



2015 Jambalaya Writers' Conference Anthology

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Credits

Editor and Graphic Designer

Daryl Holmes

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A number of photographs in this anthology were taken at locations within the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary during the Coastal Landscape Photography course offered by the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium (LUMCON). This course, instructed by Dennis Sipiorski, Department of Visual Arts, Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, and Dr. Gary LaFleur, Department of Biological Sciences, Nicholls State University, and slated this year for May 15-20, motivates students to explore the endangered environments of coastal Louisiana, to document the changing ecosystem through photography and visual arts, and to participate in saving the Louisiana Coast whenever possible. For more information on LUMCON's summer courses, visit www.lumcon.edu.



Mari Moore

Stingray Shuffle to Timbalier, 2015

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Foreword

The Jambalaya Writers' Conference and the *Jambalaya Anthology* are made possible by Friends of the Terrebonne Parish Library with help from Nicholls State University.

We are delighted by and greatly appreciative of all the conference presenters and writers whose writing, workshops, talks, and critiques inspire and encourage aspiring and well-published writers alike. It is an honor to be able to publish works of established writers such as David Middleton as well as of many new or lesser known writers. Among the rising literary talents are the winners of our fiction contest, Bonnie Rehage, Celia Andresen, Karen Rush, and Paula Hardin and the winners of our poetry contest: Monique M. Jones, Sue Whatley, Zelda Heineken, Thomas S. Doland, and Linda Todd.

Finally, I would like to thank Gary LaFleur for providing the beautiful and thought-provoking images of coastal Louisiana.

Since this is the last time I will be serving as editor of the anthology, it is with bittersweet pleasure that I present the fifteenth annual *Jubilee Anthology* for your enjoyment.

Daryl Holmes



Bruce Soles

Wine Island: *Clibanarius vittatus*,
May 2015

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First Place Winner in the Poetry Contest

Possum Psalm

Monique M. Jones

He is the leper, the tax collector with
too many teeth
smiling when terrified
like us.
We don't want him on the lawn
or in the garbage
even though he's hurting nothing
even though he's only got one speed:
slow. Low to the ground
bony, rat tail
spinning wild circles
when he runs
when we sic the dog on him.
That will teach him.
For eating road kill
and rotting fruit under the plum tree.
For being ugly.
For making us feel afraid, mirrored.
For being the least of these.

Monique M. Jones is a freelance writer, novelist and poet who holds degrees in English and Biology from Nicholls State University. Published articles and essays have appeared in diverse magazines, newspapers, and online venues; and her poetry has been featured in several literary journals. Her fiction finds it home in the genres of fantasy, horror and science fiction. When not tapping away at her keyboard, she can be found long distance cycling, mountain biking, running, tending her small farm, and wandering the woods. She lives with her husband and her four children in Raceland, Louisiana.

First Place Winner in the Fiction Contest

The Witch Assassin

Bonnie Rehage

The bell jangled.

Runa lifted her head from the pillow and squinted at the sound. Through the window, the moon was a silver smudge against the night sky. Midnight had come and gone before she'd managed to get home and crawl into bed. Daylight was still hours away, but some fool was at her door already.

She raised herself on one elbow and groaned.

I'm getting too old for this.

Her fingers reached by long habit to the cluttered nightstand and closed on a pair of wire-framed glasses. She pulled them on, hooking the chilly earpieces securely in place. The room came into sharper focus, the shadows of furniture surfacing from the dark as though emerging from a fog.

Ancient bedsprings creaked in the thick silence as Runa pushed the warm weight of the quilt aside and sat up. She rubbed her hands over the goosebumps rising on her arms. The room was cold enough and felt all the colder after the snug comfort of her cozy bed. She'd been too tired to bother with a fire before bed and the hearth offered nothing but the smell of ash. The chill seeped through the worn flannel of her nightgown and right into her bones.

The bell at her front door jangled again, more insistently.

Runa glared at the curtain that closed her bedroom off from the other room of her small cottage. She should ignore the summons. No one would blame her if she sank back into the still-

warm sheets and got a few hours of rest. She worked hard enough the rest of the time. The bell sounded again before the echoes of the last ring died away.

"Give me a moment," Runa called with bad grace. "It's the middle of the damned night." She stood and straightened her back with an effort, one hand pressed against the pain at her right hip. Sleep would have to wait. Since Agnes's death, she was the only witch in town. That meant an obligation, even to those who called at inconvenient times. She stepped off the rag rug at the side of her bed and onto the chilly floor boards. Maybe it would be something quick. A fever potion for a sick child or herbs to soothe a toothache.

The soft creak of hinges came from the front room. The air felt different, less empty.

They've just gone and let themselves in.

The thought didn't frighten her. Very little could harm an experienced witch in her own home, not if she had the good sense to set up wards of protection across her doorstep. Runa had. A web of spells at her front door would keep out anyone with bad intent. Still, there was such a thing as common courtesy.

Slow footsteps padded on the other side of the curtain, just loud enough to hear. The visitor was walking around Runa's workroom.

Damned nerve. Someone needs a lesson in manners, and no mistake.

No sign of light showed through the curtain that served as her bedroom door. Whoever was here for her help had come without taking the time to bring so much as a candle to light the

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way. That implied a certain urgency. Runa swallowed her indignation and shuffled to the doorway. She pulled aside the curtain.

In the dim front room, watery moonlight softened the untidy jumble of her work table and filtered over a familiar figure standing near the single window.

Runa drew a sharp breath and hurried forward, smoothing her gray hair into some semblance of order.

"I wasn't expecting you. I would never have kept you waiting so long if I'd known it was you at the door."

The visitor turned empty eyes toward her and smiled. There was nothing human about that smile; it was a mere rearrangement of features, like the smile of a painted marionette when the puppet-master pulls at its strings. The gooseflesh that crawled up Runa's arms had nothing to do with the chill in the room. She darted a glance at the door.

"My protection wards," she said.

"Destroyed," her visitor said and raised one hand in a gesture Runa recognized a moment too late.

The rapid click of Jenna Amsted's boots on the cobbles of Goat Run Road struck sharp echoes from the rows of close-set houses on either side. This was her favorite time of day, when the sun wasn't over the rooftops yet and the sky was still bleary with fading night. Up and down the street, families were just beginning the day. Warm lamplight slipped around the edges of closed shutters and the mingled scent of cooking and wood smoke rose from dozens of chimneys. Few people had ventured onto the frost-rimed streets yet. Jenna was alone.

Well, almost alone. There was Liam. There was always Liam.

"I just want to walk a little way with you, Jenna. What's wrong with that?"

She tried her best to avoid him, but it was almost impossible. He lived and worked in his family's shop. She rented a cramped room at the back of the store. It wasn't that she disliked him exactly; it was just that he *hovered*. And he never looked presentable. His hair was too long and always untidy, flopping forward over eyes so dark they looked black. He seemed to have knees and elbows everywhere and he was far too tall. Even with the extra height her heeled boots gave her, Jenna barely reached his shoulder.

She glanced sideways at him. He was keeping pace with that awkward, long-legged gait that reminded her so much of the herons on the banks of the Green River.

"Go home, Liam," she said.

"I'd better stay with you until you get to Runa's. It isn't safe for you to walk alone."

"Don't be foolish. I walk this way every morning." Jenna set her lips in a prim line and lifted her chin. Her skirts flapped against her ankles as she quickened her step. Liam kept up easily.

