

Issue 2
Summer 2013

PARANORMALLY

Promptly

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Fletcherism (Fiction).....	1
by Lara Eder	
Interview.....	4
Louisiana from the Train (Poetry).....	6
by Robbi Nester	
Interview.....	7
The Interview (Fiction).....	10
by Adrian Mangiuca	
Interview.....	21
Aloysius Makes a Friend (Fiction).....	24
by Kelly Ann Jacobson	
Interview.....	26
Slattern (Poetry).....	29
by Marie Abate	
Interview.....	30
Ol' Barnaby (Fiction).....	34
by Ramona D. Pina	
Interview.....	37

Singularity (Poetry).....	39
by Donna McLaughlin Schwender	
Interview.....	41
Granddad (Fiction).....	44
by Josh Morrey	
Interview.....	57

Introduction

For a period of time, Jack Kerouac had a ritual of lighting a candle each time he sat down to write, pounding out words by its light until he was done for the night, then blowing it out. Joan Didion would spend an hour each evening before dinner editing with a cocktail. Don DeLillo forces himself to stare at a picture of Borges to restore his focus if his attention starts to wander.

Why do we find the peculiarities and habits of writers so interesting? Perhaps the reason lies in the act of writing itself. E.L. Doctorow said that writing “is like driving a car at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way,” and it’s true. Writing anything—a poem, a novel, a short story, an essay—can feel like a rather myopic exercise. So much of any piece of writing is in the building blocks, the words, that it can be like trying to assemble a forest of meaning out of acres and acres of perfectly seeded saplings. We plant them and place them, and sometimes we’re not even sure ourselves exactly what meaning we’re sowing until they start to sprout and tangle into each other, until we step back and look at the growth from a distance. Eudora Welty described it similarly: “Connections slowly emerge. Like distant landmarks you are approaching, cause and effect begin to align themselves, draw closer together...And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you’ve come, is rising there still, proven now through retrospect.”

Getting at that meaning, whether we see it as a forest or a mountain or some other massive destination, can feel like a procedure only partially understandable, a rain dance we do without ever really knowing the steps. And maybe that’s why we find the idiosyncrasies of other writers so fascinating: we like to see how others arrived at those mountains and forests of meaning, what it looked like to them in bits and pieces along the way, through their own myopia. We want to know what they ate for breakfast to sharpen their senses, what music they played to heighten their awareness, whether they navigated by compass or map or the seat of their

pants. We want to know if it was a daily jog or a dirty martini or the jingle of an Oscar Meyer commercial, whether it was the light of morning or the heavy quiet of night, that allowed them to do what they did so masterfully. It's almost as if each of these details is part of a code, a tiny scrap of paper with foreign symbols scrawled upon it, that when pieced together might form some cohesive message about how we as people best tap into what's inside us and funnel it out into something tangible and communicable.

That's why we've decided to do something a little different with our second issue of *Promptly*. Along with producing some truly wonderful writing inspired by prompts from June, July, and August on *Prompt & Circumstance*, our contributors agreed to be interviewed about their creative processes, both in regards to the specific piece we've published in Issue 2 and to their relationship with writing and creativity in general. What that means is that in this issue, you'll find Lara Eder's tale of love, loss, and fad dieting along with an oddly-shaped piece of fruit that once inspired Adrian Mangiuca; you'll learn how Josh Morrey wrote a story set in an airport while in an airport himself, concluding it in mid-air on his flight, and see from the eyes of a character Donna McLaughlin Schwender created from a photograph and placed in her masterful poem. And you'll find even more poetry, fiction, and creative insight to delve into from Marie Abate, Kelly Ann Jacobson, Robbi Nester, and Ramona D. Pina!

We hope you enjoy this new spin on writing and inspiration, and as always, thanks for taking part in the *Prompt & Circumstance* experience!

Brandi & Shenan
Editors

Fletcherism

Lara Eder

Every time I saw her, she was on a new diet. Cabbage Soup. Atkins. Vegan. South Beach. Zone. Raw Food. When I was eight, she tried an all-liquid diet for several months and I became certain that I'd never be able to enjoy a smoothie again. It was much too hot for warm soup, but she made gazpacho for dinner sometimes.

Everything was either a smoothie or gazpacho, and although both were the result of pureeing an assortment of produce, the occasional serving of gazpacho created the illusion that she was breaking up our routine. For one thing, it was called "gazpacho" rather than a smoothie. We ate it with spoons rather than straws and she prepared it in her food processor, rather than her blenders. She purchased a second blender during her liquid diet phase so that she had one on hand while the other was in the dishwasher.

Sometimes she would put a dollop of sour cream in the gazpacho. It floated on the surface of the liquid and I would make designs with it. I always appreciated the excuse not to look into her face during dinner. That was part of the problem with a liquid diet. Everything was too easily swallowed. I missed Fletcherism. We had chewed and chewed together and we didn't talk much. She was always counting so she didn't even look at me. I didn't feel like a lab rat being observed.

She'd stopped using the dishwasher by the time I arrived that fall. She said she'd have cut her fingers trying to wash the blender by hand, but now she was on a high-protein diet and it didn't make sense to run the dishwasher when she only really dirtied a few plates a day.

"And you're still a skinny little scarecrow, so I can't imagine you eat a ton of food either!" she said, leaning over the table to ruffle my hair with a knobby hand.

My tutor had just gone over the skeletal system with me, and each bone seemed so apparent on her body. Carpals. Metacarpals. Proximal phalanges. Intermediate phalanges. Distal phalanges. All of the joints between them popped out with each movement of the fingers and the tendons bulged on the back of her hand, beneath her thin skin, a patchwork of freckles and sun damage.

She turned back to her computer on the kitchen counter where she was looking up low calorie chicken recipes. "Tomorrow I want to make glazed salmon, but the recipe calls for a pound, so I'm going to have to pick some up in the morning. According to what your mom said, the tutor won't be here until the afternoon, so I thought we should do something fun after we go to the store. We could get our nails done. I'll request Grace for you." She knew I preferred going to Grace because Grace didn't speak any English, and wouldn't try to make small talk with me.

The kitchen was silent for a few moments while she hunched over the screen, the visible skin above her tank top stretched tightly across her spine and shoulder blades. Vertebrae. Scapula. She turned towards me. "Can I get you anything else, Thistle?" I assumed she meant food. She rarely talked about anything besides food, and this was my favorite thing about her, besides maybe the way she was able to carry on a conversation without any verbal encouragement from me.

When she was still married, she looked up exotic recipes to make her husband for dinner. She'd once had a kitchen full of bizarre cooking instruments, but she'd sold or donated most of them after the divorce. One of her diets involved drinking a glass of wine every night after dinner, and sometimes her eyes would mist and she'd talk about Fred. I always wished I still had some food in front of me to study when this happened. I usually ended up staring at her gingham tablecloth. I memorized every stitch.

"It was like putting our entire life together into a sieve," she said. "Almost everything spilled through the little holes and all that was left was Fred and me and a suitcase for each of us. Everything else was just swallowed into this great..." she spread her bony hands for emphasis, "...maw of resentment and exhaustion." I only sat with her as she finished the wine because I thought it might be rude to leave the table, but I always wished

she would go back to telling me that she suspected I was deficient in magnesium or how I should see if chamomile tea made me feel more at ease.

Prompt: Six Words, June 2013

Lara Eder

Lara Eder is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area and a student in the University of San Francisco's creative writing program. Some of her other fiction pieces can be seen in *[ts] Review* and an upcoming issue of *Bleeding Heart's Transfusion*.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

I was determined to use every single word from the six words prompt, and I was immediately reminded of a girl I knew when I was twelve whose summer camp nature name was "Thistle." The food theme also demanded my attention. I resisted it at first, but I was also listening to Laura Marling's "New Romantic" at the very moment I began writing. There's a lyric about giving up "trying to be thin" which struck me because I know Laura Marling to be a thin woman herself. Of course this brings up the issue of mistaking the author for the narrator, and as someone who insists that all characters appearing in her work are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental, I should know better than to make assumptions about Ms. Marling based on her art.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I prefer to spend at least two weeks mulling over a story before I even put finger to keyboard. I like to start with a very developed story in my mind, even if the finished product ultimately matures so radically that it's unrecognizable from its imagined fetal state.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

Even before I could read and write myself, I dictated stories to my father who recorded and illustrated them. They were invariably violent tales about supernatural beings. When I was a couple of years older, I remember my second grade teacher frowning when I killed off the

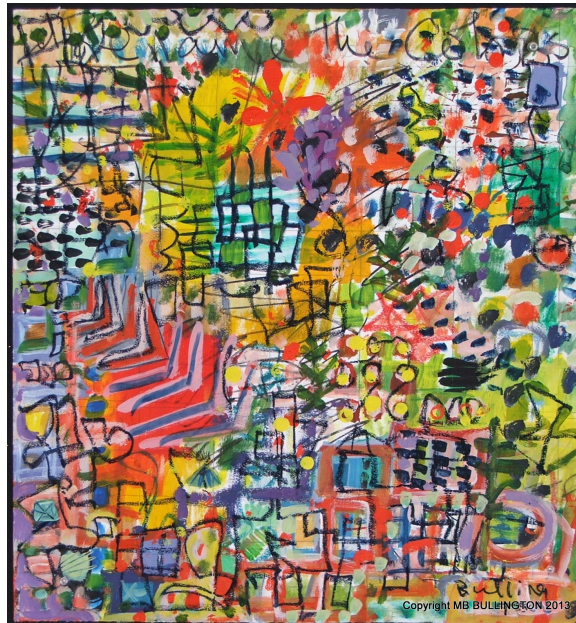
protagonist in my short story. I explained that the vampires sucked her dry.

