

the
Seraphic
Reviewer



Issue
1

Editor's Note

I started this publication on a whim with no specific goal in mind. A month ago, 'Seraphic' was a pretty word I came across in a news article. Today, it is the culmination of weeks of preparation and hours of dedicated work from a set of diverse contributors. The experiences collected in this issue are sublime, heartfelt. Each featured piece embodies, and has helped to solidify, our aim as a magazine: to document all that makes us human.

Thank you,
Tanya Rastogi, Editor-in-Chief
August 20, 2023

Contents

Poetry

Peycho Kanev

- *The Growth of a Soul (5)*
- *Obituaries in an East European Newspaper (6)*

Diarmiud ó Maolalaí

- *The don't know what to do (7)*
- *A different continent (8)*

Gerry Fabian

- *Processing Paraphernalia (9)*
- *When The Neutron Star (10)*

Sheila Murphy

- *Maybe Nest (11)*

Amanda Dawson

- *Transcending (12)*

Michael Allyn Wells

- *A Few Things you Ought to Know (13)*
- *And you Judas (14)*

Terry Miller

- *what happened was (15)*

John RC Potter

- *Moonbeam (16)*

Sarah Das Gupta

- *beneath the skin (17)*
- *The Unquiet Grave (18)*

Rikki Santer

- *Reviving Leo (19-24)*

Peycho Kanev

The Growth of a Soul

These strange things are everywhere.
In the church early in the morning
I tried to turn the water into wine
and I failed.
I was still a child and I knew nothing.

I looked at the glistening wooden legs
of the statue. The sun slowly rose and
pulled the statue's head out of the shadows
with its halo of black flies. The old people
around me were talking quietly as actors in
a silent movie, the light was moving slowly
to the ceiling.

Then they took me outside in front of a cauldron,
with the sacrifice bubbling inside. The crows
were perched on the branches as black beads,
quiet and pretending that they do not notice me.
As well as the small statuette, which they put on
the table, of the same naked actor in this obscure
and boring play.

Obituaries in an East European Newspaper

I flip through the pages and they are always there,
with their eyes open as if they still want to see.
One of them is a serial rapist, shot by a police officer.
I've read about this a few days ago in the same newspaper.
Now I look at his eyes and I see that they look like piss-holes
in the snow, but even now they're still searching.
Then my wife came in the room naked and I threw the newspaper,
before he was able to catch a glimpse of her body.

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

DS Maolalaí

The don't know what to do

I keep dreaming
I'm not paying attention
when lights change
and I go into a fender.
I'm generally fine
in the dreams – these are not
about injury – they're about
the don't know what to do
of time after an accident.
what do you do, anyway?
even now I don't know.
once the week after
I got back from malaysia
with chrysty I was coming
home from work and this guy
clipped my bumper a little.
I just got out – looked – it looked
fine. I said ok and we both drove
away. that probably wasn't right
but also I shouldn't
have been driving. I was so
fucking jetlagged
I was fucked. but yeah – didn't know
what to do. and what's worse is that even
awake I don't pay
much attention. I listen to audiobooks.
look at pretty girls and dogs.

A different continent

peter is going by
tk now sometimes. came out
a little bit to my wife.
I'm proud of him –
we thought he was ace
but turns out he was just
in the closet. a nice
guy – I like him. soft
as an oven glove mitt.
and he's eating beef
too! his parents
are apparently furious,
but they're far away.
he took care of the dog
while we were both working
last week. she visited
after – says the view
from his new place is great.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has nominated eleven times for Best of the Net, eight for the Pushcart Prize and once for the Forward Prize, and has been released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022). His Instagram is @dsmaolalai and his twitter is @diarmo1990.

Gerry Fabian

Processing Paraphernalia

I am a drawer pack rat.

The one bureau drawer holds
a collar from my favorite Brittany,
several baby teeth, a shell from Jamaica,
two tickets from a Rolling Stones concert,
a graduation tassel, a fountain pen,
the ignition key from my first car,
a sack of marbles, random baseball cards,
a shot glass from the London Hard Rock Cafe,
several love letter from females
whose faces I can no longer recall
and a wedding photo of us kissing
when love was all that mattered.

When The Neutron Star

blots the rainbows from the sky
embrace the penetrating warmth.
The slow subtle drying
within the atmospheric confluence
extends a matrix of heat.
Enlace the healing contingencies
with solar determination.