"Besides," she added, "you know your parents don't approve of you spending time with me. I am nearly a witch, after all."

"My parents don't have to know. And you're just an apprentice. That's not the same as a witch."

"What would you know about it?"

"I know you can't go through the binding and become a real witch until your eighteenth birthday, and that's three months away. And I know if an apprentice can't pass the trials, then the magic won't take seed in her."

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“Humph. Everyone knows that.”

“I know you worry you won’t be good enough.”

She halted so abruptly Liam was two long strides ahead of her before he noticed and turned back. Jenna glared at him with what she hoped was a forbidding expression. It didn’t seem to faze him.

“And where did you hear that?”

He grinned. “From you. You talk to yourself when you study.”

“Well . . .” Jenna felt a flush rise over her face. “Well, stop listening.” She brushed past him and hurried on her way. Runa’s house was just ahead. “And go home,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ve got work to do.” Without waiting for an answer, she climbed the tall white doorstep and reached for the short length of knotted rope that served as a bell pull.

She froze. Something was wrong. Jenna stood with her hand in mid-air, staring at the wooden door with its peeling blue paint. It was open, just a little, and that wasn’t right. Runa hated the cold. She would never have left it open.

A narrow slice of the room beyond showed through the gap. Dim gray light allowed a glimpse of a cluttered worktable, the curved edge of a braided rug. It all looked the same as it always had.

It didn’t feel right, though. Tendrils of something invisible flowed from inside the house circled her in lazy loops, brushing against her cheek like a spider’s web. Her hair stood on end. She clenched her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering as the sensation moved past and faded. It was utterly foreign, something she had never experienced in her six years of magical apprenticeship, but she instinctively knew it for what it was.

It was evil, pure malice. And it had come from Runa’s house.

Bonnie Rehage was born on the bayou—a Cajun who grew up hearing stories about spirit sightings, psychic dreams, and local legends. Her writing includes short stories and novels set in supernatural worlds where the dead are not necessarily gone and the fantastic can pop up in unexpected ways. She has won several local writing competitions including a previous first and third place in the Jambalaya Writer’s Conference competitions.



Daniel Kariko

Stars, 2015

Tied for Second Place Winner in the Poetry Contest

Robby Belman, Upon Leaving Central State Hospital

Sue Whatley

Forty-six years at the state institution,
And now a car without a name
Comes to take him on to a kind of place
They say is better.
A group home and new parents,
Though he likes the ones he has,
When they can drive the seven hours south
To see him. They are old now, not supposed
To be someone's parents, not in the care-taking way,
Not in the don't-you-worry sense.
This new man leads him to the back seat,
as if he cannot walk, and fastens the belt. But he can walk.
His mama taught him how when he was four.
And he could talk. He used to speak to Mama—
Words like Dadda, ball, Jesus,
But then the other babies came, two at one time,
And he decided not to need words then.
He does not need them now, and he does not think
The things he thinks; they are just there
Without connection, without a feeling to go with them.
He looks at faces, at the glow around them.

Knows the light must come from somewhere else,
And he tries to move his silent lips to let them see
He'll ride with them, and take his paper bag with straws inside.
He'll hide them under the new bed where he'll sleep,
Afraid but clinging to the softest place he can find,
And for a day or two, he will not eat, until he's sure
It is no trick.
For months he will not wear the clothes they give him,
The pants and belt and shirt and shoes, but instead pajamas.
And he'll wear the robe his mama brought him, wrapped
in cowboy paper, ropes in circles over their heads.
He laughed and almost said her name when she brought
It for his birthday, almost said her name
But then remembered other ones who said her name,
And the place he went to when he tried to stop them.
The lady with the name tag will help him paint and help him tap
The hammer on the metal sheet, soft, until it shows

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The picture underneath it, hidden like the reasons.
She'll turn the music on and tell him,
"Robby, don't you want to sing with us, don't
You want to move your feet?" And he will move
The parts inside that no one sees, that no one knows.
And one day soon, he will surprise them all.

He'll slide his legs, which slip against the pants,
Inside his shoes. His toes will move in music's ways.
He'll dance until the words that went away
Begin their slow descent home.



Brian James Culbertson
Portrait of Greg Banks, 2015

Dr. Sue Whatley is a faculty member and writing instructor at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas. A member of the Nacogdoches Writer's Guild and the FUMC Fellowship of Christian Writers as well, she works to support a wide array of writing endeavors. Wherever she travels, she finds writers looking for support; her writer's soul spots them a mile away, and calls out to them: *Come tell me about it; I see how you're suffering. Too much or too little to eat? Your job is getting in the way of your muse? Your computer needs updating? You wrote another page? Sure, you can have another cookie.*

Tied for Second Place Winner in the Poetry Contest

A Son

Zelda Heineken

From flint rock and hammerstone man is made.
Born of earth, spit, and blood to sit a throne,
Fierce and frail, he reigns, both brave and afraid.

Shale meets rubble, women kneel at the grade,
Cull blocks, toss stubble, knappers tap and hone.
From flint rock and hammerstone man is made.

One rough strike at base or edge ruins blade,
Crushes merit in rock where hope once shone,
Fierce and frail, he reigns, both brave and afraid.

A reckless hit or toss makes promise fade
To dull use, dreary toil, or worse, be thrown.
From flint rock and hammerstone man is made.

Shards rest in leather wrap till picked for trade:
Spear for beasts, arrowhead, or skinning bone.
Fierce and frail, he reigns, both brave and afraid.

Both sandstone pressure and restraint abrade
As clan shall thrive or fail by him alone.
From flint rock and hammerstone man is made,
Fierce and frail, he reigns, both brave and afraid.



Bruce Soles

Point Sur: Ropes & Rigging, May 2015

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Second Place Winner in the Fiction Contest

The Unrestful

Celia Andresen

Oh, for Joy

There was much mystery surrounding Joy Reynolds, resident of apartment 213 of the Mag Mell Luxury Condominium, but the staff were sure about these three things:

She was rich.

She was eccentric.

And she was an insufferable bitch.

So it came to be on a cold evening in January when Joy clicked across the marble atrium in next season's Gucci stilettos that the doorman offered her a "Welcome back, Miss," and then he shut his mouth.

She nodded approval. The doorman breathed a sigh of relief. It was well known that Miss Joy didn't like chit-chat, except for when she liked chit-chat. And there was no telling which mood she would be in until it was too late.

As usual, she was all bundled up: sunglasses, gloves, scarf, coat, hat. It was rare that you could see more than two square inches of her skin. The staff joked that this was to hide her horns, tail, and cloven hooves. However, they could not determine the actual reason for such excessive coverings. Painstakingly collected and reviewed eyewitness accounts said that she was a pretty girl, her age somewhere between a mature eighteen and a well-preserved thirty.

The staff attributed her manner of dress to the standard eccentricity that came with money. Most of the very rich were a bit strange. They knew this well. Some of the more philosophical members theorized that perhaps people in general were eccentric and wealth merely allowed them to be eccentric bigger.

Joy chose an elevator and occupied the back corner.

"Hold up!" a man called from the atrium.

She ignored him. Nevertheless, he managed to slide through the shutting doors.

"Hi, Miss Joy," he said.

"Sir." Joy talked like a black-and-white movie star, all "sirs," "ma'ams," "dears," and "darlings" except for when she was angry, in which case she swore like a sailor.

"So formal! Like I said, call me Bob. And how are we today?" He had a warm smile and a slight southern accent.