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

I find it difficult to explain a process that is nonsensical, even to the author herself. I set out to write a witty answer to this question, but clearly it has taken on a life of its own and turned out as a subpar, completely standard form answer. Often, my characters are the driving force in my work. They are very dear to me, but sometimes I don't completely understand them when I begin their story. This sets up inevitable, major changes in my work from the start.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I am pathologically incapable of writing about myself, which is why, when I was fortunate enough to win the PowerBall, I hired a team of ghost-writers to help draft answers to questions, fill out my OKCupid profile, and assist with Facebook statuses. Hint: three of the four statements in the preceding sentence are lies.



Louisiana from the Train

Robbi Nester

By the side of cane fields
foul pools bloom,
an ad hoc estuary
spawned by the recent rains.
Roseate spoonbills splash and feed.
Even here, luminescence:
wild garden of stars,
the moon following us everywhere
like a lost dog, while on the ground,
weeds flower, puncture
the rails with their extravagant
roots, their trenchant
insistence on life itself.

Prompt: Six Words, August 2013

Artwork: "Things That Send A Tremor Through My Reality," Mary Boxley Bullington.

Robbi Nester



Robbi Nester is the author of a chapbook of poems, *Balance*, that follows a sequence of Iyengar yoga poses (White Violet, 2012). She has published poems in many journals, including *Poemeleon*, *Inlandia*, *Broadsided*, *LummoX*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Northern Liberties Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, and *Caesira*. They have also been anthologized in *Point Mass*, *Poised in Flight*, and *The Poetry of Yoga, II*. Her essays, reviews, and interviews have appeared in *The Hollins Critic*, *Switchback*, and *The New York Journal* as well as the anthologies *Flashlight Memories* and *Easy to Love but Hard to Raise*.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

I had just returned from a train trip to New Orleans. It took 48 hours to get to California from there, sitting up in the seat the whole time. Your prompt gave me the opportunity and wonderful raw material to say something about that experience.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

The words in the prompt helped to guide the writing, pointing to what I should focus on. I probably would have written about the experience anyway, but the words, which were those I probably wouldn't have chosen without a prompt, added that extra fillip or spark, rather as though

someone else was speaking. That novelty in itself is always exciting to me. I love to write to prompts.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

No usual way. Sometimes a line or phrase sticks in my head, like a tune, or sometimes an image. Sometimes I set out quite deliberately to write about a particular subject, often one I've been challenged to write about.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

I got the idea for the cover of my chapbook of yoga poems, *Balance* (White Violet, 2012) while sitting in yoga class, in the throes of a difficult twist. Hard to say what the strangest source of inspiration is. Strange is in the mind of the beholder, I guess. Probably the sex toy store I saw once that was sitting right next to a marine aquarium store.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

I'm told that before I could write, and when I had just begun speaking full sentences, I dictated a story to my babysitter. I remember wanting to be able to read the words I saw everywhere. They still looked like something in a foreign language I desperately wanted to know.

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

All the time.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I had a fraught relationship with my parents, particularly my father. He was an extraordinary man, who suffered from bipolar disorder, Tourette Syndrome, and OCD; he could be violent, but was essentially very kind.

He was funny and charming sometimes, at other times a monster. After he passed away, I was able to write about him. My mother too.

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

Don't know. When I think of it, I'll write it.

The Interview

Adrian Mangiuca

The old man in the black cap gestured for the interview to begin by touching his index finger to the base of his thumb. A signal went out, and the image of an attractive young woman dressed in white filled the smooth grey wall in front of him. Her voice permeated his mind, though his ears heard nothing.

“Well, Mr. Daniels, thank you for taking time out of your day to speak with us. We certainly appreciate it.”

The old man nodded, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his legs. He watched her, and wondered at the blonde’s stunning beauty. Even as decrepit as he was, he had to admit her shapeliness. The high-definition image glowing in front of him did little to hide it: the curves of her hips and breasts, her hearty biceps, even her clavicle, all made clearly visible by her skintight jumpsuit.

The woman waited for a moment to see if he would acknowledge her greeting, and then continued in order to fill in the growing silence.

“Yes, well. We certainly do appreciate it. Today is an important day for you, isn’t it?”

She had a chirpy, high-pitched voice, and exaggerated her inflection, *as if I need to be kept awake*, Mr. Daniels thought. He knew that she was doing so more for the benefit of her audience than him. Still, he maintained his silence and waited for her to ask a question worth answering.

“I’m referring to the fiftieth anniversary of Reclamation, of course.”

Though he felt like responding with sarcasm, his immediate reaction—conditioned into every fiber of his being by his career before Reclamation—was politeness. *Sarcasm is the first refuge of the unimaginative*, he thought to

himself in his long-dead father's voice.

Still, he wondered at exactly what the words might cost him:

Fiftieth Anniversary? Goodness me, I had nearly forgotten. At ninety-five years of age, can you really blame me my dear? What is your name then, sweetheart? Where are you from and why did you decide to get into this fascinating line of work?

"Of course, Miss Miller. I am quite aware, more than most you might say, of the monumental importance of this fine May afternoon. And what a day it has turned out to be at that – the finest I've seen for some time."

"Oh it certainly is! The weather is predicted to keep up this way for a week, right on time for the Reclamation Day holidays." She relaxed her shoulders and the rigid smile that had been plastered to her face for the past thirty seconds.

Another pause, she continued.

"Indeed. We anticipate an even more spectacular fireworks display this season, Mr. Daniels!" She nodded eagerly.

A green light turned on at the top-right corner of the wall, indicating that the Presence had arrived inside the room. The old man breathed deeply and rested both hands in his lap. He cleared his thoughts so they would not compromise him; after fifty years of practice, the exercise had become second nature. After he had finished, a split second later, he watched the blonde's eyes carefully. She blinked rapidly in succession, indicating that she too was nervously aware of the Presence.

"So let's get started then. This is your first public appearance in twenty years, but we understand that you have been enjoying your life inside the Compound?"

"I have been. The animals returned shortly after my last appearance. I believe I saw a black bear ambling through some thickets near the center of Town earlier this week. The grasses came back long ago, and autumn in the

Fields is glorious. You should see the wildflowers I get in September, blowing through the breeze as they do. They've taken over most of the parking lots – horrible things they were – and have begun shooting up into the pavement everywhere. The thistle blossoms are my favorite. Besides that, I have been watching an oak tree grow near the top of the White Tower for some fifteen years now. I have no idea how it survives up there, or how it got there. It's positively striking."

The Old Names are dead. He repeated, guarding himself against calling out, and now even thinking, the names associated with the great city in which the Presence had met him.

In truth, he had planted the oak in that great tower years ago. Already an old man, he'd found an especially large acorn in his garden, perhaps left there by a forgetful squirrel. Later that day, and with pain in his hip from an injury sustained during Reclamation, he climbed almost 900 steps to the top of the tower, and loosened a stone to break one of the small windows.

A group of skeletons, their bright clothes disintegrating away below a thick layer of dust, silently watched from the floor where they had been left. He knew who had been whom by the clothes they wore: a colorful skirt here, high-heels and a black dress there; flip flops and a pair of the shoes typical for the time balanced on skeletal feet. He avoided their cavernous eyes.

When the window was fully broken, a gust of cold air whipped into the cramped space. It had not felt wind in the century-and-a-half since its construction. Cracks had begun to develop in the masonry, and it was in such a crack, underneath the window, that he wedged the acorn. An unpleasant drizzle had the abandoned city in its grip that afternoon. As it fell through the broken window, it watered the seed.

"Yes, Mr. Daniels. That does sound beautiful! I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say how pleased we are to hear that you are comfortable. Let's move on."

The old man clasped his hands together, and rubbed at his leathery skin with his thumb. He chastised himself for not having washed them before the interview. After tending his vegetable garden before rushing off to the

room, his nails became blackened from rooting around in the dirt. No matter, the blonde was unlikely to notice.

He wondered at how many more such hot May afternoons he would have to endure; fifty Mays since Reclamation, and fifty more to come, surely. He would live on into the depths of time, appointed by the Presence to keep silent watch over the once great city – indeed the world which it once held so much sway over. Time would move forward, yet his ravaged body would not be permitted to perish.

What a strange world he had inherited. The shapely woman looked down at her notes, and turned back up at him, smiling.

“We are appreciative of the work you have done for us, Mr. Daniels. Indeed, we are glad that you have taken up this great burden for our benefit. The prosperity of the era after Reclamation can be attributed to you, and you haven’t aged a day since we last saw you!”

The green light in the top corner flickered off. He breathed a sigh of relief. Considering the question that the pretty blonde in the skin-tight white suit had just asked, keeping his thoughts pure would be difficult. He let his mind wander as he often did when the Presence left, like stretching after rigorous exercise to prevent cramping.

Mr. Daniels knew that commenting on his ageing was a subtle way to remind him of his role, but again his impulsive politeness prevented a retort. *The first man to attain immortality and I will look like a shriveled old prune, the patchwork-color of a million liver-spots crowding for space on my skin.*

Perhaps I already do look like a prune, he thought. While his body ached, as those belonging to people of advanced age do, he could not be sure if he had already lived past the age he would have had Reclamation never happened. He rarely gave himself over to such thoughts, for they were futile.

Forever into the eons he would march, reminding mankind of the world which it had given up, acting as warning to the young to relish their youth and forswear longevity. Such was the design that the Presence had for the

world; such was the nature of Reclamation.