R. Gerry Fabian is a published poet and novelist. He has published five books of poetry. *Parallels*, *Coming Out Of The Atlantic*, *Electronic Forecasts*, *Wildflower Women* as well as his poetry baseball book, *Ball On The Mound*. In addition, he has published four novels : *Getting Lucky (The Story)*, *Memphis Masquerade*, *Seventh Sense* and *Ghost Girl*.

Sheila Murphy

Maybe Nest

A mild case of detritus
distracts from caressing
wildflowers in the midday yard

Come hither toward my nomad heart
watering the lonely plants that bloom
or do not bloom within the house

I occupy the distance faithfully
revealing little of the scape and scope
of rain light on the windshield

My repetitious heart my perfect
pitch my guarded sense
of sacred you my sole infinity

Sheila E. Murphy's most recent books are *October Sequence: Sections 1-51* (mOnocle-Lash Anti-Press, 2023), *Sostenuto* (Luna Bisonte Prods (2023) and *Golden Milk* (Luna Bisonte Prods, 2020). Murphy is the recipient of the Gertrude Stein Award for her book *Letters to Unfinished J.* (Green Integer Press, 2003). Murphy's book titled *Reporting Live from You Know Where* (2018) won the Hay(na)Ku Poetry Book Prize Competition from Meritage Press (U.S.A.) and xPress(ed) (Finland). Murphy has authored 45 books of poetry. Based on a background in music theory and instrumental and vocal performance, her poetry is associated with music. Murphy earns her living as a management consultant and researcher and holds the Ph.D. degree. She has lived in Phoenix, Arizona throughout her adult life.

Her Wikipedia page can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheila_Murphy

Amanda Niamh Dawson

Transcending

They are not ours
They are not yours
These stars navigate distant shores

Tread the deep
Minds do sweep
Dust from eyes
So souls who walked
Can learn to fly

Amanda Niamh Dawson is a poet based in rural northern California. Trees, stars, and everything quantum inspires her writing. Her work has appeared in *The Avocet*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *The Bloom*, *The Fib Review*, *The Rosette Maleficarum*, and is forthcoming in *Pomona Valley Review*. Her instagram is @thedawsonian.

Michael Allyn Wells

A Few Things you Ought to Know for Duncan Willamette

I wrote to you of pastels,
of cotton puffs overhead.

Of grass between toes,
and sidewalks too hot
to stand still on.

I told you of surprise maples
that each October were so
on fire with the color of your hair.

And mascara that won't
run down your face
with tears of joy.

And lips that were like linens so fine
we could not afford them growing up.

And I explained the lust I have
each spring for the home opener.
And how I would give that up—
to be with you.

And you Judas

Find the betrayer.

The Judas.

The one who embarks
on the rebel sea.

The one who thinks
this one time
will be no big deal,
but doesn't say it.

The vastness
before Judas
is too tempting.
We need not be

analytical. Too
condemning. Too
caught up in
the particulars.

Clearly the harshest
will be the self
judgment. The
big fat scab,

the remorseful
crust. Beneath
which, the pain
will seethe.

Michael Allyn Wells is a Midwest poet living in Kansas City. He is an alumnus of the AWP Writer to Triter mentor program – 2017 Session. He has appeared in *The Chinese Pen* for his poem *Tiananmen Mother*. Additionally, his work has appeared in *Nude Bruce Review*, *34 Orchard*, *Rockhurst University Fine Arts Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine Anthologies Vol 1 and Vol II*, *Remington Review*, *Punchnel's Magazine*, as well as other print and online venues. His work has inspired paintings by the artist Jennifer Rivera that have appeared with the painted work in both gallery and at a showing at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St Joseph, Missouri. When not writing or reading Michael is an avid San Francisco Giants baseball fan. He takes his coffee black and his wine white.

Terry Jude Miller

what happened was

“There is only one thing that I dread:
not to be worthy of my sufferings.”

— Fyodor Dostoevsky

I’ll leave out the gory details
the hanging thumbnail
infected dermatitis
excised ventricle and aorta

don’t want your stomach
Mount-Saint-Helen-ing
before we get to the cause
after effect

suffering is an equalitarian
everyone gets a taste—cod liver oil
and bleach—granite dust and tears

the best thing suffering teaches
is how to endure it

like Dostoevsky—I hope I’m worthy
of the nail poking my sole
through the bottom of my boot

Terry Jude Miller is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet from Houston. He received the 2018 Catherine Case Lubbe Manuscript Prize for his book *The Drawn Cat’s Dream*. His work has been published in the Southern Poetry Anthology, The Lily Poetry Review, The Comstock Review, and The Oakland Review and in scores of other publications. He serves as 1st Vice Chancellor for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies. His Instagram is @poettjmiller and his Twitter is @PoetTerryMiller.