"Fine, thank you." She had no recollection of ever talking to this man before.

"Gracious me, I can't believe this cold. Where I'm from . . . "

It became clear that Joy was not listening. The tilt of her chin and the set of her eyebrows said at once *I'm bored, I'm tolerating you, and are you still talking?*

Bob Whitney, who had never met a stranger in his life, floundered for words.

He made an attempt at recovery. "By the way, Caroline really loved the gift you sent for the baby. You've, uh, you've made us feel so welcome here, Miss Joy."

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The elevator dinged. "I don't have time for small talk," she said and clipped away before Bob-the-stranger could reply.

Bewildered, Bob wondered if his ears had deceived him or if she had *actually* been that rude.

Joy had bought out the 27th floor of the Mag Mell and had it remodeled to her exacting standards. The furnishing were lavish and opulent with a touch a wretched excess. She never asked the price of anything; she wanted, she waved a credit card, she owned.

No one knew where Joy's riches came from. She was fond of telling new staff that she was the princess of a small and imaginary European country, then laughing in their faces when they called her "Your Grace" in front of their friends.

Once again, Joy found Fitz waiting for her. The lights were off, leaving the den illuminated by the blue glow of two screens. Fitz had a laptop balanced on his knees, paper strewn on the coffee table, an ear bud in one ear, and the television playing softly with the subtitles on. "I like a few distractions" was what he always said.

About three months ago, Joy had introduced Sean Fitzgerald to the doorman, ordered that the staff make him a room key, gave him limited access to her accounts, and told room service to "For goodness's sake, get him something to eat that hasn't been deep fried."

Joy slammed the door behind her. "Did you send a gift to my neighbors?" she snapped. He didn't look up. "Hello to you too."

"Greetings and salutations," she snarled, using the extra syllables as storage for more venom. "Did you send a gift to my neighbors? On my behalf?"

"Uh, yeah. I thought it might improve your public relations. It's odd, you know, but people around here don't like you much."

Joy strode around his chair and slapped his laptop shut. "I don't want public relations. I don't like familiarity. And I don't want to be on speaking terms with my neighbors."

He looked up at her. His eyes were dark green. Most people couldn't be summed up in a single word. Fitz, however, was the exception—he was intense. Joy understood why he needed all the distractions pouring in: the noise, the reading, the television. It was like cutting strong liquor. The force of his personality was both powerful and focused. Without the dilutions, something was going to break.

"You know about the gift," he said evenly. "You were there when I ordered it. I did it to piss you off. We met Caroline in the lobby. She offered to let you hold the baby, and you said, and I quote, "I'm not touching that. It's sticky." So I ordered the basket and . . . Have you forgotten the whole day?"

Joy's glare did not falter.

Fitz remained impassive. "What's Bob's last name? What's the baby's name? Where are they from?"

"I don't have to put up with this. Would you kindly vacate my apartment?"

"You don't remember." He flipped his laptop back open and started typing.

"Oh, for goodness's sake, don't write it down. I've already tried keeping track of it. There's no pattern. Stuff goes in, stuff falls out."

He kept typing.

Joy seized the laptop. "No," she said, in a bad-dog intonation.

"I'm not going to play keep-away like we're five."

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"I'll give it back if you delete it."

"I won't."

Joy made a noise of pure exasperation and rolled her eyes. She tossed the laptop on the sofa, marched into her bedroom, shouting unkind names over her shoulder, and slammed the door shut loudly enough to, if they didn't know better, make the neighbors complain.

Fitz watched her go; he retrieved his laptop, feeling as if he had just missed a step going downstairs. "Scorch the Earth" was Joy's unofficial motto. It was out of character for her to let anything go. Even when she was wrong and she knew it, she fought to the bitter end.

He had to conclude that either she had something much worse planned for later, or she wasn't feeling herself today. Either way, he'd find out soon enough. He resumed typing.

In her bedroom, Joy deposited her shopping by the foot of her bed then violently divested herself of her sunglasses, hat, and shoes. As she was pulling her scarf over her head, she paused and closed her eyes. She flickered like a dying light bulb. For a moment, she became transparent, the light filtering through her exposed face. Her dress fell down through her shoulders. She was left standing in another dress, a formal green monstrosity of ruffles. A ribbon crossed her chest: Miss Dover, NE, 1957.

Then she vanished altogether.

Of all the things that the building's staff speculated about Joy, the one that they were most wrong about was her age. She was, in fact, seventy-seven years old. It was just that she had been dead for the last fifty-eight of them.



Ernest Milsted

Grand Terre 2



Mary Ann Caffery

A Crack Lets the Light Come In, 2015

Third Place Winner in the Poetry Contest

Grand Chenier Cattle Driv'n

Thomas S. Doland

Maw maw's brewin' up the coffee.
Biscuits in the oven a bakin'.
I can smell'm right out in the yard.
Between them and the eggs and bacon,
Can't say which I love the most.
Skeeters ain't bad this mornin'—
For the Chenier Ridge that's pretty rare.
Sun's up over the oaks already.
I'm hearin' cattle comin' down the road.
Can't rightly see'em yet—
Got a good ground fog set in.
Uncle David and the boys are
Drivin' a herd east to Pecan Island.
They always stop in for coffee
On the way.
While their tyin' up the horses on the fence posts,
Cars are make'n their way through the herd.
Cattle fillin' up the road ditch to ditch
Far as I can see.
Uncle David got a chew of Bull Durham,
A little drip always at the corner of his mouth.
He can roll a cigarette with one hand.
Spurs janglin' on the kitchen floor—
Gets noisy everybody is talkin' at one time.
Fresh coffee's poured,
And everybody's still talkin' at once.
Paw Paw and Uncle David move outside
And lean on the gate at the road,
Coffee and cigarette in hand.
Fog's liftin' an' the cattle are gettin' restless.
All the cowboys move outside and mount up
with fresh smokes and a chew,
“thanks for the coffee,” and waves.
“See ya'll later.”

Third Place Winner in the Fiction Contest

Mr. Petersen's Ashes

Karen Rush

Mr. Petersen's ashes were in an extra-special-deluxe-model-lemon-oil-polished-mahogany-Restorium Box on Helen's nightstand, right next to the tissues. Each night after she closed her Bible and just before she shut the light, Helen touched the box tenderly and whispered, "Good night, Mr. Petersen. Someday we'll be together again."

Helen missed him fiercely; Mr. Petersen had been quite the catch. She'd heard the jealous whisperings over the years and knew in a smug sort of way that many a woman, and even some men, had desired him. Everyone had loved Mr. Petersen, but Helen had loved him best.

He'd been good to her and the children, and although he occasionally wandered and once in a while even stayed out all night, he always came home before breakfast. Secretly, Helen was relieved and almost a little surprised. She knew she wasn't anything special so was always grateful for his return. She hid the shame of it all behind a cheery disposition and prayed the children and the neighbors never caught on.

It'd been years since her husband had died, his ashes settled and securely tucked away, and now that the children were grown and out on their own, Helen didn't have much to do anymore. Her house was tidy, her flower beds trim, and she always had homemade chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen counter just in case. She did understand everyone was busy, truly she did; so every Tuesday she put the cookies in a plastic bag, carefully twisted the top closed, and left them for the mailman.

"Be good to those who are good to you and the others can go to Hell," she sang softly as she vacuumed the living room carpet back and forth, back and forth. Helen had just started swearing. Naughty words were so spicy and full of sass; had she ever felt this decadent and alive? Sometimes she wore an old calico bibbed apron and pretended she was Aunt Bea and that's when the swearing was the most deliciously sinful.