The old man smiled bitterly; his eyes felt moist, rheumy, and he briefly wondered if he would ever lose his sight. Such aspects of his ageing had never been made clear to him. The woman continued speaking, and while he was momentarily lost in his wondering, he barely heard her next question.

“Tell us of the World Before.”

“The world before?” he asked, surprise surgically removed from his voice.

“Yes.”

“The world before what?”

“Before Reclamation, Mr. Daniels.” She leaned over her notes to him and pulled in her seat, growing slightly larger on his screen. Her blinking over the past minute or so had ceased. The Presence had probably left on her end as well.

“But...” he weighed the words and continued, “what world?”

“Our world.” She smiled pleasantly.

She wants to get herself killed. He watched the green light expectantly, but it stayed dark.

“Our world?” he repeated, feigning ignorance.

“Yes. Earth, of course. The way you saw it,” she concluded. Her insistence on asking such a forbidden question probably meant that the Presence had intended it, considering that she was still alive. He was sure that some sort of trap had been set, perhaps to test his cognitive functioning after twenty years of total isolation: twenty years left alone to preside over the decay of his beloved city, and ponder the slow corruption of his own body.

His memory, however, persisted as it had been in his youth. That is to say,

it was utterly perfect. He knew all the faces of his past, and could recall conversations with old colleagues and friends easily. He would still roam the abandoned streets, recalling the smells wafting out from each restaurant, and the names of avenues which had been printed on signs that had long given in to rust. Sometimes he would walk through the halls of his home, hearing the echo of his children's laughter, or a confidant's whisper over a hurried breakfast.

Twenty years—and this was only his second interview after Reclamation. A reminder, broadcast out to the whole world, to relinquish their bodies once they reached a certain age, so as to avoid his destiny.

He coughed.

"So you want a story then, young lady?" He emphasized the word *young*, and she smiled.

"Any you wish to share, dear Mr. Daniels." She said it in a way that made him think she would reach out and gently touch his forearm.

"Let me think." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "How old are you?"

The woman blinked and forced a smile. Such a question was not strictly forbidden, but it was almost never asked, and considered extremely strange. There would be billions of raised eyebrows among the afternoon's audience.

"Ah. Hum, well, goodness Mr. Daniels. Yes, of course I can answer you—ha, but this is my interview, you crafty man. Yes. I am, let me see, thirty-five years old," She brushed a loose strand of curly hair from her forehead and continued watching him, smiling.

"That is quite young. I am exactly sixty years your senior, Miss Miller. Honestly, I am not aware of a person one-half of my age alive today. But of course I get very little news here."

By his best guess, she could not have more than one or two years left to live—an elder.

“Anyway where shall I begin my story? Perhaps the reason I wanted to ask your age was to reminisce on where I was when I was thirty-five. Today is a Saturday, so let me think.” He paused, making reference to his still-impeccable memory in case this was a test.

“That year of my life was the eve of my first major victory.”

“Of course!”

“Yes, I was among many friends and colleagues then—it was a time of celebration. We had won something very important for ourselves, and for the history of our land.”

“Indeed, indeed. It was the time when your destiny found you! And how did you feel?”

If only she would let me speak without her interjections. He knew it was futile.

“Oh we felt like millionaires, all. Of course, some of us among the crowd were; they had proven to be a major help to our great efforts. I was... very young... for a man in my position you see.”

“Of course, and then nine years later...”

“Yes, that is when destiny finally did find me. My place in Reclamation was sealed.”

That is to say, his *survival* in the reorganization of the human race that followed.

“Tell us about your days satisfying the role that you were assigned,” she chirped.

So that is what they have started calling it now: “the role which I was assigned.” He racked his memories for a suitable story – what would be vague enough to relate, without use of the old names or identifiable information? Even though the Presence was not with him in the room and he could think

freely, members of his own species would quickly denounce him if he spoke such memories aloud.

Aside from his place in the world before Reclamation, that is why the Entity had chosen him: a clear thinker, able to master his words and never slip. So he began.

“Well, young lady, the world before was a strange place.” Qualifiers like *wonderful* or *horrible* were forbidden. He continued,

“Back then, this city was buzzing. Today I suppose the only buzz I get is that from the bees I keep in the garden—they do make the most wonderful honey. Anyway, there was activity everywhere, and at all hours of the night: people in suits and ties going to and from their various offices—always dressed smartly no matter the weather or occasion.

“Perhaps I remember that the most clearly, how much emphasis the world before put on its clothing. Today I only have my black cap with me,” at that, he tipped it at the blonde, “but I have kept none of my collection of suits and ties. They are somewhere in this home, though since Reclamation I have not bothered looking for them.”

That was a lie: some forty years ago he put on a white collared shirt, with a tie and suit, and stood watching himself in a tall mirror for some minutes.

“Such clothes do not work very well for all the gardening I do in the summer here. I prefer my sturdy jeans and—well—sometimes I even go outside with no shirt on at all!”

“My my Mr. Daniels! Young at heart as ever I see.”

“Yes, I suppose so,”

Hussy. He pinched the bridge of his nose—the old man had begun sweating slightly. Air conditioning was a distant memory, and the room was in a particularly poorly-ventilated wing of the house.

“In any case, one story? I suppose if I had to choose one story—or an

impression—it would be of a morning in my garden. We had wonderful roses then, and many of them are still alive now. I try to tend them as best I can, but it would take many hands to do the job well, and I’m afraid I am better with vegetables than flowers.

“Anyway, I was speaking to a group of people about some issues that had come up that day. I remember them asking endless questions, which I would answer as best I could—such meetings were a regular occurrence back then—and I remember one question in particular.

“Now, the content of the question hardly matters here,”

Because if I told you, you and much of your audience would face a swift death,

“Except for the fact that a realization had dawned on me. Each and every one of the men facing me was wearing almost exactly the same outfit: a black suit, a red tie, black slacks, and a light blue collared shirt. Seeing this, I laughed to myself. My smile confused those men—and many more besides—considering the gravity of the day’s events, and the question itself.

“I will never forget that moment. All the strangeness of the times in which we lived dawned on me at once...”

She interrupted him.

“Well, Mr. Daniels, I am glad to see that your memories have come back so lucidly. We only have these five minutes, and we’ll have to cut to the next program now,” the green light came back on.

He realized that perhaps he had gone too far; maybe this description had too many identifiable memories attached; or could his voice have betrayed some underlying emotion?

“Thank you, Miss Miller. I will see you in twenty years.”

She laughed the comment away as coming from a man too senile to realize she would no longer exist by that point. The old man had made the

comment on purpose, however silent his thoughts were as he eyed the green light. He touched the tip of his pinky to his thumb to mark the end of transmission.

The wall turned black, and he took off his cap and ran his hands through his long, grey hair. The top of his skull had thinned out since his youth, but the back had remained thick and curly. He kept it in a long ponytail now.

He changed into more comfortable clothes before walking outside into the May afternoon: hiking boots and short trousers with a button-down shirt. He had resolved to walk to the tower today and say hello to his Oak tree.

As he walked, he guarded his thoughts closely—a Presence was nearby, and he better than any human alive could sense it. The walk was reasonably short, yet even in the twenty minutes it took him to reach the gleaming white obelisk at its heart, the Presence kept its vigil. He was not accustomed to being watched more than a few minutes at a time; perhaps it had noticed something unusual in his behavior. The old man focused on the beauty of that warm, late afternoon.

After the walk through the meadows and much longer trek up the tower's stairs, sweat had begun to pool on his chest and under his arms. May was a hot month in this part of the world, but the cross-breeze in the room kept it pleasant. In the intervening fifteen years, he had managed to open other windows without breaking them, giving him an island of respite from the late spring heat.

As he approached his tree, he appreciated as usual how deeply its roots had grown into the stonework of the immense old monument. The skeletons watched him silently, as they had since shortly after he had first come to this place to seek peace.

He gathered his thoughts and watched the one in the black dress for a moment, remembering the day that he discovered he could not commit suicide. While the oak was still a sapling, he had looked at his wife's face, long since reduced to bone, and resolved to join her in spite of the Presence's plans for him.

He had never felt such joy as when he gathered his courage and pushed his body through the narrow window, and felt the breeze kissing his face as he began his fall to the ground. Before reaching the halfway point of the tower, however, his descent slowed until he landed with the force of a feather floating to earth.

He confronted her skeleton the next day, and promised never to attempt such foolishness again. It sat, along with its two other companions, in silent watch.

Today, the bodies of his closest companions in life, moved into the tower two days after the Reclamation, stood where they had—unmoved, untouched. They were his only company, safe from the elements and the roaming animals. The oak tree had outgrown its space, and the stump had begun to wrap around the stone.

He moved to an East-facing window, also open, and glanced in the distance at the great white dome—among the world’s largest—that had held up so perfectly all these years. Green vines had begun to crowd the lower reaches of the building, but the dome lay there, like a porcelain egg planted in the ground, at the heart of the World Before.

His tears grew and grew, and one fell to the floor as he turned back to look Northward beyond the branches of the sturdy oak. He watched as his great White House, now left to him for the remainder of eternity, turned a faint orange in the sunset.