John RC Potter

Moonbeam

Lost in the woods at night
I chased the beckoning moonbeam;
it slid down out of the sky
its pale glow caressing my face.

It was not a whole but a part,
needing my presence for completion;
I reached out to grasp
its lowering ice-pick tip.

I stumbled before this symbol of love
and couldn't catch myself

From
Falling
Fast.

The moon pierced my beating heart,
two symbols of passion
exploding together;
and I gave in
to the darkness that

covers our souls
at the end

of a love
lost in its
own
excess.

John RC Potter is an international educator and gay man from Canada, living in Istanbul. He has experienced a revolution (Indonesia), air strikes (Israel), earthquakes (Turkey), boredom (UAE), and blinding snow blizzards (Canada), the last being the subject of his story, "Snowbound in the House of God" (Memoirist, May 2023). His poems and stories have been published in a range of magazines and journals, most recently in Blank Spaces, ("In Search of Alice Munro", June 2023), Literary Yard ("She Got What She Deserved", June 2023), & Freedom Fiction ("The Mystery of the Dead-as-a-Doornail Author", July 2023).

Sarah Das Gupta

beneath the skin

back down the road re-trodden meeting that phantom
thinly transparent stripped of substance
bone with sinews about to snap
worn out muscles lost dreams now thin
blood seeping through over the years
only suggestions half prints in shifting sands
no transfusion from the present possible
water blood cannot flow backwards
dancing with shadows my arm stabs
through you as through old paper
pressed against vacancy held in
the power of long-gone hours
empty eye sockets at least an openness
no feigned passion or mock sighs
look through the vacancy into the skull
the white bone smooth and honed
cannot lie
flesh long gone even the skeleton wearing away
the uncertain smile can't hide the gaping grin
feel through the darkness the empty space
none of the trickery of flesh
only the density of bone
a tango of broken bones
dancing in a bag
shaken together
an anatomical puzzle
unsolvable

The Unquiet Grave

In his eye lingered a tear
he heard the water running near
the grassy grave still haunted him
his heart could feel the forest drear
a wolf howled out among the pines
in the silence he lived the fear
darkness washed over the fading valley
could he live without his dear
brown leaves covered the mossy path
dying withered skeletal sere
from the pool her face looked up
a face much missed for an endless year
in the South wind her voice is laughing
in soft-falling snow he can faintly hear
the whisper of longed for love
he wades deep, deeper into the water clear
slowly so slowly he slips
 beneath
 the mere

Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher who lives in Cambridge, UK; She has taught in UK, India and Tanzania. Her interests include: equestrian sports, the countryside, Medieval History and Ghosts. She has had work published in a number of magazines and anthologies: 'Paddle', 'Dipity', 'Dorothy Parker's Ashes', 'Cosmic Daffodils', 'The Flying Dodo', 'Waywords Lit; Journal', 'Pure Haiku', 'The Plumtree Tavern', 'Sciku' and others.

Rikki Santer

Reviving Leo

[]

Could we rewind
as pencils do what
pencils do best,
to erase smudges
of remarkable circumstance.

Could we rewind
as pencils do what
pencils do best,
to sketch a Hamsa hand
that sketches itself.

[]

Difficult mercy.
Hazard that won't be muzzled.

[]

1913. Dixie wanted it all back
and more. Agrarian paradise.
Christian white of it. Mob law.

(>>>)

[]

From a Georgian fiddler's anthem:

Have a notion in my head,
When Frank he comes to die,
Stand examination
In a court-house in the sky.

[]

How lavender Mary's dress,
how sweet the parasol,
tender the straw hat.
Starlings stirred a centrifuge
into the tangled skies
of Confederate parade.

[]

Lungs of abomination,
old language from dark throats.
The manifold profusion
of hot-blood atonement.

[]

From Thoreau, your fellow pencil maker:
Rather than love, than money, than fame,
give me truth. Affidavits were warped
with the Jewish Question, the Longest Hatred.
Belief, an enemy of fact.