At church three Sundays ago when others murmured "amen!" as the preacher finished up the story of Martha and Mary, Helen fidgeted. She looked from side to side, wondering who all those people were that were rooting for a woman who was shirking housework, Jesus or no Jesus. Not able to contain herself any longer, she jumped up from the third pew, thrust her fist in the air and distinctly hollered, "Preacher, that's bullshit and you know it. When company's coming, *someone's* gotta get things ready!"

She was wearing her Aunt Bea apron over her very best navy blue dress. Her son Robert was called. He was not pleased.

The very next Friday she made a scene in Wal-Mart. She'd gone in for a new dustpan, two oranges, and a can of roach spray. When she remembered she needed knee-highs, she wandered over to Lingerie and noticed some bras on clearance. That's when the trouble started.

"Uh, ma'am . . . the dressing room's over there," the young clerk said, pointing across the aisle.

"Oh, honey, I'm doing fine right here."

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“But, uh, you can’t take off your clothes unless you’re in the dressing room . . . I’m pretty sure . . . store policy and all.” The clerk shrugged, averting her eyes, as she held out her hand for the hot pink bra.

“Oh? Store policy? Who made up that dumb-ass rule?” Helen said a little too loudly as she clung to the bra.

“Umm . . . well . . . want me to get the manager or something?”

“Yeah, sugar, you go ahead and get the damn manager. I’ll wait.”

As the clerk scampered away, Helen leisurely tried on the bra, humming to herself as she primped in front of the mirror. Remembering the oranges, she picked them up and wedged them into the front of the bra. It was a tight fit and not the least bit comfortable, but they reminded her of her younger, firmer breasts and she liked how they jiggled when she turned to face the manager. Much to her disappointment, he was neither amused nor aroused, and her daughter Elizabeth was called. Helen had to pay for the oranges and defiantly wore the bra home.

Elizabeth could barely contain her giggles.

Monday Helen called 911 four times. Two times, she claimed, were misdials, but while she had them on the line she asked how they were doing. One call was to alert them that her neighbor’s cat had caught a squirrel in her yard, and lastly, she offered to bring them some cookies. The police came to check on her.

“Ma’am . . . do you know your name?”

“Helen.”

“Well that’s good Helen, real good. Do you know the President’s name?”

“Yes, young man, and if you don’t, you should be ashamed.”

“Okay . . . uh . . . then . . . what year is it?”

Helen sighed. “1974, every dumb shit knows that.” She smiled with a little tootle-loo wave as she closed the front door.

It was really her youngest son Michael’s turn to be called, but he didn’t answer his cell phone, so Robert was called instead. And again, he was not pleased. Robert was a stickler for the rules, and Helen was breaking all sorts of rules. Something was going to have to be done.

Along with listening to the voices in her head and the stirrings of her heart, **Karen Rush** draws much inspiration from watching people shop in the grocery store. She struggles with commas, feeds stray cats and raccoons, and along with her husband Jim, enjoys hiking the Rocky Mountains and fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. From her home in Beaumont, Texas, Karen loves to write about people. She’s crazy about her own family and the familial energy they exude. She believes in an afterlife, frozen Snickers candy bars, and that everyone has a story.



Dennis Sipiorski

Last Island, 2015

Honorable Mention in the Poetry Contest

The Girl on the Side of the Road

Linda Todd

Motorcycles roar, flags aflutter—
A solemn procession drives on.
Across the way, at attention she stands—
The girl on the side of the road.

She raises her hand in a soldier's salute
As the long black car passes her.
Still standing there till no longer I see
The girl on the side of the road.

His final journey soon comes to an end.
Bugle notes soar, hands fold the flag.
His memory visits—I always see her—
The girl on the side of the road.

Linda Hebert Todd is a retired librarian who writes fiction and poetry, and since she enjoys reading mysteries, much of her fiction is about mayhem and murder. Nearly all her fiction is set in the bayou country of south Louisiana, where she came of age swimming in the river and listening to tales of Lafitte the pirate and the *loup-garou*. She has a short story in *Journeys: Bayou Writers Group Anthology* and has one novel completed, *Wild Justice*, a crime story with a revenge theme. She has started a second novel set in Labrador and Louisiana.

Honorable Mention in the Fiction Contest

Twist of Fate

Paula Hardin

“All charges have been dropped due to lack of evidence from the District Attorney’s office. Mr. Joseph Gambino is remanded back to the custody of the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff Department to be released.” The judge pounded his gavel against the sounding block to quiet the spectators’ angry reaction to the verdict.

New Orleans defense attorney Merrick Hardin gladly gathered her papers and shoved them into her briefcase. She felt someone staring. Goosebumps rose at the back of her neck, making her shiver. Deep down she knew who it was, and it made her knees go weak. Merrick kept herself from turning toward the Command Sergeant Major Stone, knowing she would see disappointment in his eyes. Merrick fought against the tears threatening to fall. That’s all she needed—to show any signs of weakness.

She felt numb. She had won, but there was no honor in the victory. It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“You killed my boy, Gambino. You shouldn’t be allowed to go free.” Merrick heard the anguish in the father’s voice. It made her sick inside.

“You!” she heard the father say. Merrick knew it was directed at her. It made her stomach knot up knowing she wasn’t going to like what was coming.

“You’re Satan’s spawn. You’re here doing his dirty work. Killing off the innocents and helping the guilty.”

Merrick felt her stomach roll. She couldn’t turn and look at the family, or she’d lose it.

The briefcase of cash sitting in her safe didn’t seem worth it. If the people understood her method of justice, it would be perfect. The thing was they couldn’t because they had no clue. Feeling a migraine coming on, she pushed her fingers through her hair.

The case against Gambino had been stressful. She had worked long hours to ensure his release. She wondered why the mayor himself hounded her every move. His motives were questionable, to say the least. Rumor had it he was dirty. That he put his hands in many dealings going down in the Metropolitan area. The trial was finally over and relief flooded every cell of her body. She was exhausted, but sleep had to wait. She needed to make sure the eyewitness was safe. He was military, but Gambino was mafia.

She pushed her way through the crowd of angry people who stood outside the courthouse. News reporters crowded her, shoving microphones in her face. Different faces threw questions at her, waiting for answers. None of them understood why she defended these criminals.

Being the center of attention was not something she looked forward to, but she tried to satisfy the reporters with an evasive “yes” or “no.” Merrick walked faster, keeping her back straight. Their faces were angry, they were yelling, and someone behind her felt brave enough to shove her. When someone behind her pulled her hair, she mentally thanked her lucky stars it was only a wig. She grinned secretly, thinking what a surprise people would get if they saw the real her.

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From a distance, she spotted her 2014 red Aston Martin Roadster. She reached the safety of her car with her keys in her hand then froze in horror. She gasped and took a step back, appalled that someone had sprayed-painted the word "BITCH" on the side of her baby. Merrick looked around, wondering if whoever had done this was still watching. A crowd surrounded her and her car, preventing her from leaving. A huge man beat his fist against the hood of her car. Merrick was livid. She wanted to scream "fuck you," but she didn't because she realized it would only give them satisfaction in knowing they got to her, not to mention that the media was out in full force.

She yanked the door open and thought, *how dare someone try to intimidate me!* As she slammed the door closed, Merrick held back the angry tears and threw her purse across to the passenger seat.