Prompt: Six Words, June 2013

Adrian Manguuca



Adrian Manguuca likes to write and smoke cigarettes when he is tired or frustrated. He firmly believes there is nothing better to do given such circumstances. When he manages to do it, his writing is mostly inspired by his travels, especially two years he spent working in New Delhi. If Adrian could be a tree, he would be a banyan. He currently lives in Washington, DC and happily works for the man.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

Thistle. I love thistle... so much. I wish I could see it everywhere, growing up through the cracks in pavement on the roads here in DC; jutting out of disintegrating brickwork. So I used the six-words prompt, and that's the image that I ran with. Thistle, growing in the middle of a major US city. But why would it do such a thing? Obviously, if people were around they'd clear it out... so people can't be around. But in DC? That means that something made them leave... but then there has to be at least one person to appreciate all that thistle--and possibly all the other wildflowers now running amok through the middle of a once bustling urban landscape. Who is that person? What does he want--it is a he, apparently--and where did he come from? And there you have it.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

I believe very firmly in causality--so naturally, without the initial inspiration, the story would have been utterly different. While it's not necessarily a one-two relationship, it does mean that the initial question of thistle, and my associations with it, created an environment around itself which gave birth to the story and character.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

No rituals, no habits. I write better when I'm hungover or frustrated, in the early morning or late at night. Strange, but it works. If I ever dedicate my life entirely to writing, then I will probably build better habits, and move to somewhere quieter than DC.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

Good question. With respect to your first question--in a dream, but that was for a formal paper for my master's degree so perhaps it doesn't count. It did, however, totally tell me how to proceed with my argument once I reached a seemingly-unbreakable two-week deadlock of ideas. As to your latter question, probably a mango that looked like a pair of bull testicles. You had to have seen this thing... it seriously... seriously looked like balls. I had a great run with that story.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

I remember trying to write a mystery novel where a kid gets teleported to a place much like the old "Myst" games. He has to solve a bunch of puzzles in order to find his way back to the love of his life, whom he has lost, because she was a fairy or some such thing. I was in the first grade, I actually got pretty far into the thing... maybe like 2000 words?

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

Every single time. That's the point of writing. It's always a surprise where the characters and worlds take me. That's why I love the whole process so much--what else is there to say? I guess if I was so hell bent on arriving at a predetermined conclusion, I'd be writing a descriptive academic paper, and I've done enough of that to be quite bored of it. When I write stories, they come quickly and of their own accord.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I can't write mystery or fantasy very well--at least since that first attempt when I was six. I prefer science fiction or magical realism. It's hard when so much depends on specific details... though I really enjoy reading Sherlock Holmes, for instance, or A Song of Ice & Fire. I'm actually reading Lord of the Rings now (at a snail's pace) but loving it immensely. The point is I've never been patient enough to write such involved threads myself.

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

I've always wanted to imagine a human race in which our great (x1,000,000) grandchildren sat back, and watched as Earth was finally engulfed by a dying, expanding sun. I've always wanted to know how, after billions of years on this planet, our species will ultimately think, and what we will see in the world which gave us life when it finally dies. What will we look like? Supposing our species lives on? Will we care? Will we be nostalgic like we are today; sentimental? Will every trace of what we call "humanity" today have left us? I have never encountered science fiction that tackles this strange future; I'd love to read that story, or write it.

Aloysius Makes a Friend

Kelly Ann Jacobson

Donny's brother Michael was a geek. Not the kind of geek who is secretly sensitive, like in 80's movies when a kid gets a makeover and wins over the heart of the head cheerleader, or the kind who does something productive with his smarts, like cure cancer – no, unfortunately Michael was a run-of-the-mill, owl-framed, fact-spewing nerd. To make matters worse, they were born only a year apart, so Donny had to put up with his little brother's social awkwardness through every grade but kindergarten. At breakfast, he had to hear about breaking news on extrasolar planets or the most recent scientific paper on giving mice false memories; during dinner, he had to wait to serve himself until Michael tested his robot's ability to pass the mashed potatoes.

Unfortunately, Donny's parents saw Michael's inventions and "special interests" as something to encourage. As two farmers who had always wished for better educations, they could relate to their son's desire for a chemistry set or the complete *Encyclopedia Britannica*; what they could not relate to were Donny's play-by-play renditions of his football triumphs, or Lena, the girl with the short skirts and lip piercing whom he brought home on Friday nights. So naturally, when his mom and dad took Michael with them to their annual soil convention, Donny packed the fridge with Bud Light, turned the stereo volume past Michael's "DANGEROUS DECIBELS!" mark, and threw the loudest, craziest, most dangerous party his high school had ever seen.

The night was going well until Maryanne and Robert, the senior class's couple voted "most likely to get married," found their way into Michael's *Star Wars* sheets. All Donny saw was Maryanne pulling Robert into the room by his belt loop one minute, then running out screaming the next. She had a red mark across one shoulder like sunburn, the skin already peeling, and her face was the color of his father's best tomatoes. "Run!" she exclaimed, already halfway out the door before her Romeo dashed out of the bedroom brandishing a lamp like a sword, "It's coming for us!"

Like the typical lemmings they were, within minutes Donny's friends had abandoned him. the house was empty except he and Lena.

"Now what?" Lena asked, fiddling with her lip ring.

"I'm sure it's nothing, probably just one of Michael's robots or tarantulas. Come on, let's go see."

The two of them tip-toed to the door marked ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK, and Donny pushed the door with his index finger. It creaked open slowly, revealing a burnt-out semi-circle of a room with what used to be the right wall and ceiling completely missing, and Donny got a very bad feeling in his stomach as he stared into the starry sky. "Whatever happens, don't tell my parents about any of this," he told Lena, stepping over the broken glass beakers and charred books that comprised the rubble on Michael's floor.

Meanwhile in the chicken coop, a visitor with a very large tail and a set of shiny, red scales settled into Roost 2. Aloysius the chicken pecked once from his neighboring seat, then thought better of it.

Prompt: Run With It, August 2013

Kelly Ann Jacobson



Kelly Ann Jacobson is currently pursuing her MA in Fiction at Johns Hopkins University, and she is the Poetry Editor for *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine*. Kelly has had or will have short stories published in *The Exhibitionist Magazine*, *Hoglepot*, and *The Writing Disorder*. Her work can be found at www.kellyannjacobson.com.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

The inspiration for this piece really did come from the prompt—I loved the line "Aloysius the chicken pecked once, then thought better of it" right away because of the original chicken name, and had been dying to write a story with a dragon in it, so I just fused the two ideas together and "Aloysius Makes A Friend" was born.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

The ending was entirely based on the initial inspiration, but I had no idea how I was going to get there or who the human characters would be. How could a dragon end up in a chicken coop to allow for the necessary pecking? So I started at the beginning and felt around in the dark for a while, and then Donny and Michael appeared.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I always know the first scene of a story and sometimes the last scene, but absolutely NOTHING in between. I hate timelines, outlines, and any other organizational tool, at least during first drafts (they take all the fun out of the journey!) so I just start with an image and see where it takes me.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

I went on a completely random vacation with my boyfriend down Skyline Drive to Luray, VA, and later was struck by an idea for a YA novel partly set in Luray Caverns. I also later wrote a poem inspired by the town, a fictional "Loray." Who would have guessed a trip to a bed and breakfast in the middle of nowhere would have inspired so many pieces?

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

I have been a writer since kindergarten; I remember my kindergarten teacher bringing another teacher over to my desk and telling her I was the best writer in the class, and ever since then, I've wanted to be a writer. I wrote a few illustrated stories during my elementary school years, which are still in my school's student author library -- I think one was about a stuffed animal bear, and the other was about moving houses.

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

All the time. At this point in my writing life I never really plan where my stories will go, since I never get it right. My novel started out as a short story, and then when I tried to put the characters aside and start something new, I couldn't. They just kept talking to me, so I listened and wrote what became my first novel. The same thing happened with my novella, which I thought would become a novel but ended abruptly after sixty pages. Most

recently I started writing a short story set in Virginia, which became a YA fantasy novelette with wizards in it.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

Fiction in general is the easiest for me to write, and nonfiction is the hardest. After years of writing fiction, I just can't seem to accept that you can't just make things up in nonfiction. I'm always tempted to make the dialogue better, or change the characters, myself included!

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

I would love to see more magical realism in mainstream fiction. I'm new to both fantasy and magical realism, but absolutely love them. Introducing magical elements into a normal world is fascinating to me, and I hope to explore those elements further in later works.

Slattern

Marie Abate

Will says we are acting strange today,
so we drive across a wooden bridge
somewhere in Pennsylvania.
He leads me down tree-torn streets
set against a bluing sky.
We stop at a an estuary
where he jumps in feet first
and starts skipping stones,
puncturing the water
and smiling like a boy
running into green.
He gets to six beats
before something drowns.

I don't know what we are doing here
under this broken bridge,
loving each other so awkwardly,
throwing our shoes away.
Maybe someday we will live
next to this stream,
sink steady-deep into mud and silt,
and then when a bright stone
drops between us
today will never matter.

Prompt: Six Words, August 2013

Marie Abate



Marie Abate is a poet from Baltimore. She works as both a writer and an editor and has an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her most recent writing has appeared in *Crack the Spine*; *Sewanee Theological Review*; *Free State Review*; *The Mom Egg*; *Kisses with Fishes*; *Smile Hon, You're in Baltimore!*; and *20 Something Magazine*. Her first book, *The April Sonnets*, is forthcoming in 2014, and she is currently at work on a novel.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

My boyfriend Will and I had been dating a little over six months, and everything had seemed perfect. Then, one weekend back in July, we had our first fight. What we had argued about did not seem as significant as the fact that we had argued at all. The next morning we both woke up and somehow couldn't shake the feeling that something between us had changed. Will suggested that we go out onto the highway and just drive for a while. So we did, not talking, which is not like us, and all of a sudden we were out of northern Maryland and over the state line in Pennsylvania. We kept going. We drove on for hours, until we crossed a bridge and stopped at a stream, and then Will stepped out of the car, threw his shoes on the pebbled beach, and jumped in the water.