(>>>)

[]

Yahrzeit candles shiver
with shadows of ghost limbs.
It happened before it happened.

[]

Opera cinched by the ferrules
of new industry and its sweatshops.
This daughter of poverty with her
hair ribbons and tiny fingers
at the longitude and latitude of metal room,
her work station, erasers into brass bands,
last stage in the process.

[]

Sunday morning and a tiny wishbone in her purse.
Near the basement's coal bin
her failed body cindered and grimed.
Headlines bleed, EXTRA'S leech,
inimical power of careless information
and the din that spectators desire,
the credence gained from mouth to mouth.
Justice abscessed, rule of perjury
and forensics in erectile dysfunction.
Sharksucker prosecutor curating
tissues of lies and innuendo,
linguistic fingerprints misleading
in the did or done of it,
the sweeper's tale scrubbed and tailored.
Incompetence a curse
for this Yankee Jew
worthy to pay for the crime.

(>>>)

[]

Prosecution's courtroom diagram:

Machine room where murder was committed.

Course by stairs taken to elevator.

The elevator shaft.

Route taken with body to elevator.

Pencil shaving dump where body was found,
where lock and staple were pulled from rear door.

Location of office.

Defense's courtroom diagram:

Entrance to factory.

Frank's office. Second floor. Stairway.

Ground floor chute.

Elevator shaft.

Basement.

X where body was found.

Logos fastened with safety pins.

[]

Leo, your appeals wandered through the seasons,
each time losing their aim.

Commutation and a governor's burning effigy.

7 and 1/2 inches a butcher knife takes
from your jailed neck. Near miss.

(>>>)

[]

Hot August afternoon.
Caravan of tires bump
over 100 miles
of Georgia's red clay.
People have the right
to carry out a verdict.
How to transliterate a world—
snippets of rope and shreds
from your night shirt,
postcard photographs
marketed wide.
Under an oak tree,
the blindfolded eyes
of necessary angels.

Sh'ma, a frilled wound of prayer
to loosen the hangman's coil.
Gazelle, your alter ego
as you shrink your heart,
release bound tendons.
Veins slip through marble walls
of courtrooms, synagogues.
Cloud of your body.
Last breath rises
in quiet rage and rapture.

(>>>)

[]

Inside a Brooklyn kitchen,
a mother's hands tremble
as she braids Sabbath bread,
the language of ache.

In Atlanta, light through a widow's
lace curtains speckles the floor.

Widow opens her window,
leans over the ledge.

Wind chimes call you back.

The anima of resurrection
wrapped in elegy, salted
stones on your gravestone,
semper idem.

[]

Time says yes,
the day looks right.

You in your perfect suit
and exquisite penmanship
ferried by a dreamlike boat.
Your face pressed into mist,
your sugar skull sparkling,
the moon coming to rest.

Rikki Santer's poems have appeared in various publications including Ms. Magazine, Poetry East, Heavy Feather Review, Slab, Slipstream, [PANK], Crab Orchard Review, RHINO, Grimm, Hotel Amerika and The Main Street Rag. Her work has received many honors including Pushcart, Ohioana and Ohio Poet book award nominations as well as a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her twelfth poetry collection, *Resurrection Letter: Leonora, Her Tarot, and Me*, is a sequence in tribute to the surrealist artist Leonora Carrington and was recently published by the arts press, Cereal Box Studio.

John Grey

SUMMER CONCERTS IN THE PARK, A HISTORY

August days crawl at the speed of a banana slug.
I sweat in a crowd by the park bandstand, hanging on for dusk,
amazed at how easily I found a spot, as if the place for me
was known to all, and bodies parted accordingly.

I'm uncomfortable but ready for anything,
my anticipation takes in the faces of the crowd,
as we wait for blended voices, choice guitars,
pounding rhythm, to turn dog days into breeze.

Steam rises from the grass, specters of past bands I'm thinking,
muffled by the years between, doing their best to
unglue my shirt from my skin, trace the thought somewhere
in my head that, no matter how much I complain,

I'm always here for the concert. Sure, I remember
past shows, most with pleasure, a few with boredom,
but in a place humming with youth, the din of their
rowdy if uninformed conversation, at the crack of evening.

That's why I do this as regular as Spring lilacs,
to get back to a time when love was more like longing,
and dreams weren't merely concoctions of past events,
and innocence was the just and proper guide for the experience.