The car's V-12 engine roared to life, giving the crowd their only warning to move. The car jumped into traffic, forcing nearby cars to get out of the way. *How could someone spray paint an Aston Martin?* she wondered in disgust. *Why do I put myself through all the headaches?* But she knew. Merrick had lost her father when she was young. No one had offered assistance. Her mother had struggled to provide for and protect their small family. Merrick did what she did to give people a chance at normal.

With the economy deteriorating daily, more people found themselves without jobs and homes. Lost in the loopholes for assistance or without enough to survive, families were now living under bridges and in alleyways, fighting to survive.

Merrick was determined that no child living on the streets, no homeless or orphaned child would be forgotten. Behind the scenes, she bought old warehouses and turned them into safe havens and new beginnings.

When she found a quiet place to park, she pulled over and killed the engine. Her fingers flicked the lever to the console. When it opened, she pulled out her goggles. These bad boys she designed and made herself. No one knew who she really was, not the people of New Orleans, not the judges, and least of all, not the bad guys. At the moment, she was glad they didn't.

Merrick positioned the goggles against her face without slipping the leather strap over her head. She adjusted the aperture displaying the past hour through the lenses.

While constructing the steampunk goggles a few years ago, she had added a piece of rare mineral she had found while metal detecting. She believed it was a chunk from a meteor. When she tried the goggles for the first time, she was stunned to find she could see into the future and past for a brief timeframe of around eight hours on a good day, depending on the weather.

The vertigo-like dizziness made her upset stomach churn a little more. She held fast to the goggles, knowing this feeling would pass. Much like someone walking from out of a fog, she watched the scene unfold.

An unmarked black van pulled up, and the side door slid open. Two masked assailants jumped out and painted her door within seconds, jumped back in the waiting vehicle, and drove off. Merrick turned her head trying to see behind the van, but, of course, it had no license plate. She set the goggles back in their hiding place and drove to her home near City Park. It had been a long day, and she was tired as she pulled into her driveway on the side of her house and turned the car off. She noticed that her motion sensor was on before its time. It spooked her a little, after the day's events.

She opened her car door and stepped out. A huge opossum jumped from the garbage can, knocking the lid to the ground with a loud explosion. Merrick pulled her gun from under her long skirt. Her heart was beating loudly in her ears. She aimed the gun, following the sudden

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movement of a mother possum scurrying behind the bushes, carrying a load of babies on her back. Merrick holstered her gun, more than a little relieved. She leaned inside her car and quickly grabbed her purse and briefcase, slinging them out of the way as she shut the car door.

Merrick started walking toward the house. Before she could call it a night she had to do one thing. Deep inside she felt an urgent need to hurry even though her body screamed for a hot shower and bed.

Something drew her attention toward the entrance of the house. Merrick stared straight into the eyes of Joseph Gambino. She stopped as her heart jumped to her throat. Prickles of uneasiness ran down her spine, and her palms grew sweaty. The gun against her leg felt heavy all of a sudden. She wished it were in her hand.

Merrick fumbled with her purse, bending her head slightly away to take a quick breath, and put her game face on. At the same time she tried to get a quick look around to see who else might be lurking in the shadows. Gambino was never without his henchmen, and she didn't want someone sneaking up behind her. She needed to be smart about handling the situation. Before she could utter a word, he began to approach. The way he looked at her gave Merrick the creeps.

Paula Hardin was born and raised in New Orleans. She's been married to her soul mate for over nineteen years and has three children, two step-children, and seven grandbabies. Her passion is for anything other than the norm, including fantasy, science fiction, the paranormal, and the mystical. She writes paranormal romances, steampunk, contemporary, preferring suspense-filled plots that end with happily-ever-afters.

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Saving Jesus

Paul Lake

"BrickHouse Security saves Jesus for 8th year in a row, offers free GPS tracking of nativity scenes and holiday displays."

Somehow escaping
The sharp eye
Of angels, shepherds,
And magi,
Thieves snatch the infant
From the crèche
To spirit God off
In the flesh.
Clearly, it's
The thieves' intent
To massacre
The innocent
Like Herod
In the dark of night.
Forcing parents
To take flight.
To empty Christmas
Of the Christ
Would seem the purpose
Of the heist—
Unless the abject
And forlorn
Hijack the babe
To feel newborn
Themselves, and think
By robbing churches
They gain a love
They cannot purchase.
Unlike the soulless
Figurine
With planted chip,
The Nazarene

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Restores the lost
Sans GPS,
And covers crime
With holiness.

Poet, essayist, and novelist **Paul Lake** was a Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University and has been the poetry editor of *First Things* since 2006. His books include three poetry collections, *Another Kind of Travel*, *Walking Backward*, and *The Republic of Virtue* as well as two novels, *Among the Immortals* and *Cry Wolf: A Political Fable*.



Brian James Culbertson

P-Waste, Timbalier, 2015

The Striking of the Lyre

Demodokos in Modernity

—a statement on poetics—

David Middleton

When, in *The Odyssey*, we first behold Odysseus, he is weeping on the shore of Kalypso's isle, gazing over the waves toward Penelope and home and thus toward his intended human place and fate—not as divine consort to a goddess nor yet as a shade in Hades, nor as one of Circe's herd—but as ruler of far-off Ithaca, an island realm in the middle world washed by the middle sea.

But then, set free by the will of Zeus, Odysseus with Kalypso's own strong olive-handled ax, fashions a raft out of the felled black poplar and alder trunks, a raft that takes him over the turbulent waters until it breaks apart—and floating for two long days upon a single beam, at last from atop a rising wave he has an “unexpected glimpse of wooded land” and then is swept away onto the rocky shores of remote Phaiakia to whose untroubled people the gods still show themselves without disguise.

Guarding his identity, Odysseus comes as a nameless stranger to the palace of Alkinoos near which lie perfect gardens with their “orderly / rows of greens, all kinds . . . lush through the seasons” and orchards of pomegranates, apples, figs, and pears whose fruit is exhausted or spoiled “neither in winter time nor summer.” And in this pastoral kingdom Odysseus hears the bard Demodokos sing twice to his fine “clear lyre” of Odysseus' own role in the Trojan War, including the final ruse of the wooden horse.

In response to the powerful singing, this “stranger”—whose own great exploits have been thus traumatically revealed in the rhythms and in the words of measured verse—first seeks privacy by hiding his head under his purple mantle, yet then uncovers, and, by pure compulsion, publicly weeps: “tears running down his face before the Phaiakians.” And when Demodokos pauses, Odysseus—who soon after such singing will at last risk revealing his identity to his host—once again “would take the mantle away from his head, and wipe the tears off, / and taking up a two-handed goblet would pour a libation to the gods.” And so this crafty hero, who wept for the return to his full humanity on the sands of Kalypso's isle, now weeps from the depths of his being at poetry's shattering revelation of who he is.

This profound effect of poetry on a hero both modern and archaic is among the most compelling evidence we have that our greatest verse and the mystery of human existence are at one. And there are other clues. Keats, for instance, in his search for ideal disinterestedness, named Socrates and Jesus as the only persons in history who attained to such a state, though their teachings were taken down—perhaps in necessary accord with this ideal—only by others. Yet what do we find when we examine the final acts of these two figures who so readily stand as symbols of the two great strains in the Western tradition—the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian?