There was a turning point in the relationship as I watched Will start skipping stones over the water. He couldn't get past six. We had been dating for six months. Did this mean something significant? Were we going

to make it? But then when that stone sank, he smiled, and he tried again. I liked that. It felt like a moment I should write about it in a poem.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

I try to write or revise poems almost every night before bed. I usually have at least two or three initial drafts of a poem. I try to space out each draft by at least a week. By the third draft, I can usually tell if something is working or not. The first draft I wrote was called "After the First Fight." But that version talked more about the drive and how I wanted us not to be fighting anymore, and I left out the water scene entirely. It was too emotional. I put it away for a month and picked the poem up again last week to see if it was worth saving. I still didn't have a good ending in the second draft, but this time, at least, the poem ended with a scene on the water. The third draft came to me a week later on a Friday night, with Will sleeping on the couch next to me, his shoes thrown on the floor. I was on my laptop and pulled up the Six Words prompts for Prompt and Circumstance on a whim. I saw the word *puncture*, and that word struck me, and I remembered my original poem. I remembered how Will had been skipping stones that day, and how it looked as if the stones were puncturing the water. I also liked the idea of writing about stones dropping between us; it seemed to have a parallel between the actual act of skipping stones and about the passing of time and space. Once I really thought about the word *puncture*, I knew exactly where I wanted the poem to go, and "Slattern" was born.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I am usually inspired by little moments in time that seem significant. I am always guided by an emotion, and I let whatever I am feeling lead me to what I want the poem to say. In that sense, I try to capture a mood, undertone, or current in my work, one that may be insular in focus or that may be unexpected.

I usually write at night, weather permitting, on my second floor balcony, overlooking a valley full of trees, with my Macbook on my lap and a little

lavender candle next to me for light. It feels nice. I write for an hour or two before bed.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

Museums are my favorite place to go for inspiration. I look at pictures and walk around the marble staircases, and I'm always inspired. I'm working on a novel right now, but I'm stuck on some of the plot specifics. I went to the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore last weekend and probably took a hundred pictures of a crosier and a sepulcher of foxes and Dionysus and happily went home and wrote for the rest of the night. I'm still not sure why I did that but something just clicked.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

The first poem I remember writing was for religion class in Catholic school at St. Pius X in third grade. We had to write a poem about the nativity. I wrote about the three wise men, how it must have felt to walk towards the stable, just smelling the sweetness of the hay, holding out spices in their hands and falling on their knees just because the stars sent them there. I always found the nativity story fascinating. So that's what I wrote about, and I didn't even mention Jesus, and my teacher said at the time that I didn't follow the directions, but that she liked the poem anyway. I got an A minus. I had wanted an A. Maybe I could do better next time, I thought. That moment kept me writing.

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

Every poem I write is always a journey, and I rarely end up where I think I am going to go. Every poem surprises me.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I tend to like to write a lot about nature, especially phases of the moon. I find small moments in this world endlessly entertaining.

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

I am writing my first novel about a girl named April who can see ghosts. I've had this story inside of me my whole life, and I can't wait to get it down on paper. And it is scary and strange and unlike anything I have ever done before. This novel is like a maze that keeps spinning me around in every direction, but I want to be able to find the center, and I think I'm finally on my way.

Ol' Barnaby

Ramona D. Pina

Barnaby O'Conner hates kangaroos. He bitterly watches the changing world and hates all of its newness. He hates the sky rises and dingo businessmen that feign importance. He hates the Sidney opera house where people overpay to watch a hideously overweight woman belch her umpteenth meal while cackling incomprehensible words. He remembers it being constructed when he was a boy and vividly recollects the pompous attendees entering the theater with their already upturned koala noses. Their faces were botox-like, frozen into looks of disgust that betrayed their delight.

He prefers to retreat to the reddish clay outback that he claims as his backyard. There, he finds comfort in its dry and desolate atmosphere, which almost mirrors Barnaby's sense of humor. The only static fixtures in his shifty environment are the kangaroos, who are really the native Aborigine in the area. Despite this fact and its proof of something stable in his volatile environment, he hates them too. No one else calls the Aborigine kangaroos. It's only derogatory because Barnaby makes everything derogatory. He doesn't only call the natives names but classifies everyone as animals.

The little Tasmanian and Thorny deviled children bullied Barnaby when he was young because he wasn't like the others. He had bleach blond hair like his father that grew upward like his mother's. His tattered and poorly tailored clothing looked like his pastime was crocodile wrestling. His inherited green eyes contrasted unnaturally against his reddish skin. His mother was a homely malnourished-looking woman with coarse hair and light brown skin. His dad was a seasonal construction worker with little education who descended from the English prisoners that were once jailed on the island. His siblings, two brothers and a little sister, all looked like him. They were poor and couldn't afford to do anything but live off of the land. Its barren disposition begrudgingly yielded them fruit and all of the children teased him for this.

It turns out that Barnaby's momma was a "kangaroo." Since his dad was an English Australian, Barnaby was not quite a kangaroo but a wallaby. This made him and his siblings outsiders to both worlds. Eventually they grew older, married off and moved away to other continents to escape the social intolerance, but not old Barnaby. He stayed and he hated.

While driving back from a hunting run, Barnaby approaches someone in a broken down car. He hates unprepared people but decides to help anyway. He pulls over, gets out, throws his rifle over his left shoulder and walks up to the distressed wombat. With each step he takes down the road towards this road kill, he realizes that this man is one of the little Tasmanian devils that badgered him as a child. At that moment, he wanted to swing his rifle around and blast this guy. He would first shoot his left leg. Then, he would shoot off the right and leave him paralyzed. After the creature fell, he would walk up to and lean over his writhing body, spitting chewed tobacco at his eyes before hopping into his all terrain SUV to watch him bleed. He would drive off, abandoning the wounded animal, only to stop, switch his gears into reverse and run him over; drive off, reverse again and repeat.

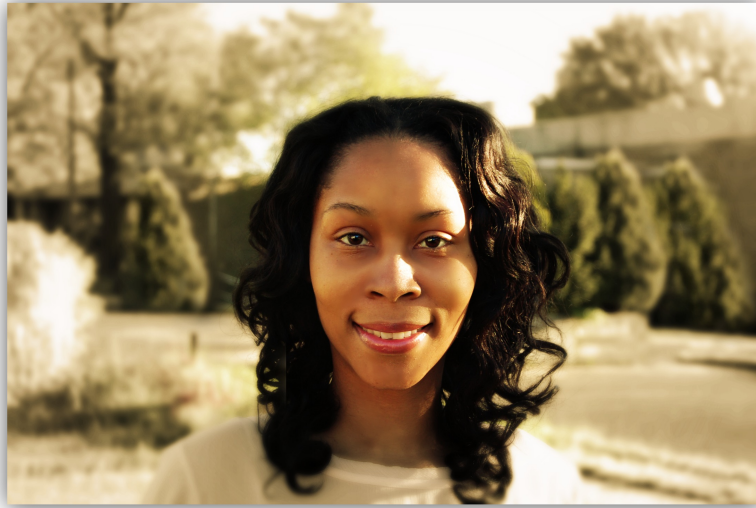
If only he were a crocodile, and not a wallaby, he would decapitate him with a 5,000-pound bite force. Barnaby feels himself choking the rifle's handle, and thinks, "It would be so easy to rid the world of this vermin." The bush was his home and no one but himself, and the devil, would ever know. He then wondered how any of that would differentiate him from the man crouched a few meters away.

The guy, now grey-haired and hunchbacked compared to Barnaby's rippled sun-dried hide, looks centuries older. He says, "Barnaby? Barnaby O'Conner, is that you?" He almost looks afraid at the reality that it is old Barnaby. He recognizes that the years have treated this man much better. Barnaby nods, confirming his identity. Before he utters a word, the former torturer begins rambling on about their childhood and constantly apologizes for all the torment he caused. Barnaby remains silent, and when the man finishes speaking, he remains that way still. He helps change the flattened tire and when they both stand, Barnaby extends his hand. They grip palms and shake firmly. Then he quietly returns to his Jeep.

Barnaby inherently knows something that most of us forget: people are animals. What he was reminded of today, for the first time in a long time, is that not all of them attack. Relief washes over him and he hops into his Jeep to head back home. While driving down the lonely road, he feels the urge to divert from his typical route and take the scenic one. He hated breaking routine but that was beginning to be the day's theme. "Why not?" he thinks. As he drives, he passes a wooden gate at the end of an expansive property that reads "Jirra." That was his mother's maiden name that translates into kangaroo in her native aborigine tongue. Barnaby can't believe that he had forgotten about this place. He pumps the breaks, cranks the gears into reverse, parks in front of the gate and gets out. He thought that the place was abandoned but when he looks carefully, he can see other brown skinned blondies off in the distance. It takes him a minute to register that they are waving at him. "Well I'll be..." he murmurs and he waves back. He pushes past the splintering gate and starts walking briskly towards the group. His leather hide cheeks stretch unnaturally, and its newness is odd to him. But he doesn't hate the feeling. He doesn't hate it at all.