(>>>)

So August days roll out slow but memories of them quicken,
the simple joys of people my own age,
without the defeats and bolstered by desires,
not alone, not standing outside, but within.

Sun's had enough, slips below the tree-line.
Stage lights come on, no one goes dark alone.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Stand, Washington Square Review and Sheepshead Review. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the McNeese Review, Santa Fe Literary Review and California Quarterly.

Barbara Meier

Idols

Depression is the idol in my mind:
a bird of prey, perched on my tablets
of destiny, tearing the cuneiform symbols
off the damp clay. The idols are asses
loaded with gypsum bas-reliefs
depicting every dragon memory
in the event panels of my life.

I am that beast of burden, an onager
laboring westward, bearing the gold
and silver of shame, anxiety, and bitterness
to a new land where I have been summoned.
The Word shatters my stories and melts my fears.

It comforts me when I don't understand
purpose and what is to come.
The former things of ancient times
recorded in my DNA because
You are my God and there is no other.

Frank William Finney

Dreams Like a Kite

"Throw your dreams into space like a kite..."

- Anaïs Nin (1903-1977)

Away from the wires
the trees and spires

Above the hills
and mountain tops

Over the heads
of lost balloons

Beyond the pallid
stars.

Frank William Finney is a retired university lecturer (literature) and poet from Massachusetts.

His poems have been published by Drawn to the Light Press, Metachrosis Literary, Poetry Nottingham, and elsewhere. He is the author of *The Folding of the Wings* (Finishing Line Press, 2022), and other collections.

Diane Funston

No True Silence

There is no sound of silence in the dark house on the tree-lined city street. It is summer in upstate New York. Hot and humid, not unexpected; nothing out of the ordinary. But everything here is out of the ordinary.

There are four fans on in the living room. One, I recognize from my teen years; my mother prides herself it's still going strong. Each fan is on, including a ceiling fan that goes so fast it resembles a dragonfly cruelly being flushed down the toilet.

At one end of the small room, under a velvet painting of a fluorescent-orange and yellow mountain scene, sits the television. The set is turned on in the morning and shouts all day long until she goes to sleep. News, weather, Animal Planet. Those are the choices. All the news, disgusting as it usually is, can be caught up on in the first hour, but the channel is on for many more. Politicos shouting at each other, murders abroad, murders here, the latest disease to be afraid of, the latest food that will kill you.

My mother is hard of hearing. She refuses to get a hearing aid because she doesn't have the money, resents those who get it free from government aid. The man upstairs gets government aid; he is developmentally disabled but a kind sweet man in his sixties. He cannot hear well either, but I know it is sometimes selective.

In my cellar room, I hear the TV, the volume a normal setting would be. I hear the muted sound of the fans.

(>>>)

In between, I hear my mother swearing at little inconveniences: dropped forks, stuck drawers, unliked commercials. When upset, she will slam doors, drawers, and rattle pots and pans she seldom uses anyway because she hates to cook.

It is my last Saturday dinner with her, and she said yesterday she would prepare a meal for me. I notice the box of instant potatoes on the gold Formica kitchen counter. I ask what we're having.

"I've got two pork chops I made awhile back thawing from the freezer. I'll just microwave them and make some potatoes. I remember now the chops are covered in gravy. I forgot you don't like gravy. You can probably just scrape it off."

Diane Funston lives in Marysville, California, in the Sacramento Valley. Diane has been published in various journals including *California Quarterly*, *Synkronicity*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Whirlwind*, *F(r)iction*, *Tule Review*, and *Lake Affect Magazine*, among others. She has been the Poet-in-Residence for Yuba-Sutter Arts and Culture for two years and ran a monthly Zoom event called "Poetry Square" featuring poets from all over. Diane has a brand-new chapbook, her first, entitled "Over The Falls" from Foothills Publishing.

DC Diamondopolous

Boots

The same sun scorched downtown Los Angeles that had seared the Iraq desert. Army Private First Class Samantha Cummings stood at attention holding a stack of boxes, her unwashed black hair slicked back in a ponytail and knotted military style. She stared out from Roberts Shoe Store onto Broadway, transfixed by a homeless man with hair and scraggly beard the color of ripe tomatoes. She'd only seen that hair color once before, on Staff Sergeant Daniel O'Conner.

The man pushed his life in a shopping cart crammed with rags and stuffed trash bags. He glanced at Sam through the storefront window, his bloated face layered with dirt. His eyes had the meander of drink in them.