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Awaiting death in his cell, Socrates turned Aesop's *Fables* and the *Prelude to Apollo* into verse because his daimon had said for him to "practice and cultivate the arts," and fearing now that not philosophy but poesis was intended, Socrates says, "I thought it would be safer not to take my departure before I had cleared my conscience by writing poetry and so obeying the dream." Likewise, on the cross, before the final cry that escapes him with his spirit, Christ, according to Matthew, utters his last words in the poetry of the Psalms: ("Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" Psalm 22:1). Even Plato, whose life and thought link Socrates and Jesus, declared on his deathbed, by the slightest gesture, the *differentia specifica* of verse: "Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the *nomos*. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure" (Eric Voegelin).

The origin of measured verse is lost in prehistory. But it seems reasonable to suppose that, in some long defining moment, primitive man awoke from animal sleep and so was struck with wonder and with terror at the beauty and the mystery of a world in which he seemed fated to dwell as a being on the verge, placed in a middle station somewhere above the flora and the fauna and the elements, yet well below divine powers obscurely apprehended. The cycling of the seasons, the progress of the stars, the rhythms of the body and the stages of human life—such things must have drawn forth from out of the depths a first measured response to consciousness both in music and in words. Perhaps at last man recognized a strange power in language that led him to think of the Maker's power as a language in itself, an attribute of deity, as in the Book of Genesis, where, in God's own mind, the *word* "light" somehow came before and helped to give existence to the *thing* called "light": "And God *said*, 'Let there be light'; and there *was* light" (Genesis 1:3).

The story of Adam the Namer, who spoke to the answering beasts before the Fall, and the story of the Fall itself as involving disruption—not only between human beings and the other creatures and between language and things but even between words and the very Word itself—may be archaic indicators that poetry lies at the center of human life and remains the one power by which man might still return from his long sojourn through history to a realm where Edenic innocence and conscious existence, both in time and beyond time, are reconciled at last.

Such reconciliation may be symbolized by Homer's bard Demodokos, who sang of the fall of Troy amid the gardens and the orchards of Alkinoos' pastoral kingdom. And indeed, it is King Alkinoos himself, who, in one of the most remarkable passages in *The Odyssey*, encourages Odysseus, so profoundly stirred by Demodokos' song, to transform himself from listener into poet not only to tell his own story but also to say why he weeps at tragic history, for such history, says the king, is not the final end but rather a godly gift for a further, sublime purpose: "Explain to us also what secret sorrow makes you weep as you listen to the tragic story of the Argives and the fall of Troy. Were not the gods responsible for that, weaving catastrophe into the pattern of events to make a song for future generations?"

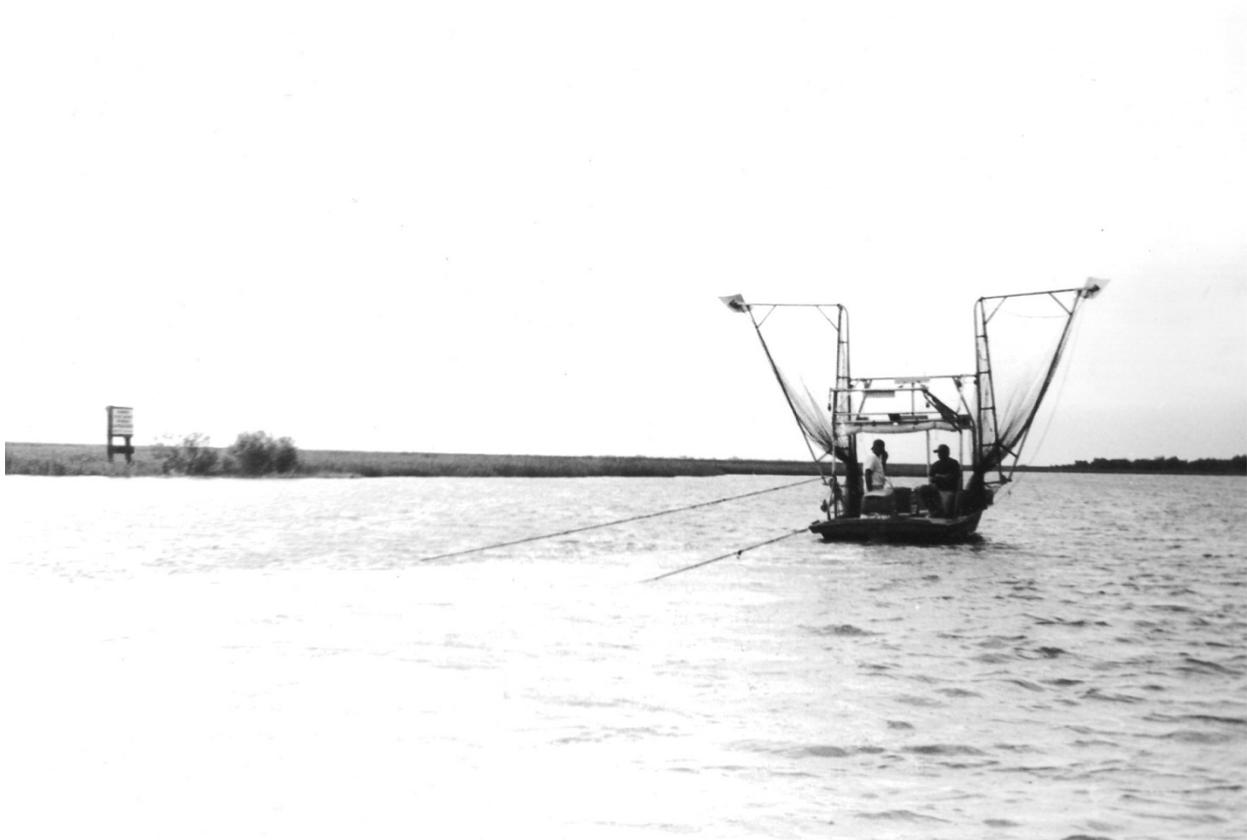
And to this may we not add that as long as human beings continue to ask those two primary philosophical questions—Why is there a universe instead of nothing and Why is that universe as it is and not otherwise?—poets will try to write what Wallace Stevens called the "central poem," a poem in which the poet attempts the great return from the fallen world to the Bible's *peaceable kingdom* (Isaiah 11: 1-9). Such poets will glimpse what Jacques Maritain calls "the radiance of the ontological mystery," and, like Caedmon, the cowherd poet and symbolic initiator of the English poetic tradition, they will "Sing about the Creation." And should the

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authors of these poems ever close the circle of being—if such an act be possible and allowed—then, like Adam the Namer, they and we may commune once more with all those things which, even now, as the Psalmist says, mysteriously converse among themselves: “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge There is no speech . . . yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world” (Psalm 19: 2-4).

To all such poets who attempt the “central poem” should go the praise Odysseus himself bestows upon the Phaiakian: “No one on earth can help honoring and respecting the bards, for the Muse has taught them the art of song and she loves the minstrel fraternity.” So the doer of great deeds pays homage to one of those through whom such deeds live on, Demodokos, whose measured verse was chanted to the striking of the lyre.

Adapted from the introduction and conclusion of an omnibus review in *The Sewanee Review*



Gary LaFleur, Jr.

Old School, Bayou Sale, 2015

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In the Beggar's Palace
—after passages in Books XXI and XXII of *The Odyssey*

David Middleton

Like a singer long familiar with his lyre
Who loops the twisted sheep gut, bound at tail and bar,
Turning a new peg until it tunes the cord,
He strung the great bow, bending its limbs with ease,
The test-pluck sounding high like flights of swallow song,
The shaft zinging clean through twelve ax-handle eyes.