Prompt: Whatta Character, June 2013

Ramona D. Pina



Ramona D. Pina has published an essay and poem in *Boston's Book of Peace Vol. V* (1999). Her spoken word was published in *Blackberry: A Magazine's* blog in May. She also has a flash fiction piece that will publish in the fall of 2013 with *Zest Literary Journal*.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

I don't have a particular methodology. I research different things so that my imagery can be realistic. The rest I make up. What I come up with surprises even me. I'm always challenging myself and building a story upon each prompt.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

I was attracted to the Barnaby character because it sounded like he just liked killing things. Which made me think about self-reflection and being aware of emotions. Since that's how I think, I couldn't help but take Barnaby's hate to that next step. Asking "why" he hates, what caused him to be this way. Digging deep.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning,

middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

10% is inspiration; the rest is research to help with imagery and developing the story on my own. Making up the why and the how. I start writing a story at the beginning. Of all my works, as much as I change the ending and parts of the body, the beginning never changes.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

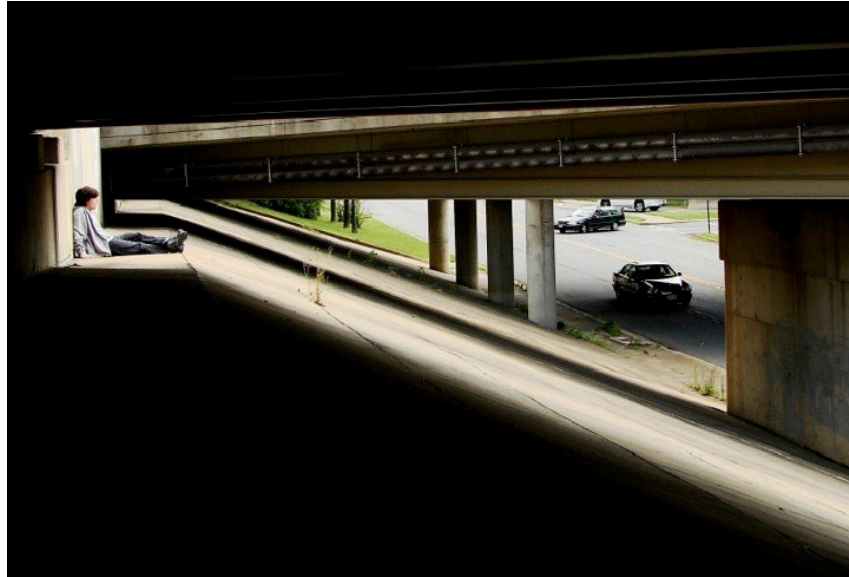
I have been struck by idea in a dream, by a Facebook post, and by dropping kid off at school.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

The earliest thing I wrote was poetry. I started in second grade. Langston Hughes' "A Dream Deferred" was posted on the wall and I would stare at it in class all day.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

Subjects that come easy to me are fiction and poetry. However, I ironically struggle with non-fiction and anything autobiographical.



Singularity

Donna McLaughlin Schwender

"Your mom is a filthy whore
and you're a freak of nature."
The trenchant meteorites
hurled by galactic traveling companions
impale his motherland
and leave invisible scars.

His life revolves around space,
words,
and the space between words.
He is the son —
existing in the windless shadows of a waning moon,
seeking warmth from the origin of his universe.

Her life revolves around need,
love,
and the need to be loved.
She is Mother Earth —
orbiting out of control,

seeking warmth from alternating centers of her own universe.

From the truant perch
of his eclipsed observatory,
telescopic eyes
focus on the slattern
cloaked in stardust.
She is Saturn
festooned in the luminescence
of her many rings;
her equatorial corona
ebbing and flowing
in the estuary between
self-love and self-loathing.

As familial roots
puncture the foundation
of his concrete throne,
the sheer weight of his emptiness
prevents him from peregrinating
to a more hospitable home planet.
He wills himself to go supernova.

Collapsing inward,
a black hole is born.
As the gravitational pull of desire
crosses the threshold
of his event horizon,
the words for space, time, love, and need
coalesce into a singularity of souls
and becomes forever invisible
to the naked eyes of exploration.

Prompt: Imagine, August 2013, and Six Words, August 2013

Donna McLaughlin Schwender



Donna McLaughlin Schwender has been pushing a pen across paper in an effort to find her way back into the world after a tick bite ended her career as a Wildlife Biologist. Her first published words recently appeared in the Spring and Summer 2013 issues of Haunted Waters Press, *From the Depths*. A self-professed word nerd, feather finder, heart stone hunter, and synchronicity searcher, you can eavesdrop on her life by visiting her blog, Heart Stone Feathers (<http://heartstonefeathers.com/>).

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

For Prompt & Circumstance, I always look at all four of the monthly prompts to see what inspires me. As a self-professed word nerd, the Six Words prompt is the one that usually captures my attention. I have to confess that I had to look up the definition of two of the words – slattern and trenchant – that were part of the Six Words prompt for August. Once I knew what they meant, I felt drawn to look again at the August Imagines prompt that featured the young boy sitting under an overpass.

I've learned that my best writing usually starts with "hearing a voice" that gives me a sentence or phrase to begin the process. In this case, after staring at the Imagine prompt photo, it was the sentence, "Your mom is a filthy whore and you're a freak of nature." I had NO idea what it meant or where it was going to lead me, but I just kept following it as the story unfolded. I know that sounds crazy to some people, but it's the only way I know how

to describe it. It's as if the story already exists and is simply waiting for me to be the transcriber.

As for the outer space component of the piece, I admit to being a Sci-Fi geek. Pieces of me seem to occasionally spill over into my work and I try to graciously ride the wave of that part of the process.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

The initial first sentence inspiration really set my pen in motion. There was no stopping it after that. Other than intense word-by-word editing of my first draft, very little changed or had to be "worked through." I wish I could say that's how it always happens, but it doesn't. I just know when it does, it will be something good (or at least something I personally like).

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

Sorry, but there's nothing special I can add to the conversation here. I just try to be quiet, listen, and then get out of my own way - all of which is easier said than done.

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

I'm drawing a blank on these questions, but I will say that the weirdest thing I ever wrote ON (and I do mean ON) was a banana. It was an assignment for one of my writing classes.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

While I don't have a specific memory of writing it, I recently found a photo-storybook entitled "Fish" that I had written for a first grade assignment. I laughed when I saw the truest words I've probably ever written – "A tuna fish has tuna inside of him."

To do the research for my childhood writing projects, I remember using "The New Book of Knowledge" encyclopedia. I loved reading those books just for fun!

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

I feel like every one of my pieces has taken on a life of its own. Even if I start out with a general idea of where I think I might end up going, I don't let myself get flustered when the path of words I lay down leads me to another place. I simply try to think of it as part of the experience/process.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

For a long time, I was only interested in writing non-fiction, whether in the form of memoir or essays. I never thought I'd be able to write poetry or fiction. After taking several writing classes this past year, that's all changed. I now find myself writing a great deal of poetry, as well as creating fictional stories that are usually based of writing prompts. I'm also working on my first large fictional piece; whether it becomes a full-scale novel remains to be seen.

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

As farfetched as it might sound, I'd love to write a book that features feathers as its main characters. My life seems to be "encrusted" – gloriously so – with feathers, so it seems like a no-brainer, but I've yet to do it. I haven't given up hope though.

Granddad

Josh Morrey

Ever have one of *those days*? You know, where everything goes wrong? You oversleep, traffic's a mess... dead grandfather waiting for you in the airport lobby?

Well, I have. And it happened to be today.

My day started out in the red. Flashing red. The flashing red numbers 12:00 to be exact. A power outage sometime in the night killed the alarm clock without prejudice and I woke up to my wife shouting that my flight was in less than an hour.

Traffic on I-71 moved a little faster than snails in sludge, but not much. By the time we got to the Cleveland Hopkins Airport, my flight was already boarding. I delivered kisses to my wife, the kids, the dog, possibly a Skycap standing by, yanked my suitcase and computer bag from the back of the car, and dashed for the ticket counter.

That's when I saw him.

Charles Lunt VanOlpin had been a rancher, soldier, politician, and sculptor. He'd served in two wars, on four city councils, raised and slaughtered over five thousand head of cattle, and carved the Amend Park monument in Billings, Montana. He'd been married twice, shot once, and spawned more than thirty grandchildren.

He'd also been dead for five years. Heart attack.

Being a native of Ohio, while Granddad had lived in Montana, I'd really only met the man a few dozen times in my life; just enough to recognize him sitting by himself in a bank of chairs across from the JetBlue ticket counter, bottle of milk in hand.

When I saw him, his eyes were already locked on me, icy blue orbs that pierced your soul and always seemed to smirk at what they saw. Despite my tardiness and the daunting line at the ticket counter, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Grandad?” I said, unable to mask my surprise.

“Jimmy, my boy,” Grandad smiled as he stood, a lopsided, mischievous grin hanging on his wrinkled face. “It’s about time you got here.”

Stunned by his nonchalance, I stammered, “W-what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you, of course,” Grandad said without pause.

“Yeah, but, you’re... *dead*.” I lowered my voice as I caught the shifting eyes of several passersby, each pretending they weren’t listening.

“So?” Grandad replied.

“I—” I didn’t know what to say to that.

He looked exactly the same as he did the last time I saw him. Sun-dried skin, bulbous nose, wreath of gray hair, and sturdy, muscular frame, all wrapped in an orange flannel shirt and dirty blue coveralls. I’d been told more than once that I resembled him in his younger years and would probably turn out similarly. Lord help me if that was true.

A female voice over the intercom pulled me back to the present. I looked from Grandad to the ticket counter and back and said, “I really don’t have time for this.”

