like his mouth, his clothes. He is merrily, gaily, chewing the beet, breaking down the clean knife lines, the wavy growth almost like the annual rings on a tree. The taproot with its pottery shape seems to contain even more nutriment than anyone realizes. The little boy is at the very root of life with his little heart beating a mile a minute, covering distances nobody dreams about.

He doesn't give his sister the time of day, not even a passing thought. Rarely has she enjoyed any food except maybe the sterile scoop of ice cream that he has always considered too cold, or the sweets that he always seemed not to have a taste for.

Suddenly the little boy appears to have had enough and his eyes close for a second. It is then that his sister is totally out of the picture, already a full-bodied adolescent that they can't get through the doorway amid screams and scratches, bites and kicks? All the residue of

fight between brother and sister come down to this, all the humiliations of any baby brother around a tormenting sister who wants to grow up before her time. The punches and pinches, the bruises and hair pulling, the blood shed between them in cuts and scratches, the floods of tears, the quick shifts of blame, all come down to this, his adolescent sister being pulled screaming bloody murder out of that crude hut in early Europe a thousand years ago, being sacrificed to the deities of beet by early ancestors determined to have a good harvest that will get the village through yet another winter. Each time the little boy takes a bite he shoots a quick glance at his little sister as if it were she who made it all possible.

For hundreds of years beet consumption for that very reason could have gone underground, as the lowly root fell to the status of a minor vegetable, an embarrassment at what used to produce a bumper crop when all other crops failed. The sacrifices promptly

disappeared with the greater availability of food as Europe grew more civilized.

The quantity of blood mankind spilled was probably for other reasons than the original fascination with the lowly beet, but that may have started it all, initiating a life of sacrifice, mutilation, bloodletting. Wars, rape and

rapine all may be traced to that one vegetable that worked its way so deeply into the psyches of our early ancestors that a three-year-old could now tap into it as easily as he gobbled up beets to the exclusion of all other food.

As he trained his eye on his sister who tormented him to death and took another bite, one could sense his vague premonition that she had no place even in their family except

to insure the continued abundance of next year's crop of the bloody vegetable. He barely looked at her because he knew that he would soon be relieved of her tauntings.

The tiniest cut in a beet will make for an effusion little different than those scarifications, chance breaks, in our own skin. And the stubborn bulbous root with such a rough exterior is not unlike our own leathery exposure to the elements thickening with unsightly bumps that appear on our face and nose as we too age.

The first of us who ate beets and cut them open must have thought they were miniature reproductions of our bloodline. They sensed that they could keep us alive through the harsh winters long before they achieved the status of a cult. And the one or two virgins periodically sacrificed to a continued bumper crop signified little in the scheme of things that

preserved the community.

And so the little boy finally looked at his sister with the dim knowledge that she might be next, for small as he was such sacrifices were already in his blood as conscious

reprisals he never considered before he ate his first serving of beets.

By the third serving his sister already grown up was pulled from the hut and carried through the village screaming until she was strapped to the altar. He had to lower his eyes any number of times at her fate. He turned back to her and imagined her face a red smear of beet juice that his fingers were now involuntarily playing in. He tried to discount all her torment of him in one sympathetic glance, overcome the separation of three years by a thousand.

He looked down from his highchair and observed the marvel of his whole family at his appetite. Gone was that look of perilous survival a little boy has towards a sister who torments him day and night. For the beet juice was now coursing through his bloodstream exciting a whole history of sacrifice.

The sister looked at her little brother steady now as if studying in him her own unwitting reaction to a fate that could easily have been hers. Her hands pried from the doorway as determined as a new toy taken from him, and

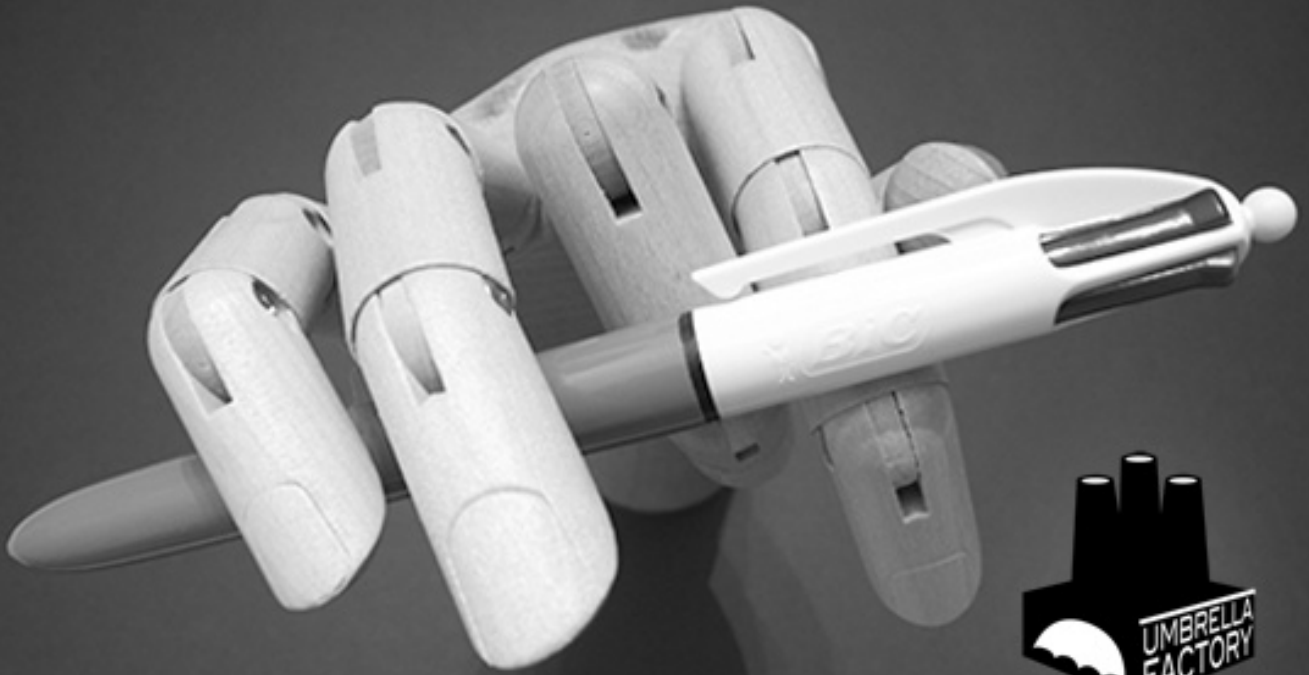
on her head those bumps against the floor just as he came crashing down from her pushing him off balance, and the red stains on his plate smeared for bloodying his nose so often.

He sensed she was taken to the village to be sacrificed for a food that he had just eaten with such gusto. Strong arms were already pulling her into adulthood just as she had pulled on his own arms. The red smears on his plate depicted in their vague outlines the flowing hair and the torment of her departure, the lament over not being able to enjoy what he did. The beet juice was only a trickle now where drops had run down his chin onto his highchair streaking his elbows and smearing his arms.

"Tristan," his heedless sister drawled, "you've made a mess again!"

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