A beggar no more, aiming true with measured rage,
He targeted at will each uninvited guest
Who swilled his wine, gulped food, bedded his ready maids
All night, while his pressed queen drew the slowly woven strands,
Saved by a web's deceit, but then betrayed, undone
Till bronze-tipped arrows threading the air sped home.

Soon those who had given themselves to would-be kings
Unwillingly scrubbed blood from upset tables, chairs
And dragged slain lovers off, their corpses trailing gore,
Then after were hemmed in hard by yard and wall,
Like thicket-birds come to roost, trapped in a net,
Thrushes and doves flushed toward another kind of sleep.

And there, pulling plied cable, taut from post to dome,
Set high enough so a barely lifted foot
Could just brush its shadow moving on the ground,
Telemachus had them bow to a noose's loop
That tightened until they writhed (though not for long),
Snapped neck-bones, muscles convulsed . . . in stillness limp.

Then Odysseus' old nurse, who knew him by the scar,
Brought purifying sulfur, torches dipped in tar,
Blue flames from the yellow crystals melting red
In trays along the fumigated hall, the dead
Suitors finished, a body of work made so
By a crafty king who strung a poet's bow.

Originally published in *Chronicles*

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Old Bird on a Telephone Pole, Old Man Watching

David Middleton

With black wings pressed against his sides he stays
High-perched alone while younger birds untold
That sought mosquito hawks warm summer days
Are far in flight from northern night and cold.

Below the twilight grays of cloud and sky
The bird is fixed on nothing as he stares
Beyond the downcast eyes of passersby
All caught in a bewilderment he shares.

Behind the dimming clouds a full moon glows,
Mere symbol of itself as it would seem
To one who fears the little that he knows
Is like a bird's eye darkening a gleam.

He stands with hands in pockets deeply pressed,
His form grown blacker now as night grows old
Like that lone bird whose essence he had guessed
Was ghostly as his own in polar cold.



Christine Zuercher

Grand Terre Island, 2015

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Self-Examination: Reflections in a Mirror

David Middleton

Time once again for my six-months' exam
I stand before a mirror to assess
This aging body's state, each troubling sign
I'll need to show my doctor—lumps or moles,
Tingling or numbness, belly fat or sores,
Heart palpitations, rashes, there with things
Beyond all cure, that sag or fall away.

But then I see what mirrored eyes now say,
Those portals of the soul where sheer light sings
Till mind will discipline while love implores
The flesh to give itself to old controls
So virtue every sin might soon confine
Till soul is more and more, the body less
And who I should have been is what I am.

Originally published in *The San Diego Reader*.



Dennis Sipiorski

Chauvin, 2015

2015 Jambalaya Writers' Conference Anthology

Physical

David Middleton

Another six months gone and here again
I sit in the examination room
Waiting for my good doctor to walk in
With blood reports' and x-rays' gloom and doom.

My pressure, weight both noted by a nurse
Who's scribbled words and numbers on the chart,
I'm left alone to think about what's worse
This visit—kidneys, liver, lungs, or heart.

A bright high shelf is filled with boxes, jars,
Ear swabs and tongue depressors, alcohol
For rubbing only, not for snug dark bars,
Though shots I'll crave when shots come down the hall.

The room is grimly clinical although
An effort—ineffective—has been made
To cheer scared patients up with what I know
Will only lead me to be more afraid:

A watercolor's lakeside daffodils
Spreading springtime wild, blooming deep in sun,
Apart in art from life's prime blight that kills
Both them and us, the petals, flesh undone.

And hung in front of me, to illustrate,
A poster shows our viscera exposed,
Things hideous beyond their hidden state,
Old haunts of mind and soul, man-stuff disposed.

Outside the room's shut door I hear clear signs
My turn is next, my chart's flipped pages, then
The swift unknocking entrance that defines
My status as the one already in.

And so he comes, immaculate in white,
Professional, and friendly to a point,
And I, just hoping not to flinch in fright
As deftly he examines organ, joint.

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With warnings about drinking, weight, and food,
The blood work read like entrails, ups and downs
Of this and that, prescriptions all renewed,
He leaves with sad half-smiles and practiced frowns.

Then after his nurse tells me where the bill's
To now be paid if insurance won't do,
I'm out absorbing sun like daffodils,
Deep light, so metaphysical, so true.

Dr. David Middleton's latest collection of verse is *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (LSU Press, 2013). In August of 2014, Middleton was named the first Poet in Residence Emeritus at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana.



Dennis Sipiorski

Last Island, 2015

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The Watch

Bonnie Rehage

Brad got to the Waffle House half an hour late, but that was okay. I had expected it. He pushed through the doors, spied me at a booth halfway between the entry and the bathrooms, and headed for my table. The lone waitress stopped leaning on the counter when he walked in. She called out a welcome. He raised a hand to let her know he'd heard but walked past without breaking his stride.

That was Brad all over, always in a hurry, even when he was just meeting an old friend for a cup of coffee.

"Mark." He nodded by way of greeting as he slid into the red vinyl seat across from me. "Why the hell did you choose this rat hole for a meet?"

"They make a good cup of coffee."

"So does Croissant D'Or, and I don't have to sit in a fucking plastic booth to get it."

"Nice suit," I said. And it was. Steel gray with a subtle stripe woven through the fabric. It looked expensive, but then Brad wouldn't wear anything else.

"Thanks." He glanced at the waitress, who by now had approached us with a glass carafe of coffee. She slid a thick white mug and saucer in front of him. "Just coffee," he said, dismissing her with a flick of his hand. She dumped a handful of creamer packets on the table and left.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "You're not having any of this world class coffee?"

I shook my head. "Not today."

He shrugged and ripped open two yellow packets of artificial sweetener, dumped them in his coffee and stirred. He took a sip then leaned back in the booth. "Well? You're the one who insisted we meet this afternoon. I cut a very important meeting short to drive out here, so let's get to it." He frowned and took in my own suit. It wasn't the sort of thing he was used to seeing me wear.

"Wait a minute. This isn't some kind of business pitch, is it? Because I have an office for that and a secretary who can set you up with an appointment."

"Nothing like that. I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes," I smiled. "It's been a long time."

His jaw tightened. He glanced at the thin gold watch on his left wrist and huffed out a breath. "What the hell, I'm here now. I might as well finish my coffee at least." He lifted the cup. "Not bad, by the way. So what's on your mind?"

"You know my mom died last fall."

He looked into his cup, took another sip. "Yeah, I heard. I would have been at the funeral, but I was out of town that day. There was no way I could have made it back in time."

"Don't worry about it. That's not why I wanted to see you anyway."

He met my eyes again. Waited.

"Something happened the night she died. She was in the hospital for about a week before she went. I stayed with her the whole time, night and day. It can be rough, just sitting around all day in a place like that with nothing much to do but watch her sleep, so every now and then I took a walk, just long enough to stretch my legs and get away for a bit.

"That night, her last night, when I left her room to walk around, there was a man standing outside her door. He was about mid-twenties, dark hair, average height, wearing a black suit.

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He glanced my way when I walked past but neither of us spoke. I figured he was in that place for the same reason I was, more or less.

“When I got back about twenty minutes later, he was still there, standing just outside the door. I asked if he was looking for someone. I mean, there’s this stranger standing outside my mom’s door all this time without going in or saying anything. I wanted to know what he was doing.