I left him standing there as I hustled to the ticket counter. The line had waned, but not enough. I took my place behind a hefty woman in a sunflower dress and watched the people at the check-in kiosks anxiously.

“What’s your hurry, Jimmy?” Grandad said, startling me. I hadn’t heard him walk up. He leaned against the small station where you fill out the name and address tags for your luggage.

"I'm going to miss my flight," I said.

He shrugged. "There'll be others." He offered me his bottle. "Milk?"

"No, um, thanks."

He shrugged again. "Your loss." He downed another swig, sighed, and said, "Tell you what, there are some things in life that you never truly appreciate until it's too late, you know that, don'cha?"

I watched him for a moment. I hadn't heard those words in five years. "You know that, don'cha?" was Grandad's signature phrase. Like I said, I didn't know the man too well, but it was still nice to hear him say it again.

"If I miss this flight, I won't make the staff meeting at four o'clock," I worried aloud.

"And?"

"*And*, Donna doesn't take too kindly to missed staff meetings. If I don't make it, I'll have to hear about it for the next six months."

A group of kids chasing through the line darted suddenly *through* Grandad, his form losing its opacity for a moment.

I stared in surprise. "They can't see you?" I asked.

He snorted. "Of course not, my boy. Only you can."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Great," I muttered. "I'm hallucinating. It's got to be the stress."

"Hallucinating?" Grandad sounded offended. "Could a hallucination do this?" He reached up and flicked the top of my ear, like he used to when I was a kid. It really stung.

"Ouch!" I cried. "That hurt!" People continued to stare. I glanced around, embarrassed, and said, "Earache." I don't think any of them bought it.

“So, you won’t get fired?” Grandad asked, going back to our conversation.

I looked at him, rubbing my ear. His dark eyes sparkled. “Not likely. Not for this event, anyway. But if I miss too many, I could.”

“Well,” Grandad sighed. “It’ll work out. You know that, don’cha?” He motioned past me with a nod. “You’re up, son”

I turned to find a ticketing agent motioning to me. I snatched up my suitcase and hurried over.

I quickly swiped my credit card and followed the prompts on the screen. James McKay; final destination: San Francisco; checking one bag; no firearms, explosives or other contraband; print boarding passes. The agent asked for my ID and indicated for me to place my suitcase on scale.

“All right, Mr. McKay, that’ll be \$75,” the agent said.

“Oh, no, I’m a Platinum Member,” I informed him. “I get two checked bags free.”

“Only if they’re under fifty pounds, sir.”

I glanced at the glowing numbers on the scale. 87 lbs.

“Eighty-seven— wait a minute.” I reached down and unzipped my suitcase. Inside, resting atop my clothing, were three bowling balls. “What the...?” I reached in and pulled one out. Green with blue swirly designs, I’d never seen it before in my life; nor the others.

“Yeah, that’d do it,” the agent said.

I heard a whistle out of Grandad. “Didn’t know you were a bowler, Jimmy.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Excuse me, sir?” the agent replied.

I gave Grandad a sour look. “Nothing,” I said to the agent. “Look, I don’t know how these got in here.”

“Are you saying someone has tampered with your luggage, sir?”

“What? No. Must’ve been one of my kids. But I don’t need them and I don’t want them. Can I just leave them with you?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir, I’m not allowed to accept gifts.”

“It’s not a—”

His impassive gaze stopped me short.

“Fine.” I turned to the line of people. “I’ve got three bowling balls here. Anybody want them?”

A friendly old gentleman dropping off his wife took two, though he had to rent one of those luggage carts to get them out to his car, and a squirrely teenager in a rock band t-shirt accepted the third with a grin. That left my suitcase underweight, as it should have been, and the ticket agent tagged it and handed my boarding pass.

“You’d better run,” he said.

I did. All the way to the line at the security checkpoint; twice as long as the ticket counter. I waited again, fidgeting nervously.

“How’re Sonni and the kids?” Grandad asked from beside me.

I jumped. “Geez, Grandad, quit doing that.”

He held his hands up. “Easy there, cowboy. No need to get testy.”

I scowled at him, ignoring the stares from around me. “They’re fine. Joey just graduated kindergarten, and Cutter’s starting to walk.”

“*Graduated* kindergarten? Boy they’ll celebrate any mediocrity these days won’t they? Whatever it takes to make the kids feel good about themselves, eh?”

“What’s wrong with a kindergarten promotion?” I asked.

“Kids these days are coddled, Jimmy; spoiled. They have their little hands held until they graduate college and they’re lauded every time they spell their name right. In my day, we didn’t get recognized for doing what we were supposed to. We got whipped when we didn’t, you know that, don’cha?”

“There’s nothing wrong with a promotion ceremony from kindergarten to first grade,” I said. “Honestly, I think it’s more for the parents than the kids anyway.”

“How’s the rest of your family? Your folks? Your sisters? Did that little brother of yours ever come out?”

I gave him a flat look. “Chuck isn’t gay, Grandad.” I caught a few scowls around me. “Not... that there’s anything *wrong* with that,” I hastily added.

Grandad snorted. “If you say so, Jimmy. You know, there’s a reason he’s thirty-eight and still single.”

“He just hasn’t met the — You know what? I’m not having this conversation with you.”

We’d finally reached the ticket checker and I pulled out my boarding pass and ID. Before I could hand it to her, a gust of air blew the ticket from my hand. I snatched it from the floor with a curse and held it out again. Another gust took it away, this time past the rope stanchions. I apologized as a young boy retrieved it for me.

As I offered it the third time I felt the breeze again, but squeezed my fist shut, preserving my grip. That was when I noticed Grandad crouched beside me, blowing on my hand.

“Hey!” I yelled, yanking my hand away from his still puckered lips. He stood quickly as if nothing happened. Glaring at him, I handed the ticket to the checker. She eyed me for a moment, so I pointedly ignored the next thing Grandad said. After some scrutiny, she returned my pass and ID and motioned me on.

As I tucked my various belongings into one of the gray bins – shoes, jacket, phone, keys, wallet, boarding pass and other papers – and pulled my laptop from its case, I said to Grandad, “How’d you do that?”

“Do what, Jimmy?”

“You know, affect... things. Like flicking my ear or blowing on that boarding pass. I mean, you’re not really here, right? No one can see you, so how can you touch things?”

“Who says I’m not here?” Grandad asked, pulling himself up.

“Everyone around us,” I reply. “They can’t see you, remember? But I can. Why?”

He grinned again. “Oh, that’s one of the great things about being dead, Jimmy. I can do all sorts of things. In fact, I can pretty much do whatever I want.”

I felt a touch on my arm and found a TSA agent politely motioning for me to step into the body scanner machine. I moved into the enclosure and held my arms up as indicated.

“Sir, do you have anything in your left pocket?” the TSA agent on the other side of the machine asked as I stepped out.

“No, I put it all in the –” I trailed off as I patted down my pants pocket. It felt padded. I reached in and pulled out my wallet, boarding pass, baggage claim stub, and a wad of tissues; all items I was sure I’d placed in the bin.

The TSA agent sifted through the pile, then said, "Go ahead and hold those items in your hand sir. I just need to pat down your left side. Arms up, please."

I sighed impatiently, but complied. I didn't have time for this, but what could I do? He patted me down and I refrained from asking for his phone number, a joke I'm sure he hears on a daily basis, and I was allowed to proceed.

At the rollers exiting the x-ray machine I found another TSA agent waiting, hand on my computer bag. Grandad stood next to her mimicking her expression.

"Is this your bag, sir?" she asked.

"Yes," I snapped. "What is it now?"

She arched an eyebrow. Grandad said, "Now, Jimmy. There's no cause to be rude. I know for a fact your momma taught you better than that. This nice young woman is just doing her job."

I sighed again and repeated, "Yes," in a more patient tone.

"I need to have a look inside, sir. Please gather your belongings and follow me." Again, though I was nearly out of time, I complied, snatching my junk from the bin and tucking my computer under my arm as I hobbled over, one shoe on, to the stainless steel table she'd taken my bag to.

"What's in this bag, sir?" she asked.

"Just some paperwork and computer accessories; power supply, mouse, stuff like that," I said.

"She's cute, ain't she?" Grandad asked, standing beside her and giving me an eyebrow pop.

"Shut-up," I muttered.

“Excuse me, sir?” The woman, Agent Whicker, her nameplate read, said.

“Nothing,” I said quickly, “Sorry, not you.”

“Is there anything in this bag I should be aware of, sir?” Agent Whicker asked.

“...no... like what?” I said.

“The x-ray image showed what appeared to be a... human head, sir. Do you have anything like that in here?”

“What?” I said. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Agent Whicker eyed me as she donned a pair of bright blue rubber gloves and proceeded to unzip the front pocket of my bag.

“Is there anything sharp or dangerous I need to be aware of, sir?”

“No,” I replied, the fight gone out of me.

In the time it took her to scour the interior of the bag I swear I could have driven to San Francisco and back. I retied my shoes, put on my belt, and stuffed everything else in my pockets. Finally she zipped all the pockets closed and informed me she needed to rerun the bag through the x-ray.

“Please hurry.” My plea was met with incredulity. As she walked away, I turned to Grandad, who was running his hand along one of those handheld metal detectors the TSA uses. Every time his forearm passed by, the unit lit up.

“Look at that, Jimmy,” Grandad said. “It even picks up that old piece of shrapnel still lodged in here.”

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

He looked at me. “Seems pretty obvious to me.”

I shook my head. "Not to the metal detector. To me. Why are you making everything so difficult?"