“He seemed surprised that I spoke to him. He looked behind him, like he thought I was talking to someone else, but we were the only ones in the hall just then. He turned back to me with this look on his face, like something had spooked him. Then he vanished.”

Brad shrugged a silent “so what?”

I leaned over the white Formica table top and looked straight into his eyes. “I don’t mean he just walked away,” I said slowly. “He *vanished*. Disappeared.” I held my hands up with fingertips bunched together then spread them apart in a pantomimed explosion. “Poof. Gone.”

He stared at me for a long moment. In the silence, the door opened. An old man shuffled in and sat at the counter. His slow footsteps and the hiss of the coffeemaker were loud in the almost deserted restaurant. Brad finally broke off the stare, shifted his gaze sideways and snorted.

“Disappeared.” His measured voice almost hid his anger. Almost. Anyone else might not have picked up on it, but we’d known each other all our lives, and I could read his mood. “I’m a busy man, Mark. I didn’t take time out of my day to come here and listen to fairy tales.”

I hadn’t expected him to believe me straight away. I had hardly been able to believe it myself the first time. “There’s more,” I said.

His eyebrows lowered. I held a hand up before he could say anything more. “Please just hear me out. For the sake of our friendship if nothing else.”

Our relationship had taken a few hits in the years Brad spent zooming up the corporate ladder, but he was still my oldest friend. Friends make allowances for each other.

Another, more pointed look at that fancy watch. I read the hands upside down, even though I knew what time it was. Three fifteen.

He leaned back against the booth, his arms crossed and his face tight. “Ten minutes.”

More than enough time. “Thanks. Anyway, after the guy vanished, I heard the alarms going off in my mother’s room. She was dead by the time I got to her.”

“Sorry,” Brad muttered.

“A few months after that, I saw the same guy outside of a club downtown. It was late and the band had just finished its last set, so there were a lot of us heading for our cars at the same time. He was standing on the sidewalk about ten feet from the door when I spotted him. He nodded at me, kind of like saying he saw me and he knew I saw him. He glanced at something on his wrist. It looked like a black watch. Then he looked up and past me. I started to push through the crowd to get to him when I heard a car braking hard and a thump. A woman had been hit by a car. Everyone started crowding around her, pushing and shoving to get closer and see what happened. When I was able to get to the place the man had been, he was gone. The woman died right there in the street.”

Brad turned way and stared at the parking lot through the plate glass window next to the booth. There were only two cars in it, a beat-up brown Nissan and his silver BMW. Sunlight bounced off both windshields in brilliant starbursts. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t walk out, either, so I kept talking.

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“By the third time I saw the guy in black, I had figured out that no one else could see him. He didn’t seem to mind me being there. We were getting used to each other, I guess. He even said “hello” and stood next to me, as close as you are right now. Close enough for me to get a good look at the thing he wore on his wrist. It looked like a watch, but there were no numbers or hands on the face. It was just a blank disk.

“Not long after he showed up, I heard screaming behind me. By then I knew something like that was going to happen, and I didn’t look around. I didn’t have to. I knew what was going on. I just kept my eyes on the guy in the black suit instead. That time I saw him leave. He nodded at me then walked through a wall. Just melted right into it.”

“Come on, Mark. What the hell are you talking about?” Brad was openly agitated, yanking the knot in his tie loose and shifting in his seat. The waitress walked by behind the counter with a plate of eggs for the old guy. She watched Brad from the corner of her eye, frowning.

“I saw him again and again. And not just him. There were others—all of them in black suits, wearing those black watches.” I leaned toward my friend and tapped the table to make my point. “And every time they showed up—every single time—someone died.”

“What’s this got to do with me?” He was almost shouting now. “If you think they’re killers, tell a cop, for Christ’s sake. I can’t do anything about it.”

I shook my head. “Not killers. They never touched anyone; they just watched. All they ever did was attend the deaths. After a while, when we came to accept one another, they told me a little more about the duty. That’s what they called it, the duty.

“They had all been recruited to it at one time or another. I mean, they had regular lives before that, but they were born to stand vigil at the moment of death. Just to watch. I even started calling them The Watch.”

“I’ve heard enough.” Brad slid to the end of the booth and began to stand. He gasped and dropped back into his seat, his right hand pressed flat against his chest.

“Can you imagine what that would be like?” I asked. “Watching one person after another die and not being able to say anything, do anything? To just watch death over and over?”

“Mark.” Brad’s voice was shaky, his breathing fast and shallow. “What . . .” His eyes flicked over my face, took in my neat black suit and widened. He managed to get up on his second try but could barely stand. He leaned panting against the table. His face was very white.

“And the worst thing, Brad, the absolute worst, is not being able to talk to anyone about it. Not having a friend to confide in. Everyone needs someone to talk to, you know? Someone he can share things with, even if it’s only for a few minutes.”

The waitress looked at my friend again. The chrome napkin holder in her hands clattered to the floor, loud as a bomb in the still restaurant. She ran around the end of the counter and sprinted for our table.

“I—” Brad gasped, and I saw fear in his eyes. “Please. I have things to do.”

“No,” I pushed my sleeve back to check the black watch on my own wrist. The face wasn’t really blank, at least not to those of us who knew how to use it. “No, Brad, you really don’t.”



Christine Zuercher

Cheniere Caminada Cemetery, 2015

Corpse Finder
- *Hebeloma syriense*

Monique M. Jones

Lady of other's mourning,
she grows in secret places,
deep in leaf mold, with earthworms and beetles
feasting; white spider-webbed fingers
gently probe underground
beneath redbud and elm, leaves falling
in shades of autumn.
Sheltered under hemlock and nightshade in
shadows ripe with dark remembrances,
she emerges
crouching low, bowed under
her dusky cap of sticky ochre.
She is a grim tale teller
speaking of silent bones.

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Opelousas Home

Thomas S. Doland

Just a lonesome cowboy on the Opelousas plain.
Left the house early again .
Sun's breaking through the clouds.
Been a long mornin' in the rain.
It's been a lonely place since momma's been gone.
I tried to leave a while back
Just to escape the pain,
But I'd rather be in this saddle
Drivin' these cattle at my Opelousas home.
I can still see her cookin'
breakfast at the stove.
The chickens in the yard
Waitin' for her impatiently.
They been lonely since she's been gone—
Nothin's the same.
Got her grave next to daddy's
In the graveyard down the road.
Passin' by it again this morning,
Lord I miss her so.
It's been a lonely farm
Since she's been gone.
Ain't never gonna leave—
Got no place else I want to go

Cicero's all wet and muddy
Workin' with me on these cows.
He's a faithful collie dog—
Been around since I was a kid,
Always pantin' and waggin' his tail
At the kitchen door, waitin' for momma
To toss him a scrap.
He don't smile much anymore.
He's been a lonely dog since she's been gone.
Her apron still layin' over the back of the chair
At the kitchen table.
Her boots she wore in the yard
Still at the door.
She'd look up from her cookin' with
Her gentle eyes and smile,
"Dinner's 'bout ready.
Get washed up and take that hat off

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In the house.”

Lord I miss her so.
Been a real lonely farmhouse
Since she's been gone,
But I'll never leave
My Opelousas home.

A lifelong resident of Lake Charles, **Thomas S. Doland** was influenced by his mother in his love of music and art. “The love of poetry came naturally as creative expression of life events.” Doland's favored poetic subjects are religion, romance, philosophy, biography, and autobiography.



Evan Thomas

Bayou Sale, 2015