"Can't a man have a little fun with his grandson?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"A little fun? Grandad, I'm going to miss my flight. And believe it or not, that's *not* fun."

"Don't be so uptight, sonny. Things'll work out, you'll see."

Agent Whicker returned. "Thank you for your cooperation, sir."

I snatched the bag from her hands and ran for the gate, leaving her and Grandad in stunned silence.

The terminal was packed with people, some coming, some going, and some, I'm certain, just standing there to act as obstacles to those of us with real purpose. I shouldered my way past more than a few upset travelers, muttering apologies as I went, and made it to my gate just in time to watch the plane push off from the causeway.

"Wait!" I called, waving my free hand. "Wait, I'm here."

I reached the counter and breathlessly said to the gate agent, "Wait I'm here. I have to get on that plane."

"Name?" The agent asked.

"James McKay."

She typed on her keyboard a minute, then said, "I'm sorry, Mr. McKay, but you're too late."

"No," I protested. "I'm here. Just have them pull back in and let me on. It won't take five minutes."

“Even if I could do that, sir, it wouldn’t do any good. Your seat was given to a standby passenger ten minutes before boarding concluded.”

“No. No, no, no.” I looked into the disinterested eyes of the gate agent.

She didn’t say the words, *Next time be on time*. She didn’t have to. She helped me rebook for the next available flight, three hours away, and I sauntered over and dropped into a chair to wait.

Grandad was sitting there waiting for me.

“Tough luck, kid,” he said.

“This is your fault,” I said. “You know that, right?” I meant for the accusation to sting, but my heart just wasn’t in it. Then a realization struck me and I sat up suddenly looking Grandad in the eye. “Wait, this *is* your fault. You meant for this to happen, you *made* this happen, didn’t you?”

His averted gaze was all the confirmation I needed.

“It was you with the bowling balls? And the image of the head; my wallet in my pocket? The *alarm clock*?”

He gave me a sly grin.

I nearly exploded. “How could you? Why would you do this to me?”

“There’s a reason for everything, Jimmy,” he said cryptically.

I studied him. “Were you sent here? Is this... fate, or something?”

Grandad laughed. “Jimmy, I’ve been dead five years. I can tell you with certainty, there’s no such thing as fate.”

I frowned. “But, why then? Is there someone you wanted me to meet here?” Then it hit me. “The plane’s going to crash, isn’t it?”

He looked surprised. “I sure hope not. Bernie’s on that plane.”

“Who?” I asked.

“My old fishing buddy, Martin Bernstein. Oh, you probably never met him. Your momma’d remember him, though.”

My brain was really working by now. “You had a friend on the flight I just missed?”

“Mmhmm, I was helping him out.”

“You’re a ghost. What could you possibly do to help out your friend except...”

And that’s when it all finally fell into place.

“...except keep me from getting on the plane.”

Grandad shrugged. “He’s going to Alaska for our annual fishing trip. But he was flying standby on one a them, uh, buddy passes. I told him not to. Told him he wouldn’t make the flight, but it was cheap. He said he could stay for a whole extra week on the money he saved.

“Well, I was right. He wasn’t going to make the flight, and if he missed this one, he wouldn’t make it to Juneau before the last boat shipped out for the island. I had to do something, you understand.”

“Oh, sure, I understand.” I didn’t try to mask the sarcasm. I was sitting in an airport having a conversation with my dead grandfather. The only thing I understood just then was that I was probably going crazy.

He stood. “Well, I’d best be heading out. Gotta get up to the island before Bernie and scare away the other fishermen.” He gave me a wink. “Being dead does have its advantages.”

I smiled.

“Look, Jimmy, before I go,” Grandad said. “I know we didn’t spend much time together when I was alive. And I never really gave you any advice – not good advice anyway. So let me leave you with this.

“I know your job pays you well, lets you support Sonni and the kids, lets you buy stuff. But I also know it takes you away a lot. Well, take it from a lonely old ghost like me. In the end, it’s the people in your life that matter, not the things, you know that, don’cha?”

With that, he took one last swig of chocolate milk, shot me a wink, and disappeared.

Josh Morrey



Josh Morrey has been writing seriously since 2006 when he received an Honorable Mention in the Writers of the Future contest. Since then, he's submitted to WotF nearly every quarter garnering another HM and a Semi-Finalist. He's getting closer. His goal is to win that contest no matter what. He will continue writing short fiction until either he wins, or he dies. After that, who knows? Novels is the plan.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

You know, it's interesting. This story just sort of fell together for me. I was working in San Francisco when I read the P&C prompt for June, "I saw my dead grandfather sipping chocolate milk early in the morning at the Cleveland airport." I thought it was a fun idea that maybe I could work with. Throughout the rest of the day as I worked, this idea kept brewing in my head. After work I went straight to the airport to head home. I had a two hour wait for my flight, so I started writing. On the plane I continued. I had a two hour layover in Phoenix so I just kept going. And I finished it in the air just before my plane landed in Salt Lake City. And that was it. The story was more or less done.

Now, part of what made this story flow so easily for me was that I worked for the TSA for nine years, and now I fly several times a month for my new job. So airports and airport security are pretty much second nature to me. The character of Grandad is very loosely based on my own grandpa who passed away in 2007. "You know that, don'cha" was his signature phrase. The rest was merely my attempt to be witty and have fun writing and the ending is just me being snarky. Several people who've read it told me how relieved they were when it didn't take on the predictable "saved from a plane crash" route, and how much they liked the silly ending. So it stuck.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of "working through it," so to speak, coming to ideas and decisions along the way?

I pretty much answered this in the last question, but the answer is sort of both. I didn't start writing right away, the idea festered in my head for a few hours before I had time to sit down and start, but for the most part, once I started I just kept going and wrote it all in one sitting, more or less (If you don't count the take offs and landings between flights)

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I always write linearly. Trying to write out of order for me is far too confusing and I forget details that should be in certain scenes because I haven't written the previous scene, etc. Typically some idea will strike me, usually a "what if" question prompted by something I'm doing, reading, or watching and I'll start mentally generating a story.

Once I have the kernel in my mind, I spend time thinking through it, creating and rejecting possibilities until I've pulled together a basic outline. At this point the idea is practically jumping out of my head and I have to sit down and start writing it before my brain explodes. I'll hammer a story out in a few sittings usually and send it off to my writing group and meager collection of beta readers. Then begins the tedious process of revision and rewrite, (which I hate). Once that's done, the hope is I will have a coherent and entertaining story with which to trade for another

Writers of the Future rejection slip. ;)

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration you've ever drawn from?

I don't know that there's ever been a *strange* place that I've gotten an idea from. I do remember one story idea came while I was playing Halo 3: ODST. On a certain level you drive a military jeep-style vehicle through a canyon while fighting enemies. This particular day I wasn't fighting, but driving through the canyon as fast as I could while dodging enemy troops and tanks. I was struck with the image of an armored supply train dashing through a narrow canyon between two colonies while being assaulted by the native creatures of the wild planet and of a young man on his first run positioned on a side turret shooting at these huge flying creatures to try to keep them off the train. Thus was my story "Riding the Titanium Bullet" formed. Sadly, it now molds in the WotF rejected bin along with countless others. Someday I'll try to revive it.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing? Describe an early experience with writing or creativity.

I've always been a creative person. I spent most of my early years, up through high school, drawing. I drew everything from comic book scenes to still lifes. Mostly I duplicated Marvel characters. In college I discovered a love for the written word and changed my major from psychology to English. But the earliest thing I remember writing was in Jr High, in an English class We were given a few lines on a piece of paper to draw a picture out of and write a page about. The image was a curved line with a wavy line bisecting it. I turned it into the bald pate of a middle aged man with one single hair left and then wrote a story about him worrying about losing his last hair. He gets a phone call from his boss asking him to come in, but declines because he has a date. Then as he goes back to his last hair, he accidentally plucks it out. Problem solved.

It didn't work out very well because I wrote the entire story as his inner monologue. There was no exposition. So when his boss called, it was very confusing keeping the MC's thoughts and his actual dialogue with the boss separate, especially since I didn't include the dialogue of the boss, just the man's reactions to it. In the end it confused more people than it entertained.

Have you ever written anything that started out as one thing, but took on a life of its own and became something totally different? Describe the experience/process.

Well, my current WIP is on its third iteration. I've rearranged characters, scenes, and plot points so many times my head is spinning. But typically, since I block out the whole story in my head before I ever start writing it, my stories end as they should. That doesn't mean the characters or locations end up where they started, though. I had one story where the main character had a male roommate and a girlfriend who hated each other. Then the roommate became an old female friend to make the girlfriend jealous and justify the animosity between them. Then the girlfriend got dropped entirely to explore a budding relationship between the pair of old friends. So my characters do evolve, change, and sometimes disappear like mob informants as the stories develop.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

I was raised by Trekkie parents on science fiction, so that is my most ready form. Nearly everything I write is sci-fi prose. I also dabble in fantasy, though not nearly as often.

I struggle with poetry. Occasionally I try to write a poem, if an idea strikes me, but I'm such a stickler for rhyme and meter that I usually end up forcing the whole thing into some predetermined box that kills all the magic. For whatever reason I cannot stand free verse poetry. If it doesn't have a rhyming scheme and meter to it, it's just rambling in my mind.

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

This is probably the only question I don't have an answer for. Honestly, if there's something I want to write about, or that I want to see written, I'll write it. It may never see the exit tray of a printer, or the inbox of a friend or editor, but I'll write it if only for my own catharsis.

Promptly

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