Sam hoped hers didn't. Since her return from Baghdad a year ago, her craving for alcohol sneaked up on her like an insurgent. Bathing took effort. She ate to exist. Friends disappeared. Her life started to look like the crusted bottom of her shot glass.

The morning hangover began its retreat to the back of her head.

The homeless man vanished down Broadway. She carried the boxes to the storeroom.

In 2012, Sam passed as an everywoman: white, black, brown, Asian. She was a coffee colored Frappuccino. Frap. That's what the soldiers nicknamed her. Her mother conceived her while on ecstasy during the days of big hair and shoulder pads. On Sam's eighteenth birthday, she enlisted in the Army. She wanted a job and an education. But most of all she wanted to be part of a family.

"Let me help you," Hector said, coming up beside her.

(>>>)

“It’s okay. I got it.” Sam flipped the string of beads aside. Rows of shoe boxes lined both walls with ladders every ten feet. She crammed the boxes into their cubbyholes.

“Can I take you to lunch?” Hector asked, standing inside the curtain.

“I told you before. I’m not interested.”

“We could be friends.” He shrugged. “You could tell me about Iraq.”

Sam thrust the last box into its space. The beads jangled. Hector left.

She glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes until her lunch break. The slow workday gave her too much time to think. She needed a drink. It would keep away the flashbacks.

“C’mon, Sam,” Hector said outside the curtain.

“No.”

Hector knew she was a vet. He didn’t need to know any more about her.

On her way to the front of the store, Sam passed the imported Spanish sandals. Mr. Goldberg carried high-quality shoes. He showcased them on polished wood displays. She loved the smell of new leather, and how Mr. Goldberg played soft rock music in the background, with track lighting, and thick-padded chairs for the customers.

The best part of being a salesperson was taking off the customer’s old shoes and putting on the new. The physical contact was honest. And she liked to watch people consider the new shoes—the trial walk, the mirror assessment—and if they made the purchase, everyone was happy.

Sam headed toward the door. Maria and Bob stood at the counter looking at the computer screen.

“Wait up,” Maria said. The heavy Mexican woman hurried over. “You’re leaving early again.”

“No one’s here,” Sam said, towering over her. “I’ll make it up, stay later. Or something.”

(>>>)

“You better.”

“Totally.”

“Or you’ll end up like that homeless man you were staring at.”

“You think you’re funny?”

“No, Sam. That’s the point.”

“He reminded me of someone.”

“In Iraq?”

Sam turned away.

“Try the VA.”

Sam looked back at Maria. “I have.”

“Try again. You need to talk to someone. My cousin—”

“The VA doesn’t do jack shit.”

“Rafael sees a counselor. It helps.”

“Lucky him.”

“So do the meds.”

“I don’t take pills.”

“Oh, Sam.”

“I’m okay.” She liked Maria and especially Mr. Goldberg, a Vietnam vet who not only hired her but rented her a room above the shoe store. “It’s just a few minutes early.”

Maria glared at her. “Mr. Goldberg has a soft spot for you, but this is a business. Doesn’t mean you won’t get fired.”

“I’ll make it up.” Sam shoved the door open into a blast of heat.

“Another thing,” Maria said. “Change your top. It has stains on it.”

Oh fuck, Sam thought. But it gave her a good reason to go upstairs.

She walked next door, up the narrow stairway and into her studio, the size of an iPhone. Curry reeked through the hundred-year-old walls from the Indian neighbors.

(>>>)

Sam took off her blouse and unstuck the dog tags between her breasts. The Army had no use for her. Take your meds, get counseling, then you can re-enlist. But she wasn't going to end up like her drug-addicted mother.

The unmade Murphy bed screeched and dipped as she sat down in her bra and pants, the tousled sheets still damp from her night sweats.

The Bacardi bottle sat on the kitchenette counter. She glanced sideways at it and looked away.

The United States flag tacked over the peeling wallpaper dominated the room, but it was the image of herself and Marley on the wobbly dresser she carried with her.

Sam had taken the seventeen-year-old private under her wing. She'd been driving the Humvee in Tikrit with Marley beside her when an IED exploded, killing him while she escaped with a gash in her leg. Thoughts of mortar attacks, roadside bombs, and Marley looped over and over again. Her mind became a greater terrorist weapon than anything the enemy had. Her combat boots sat next to the door, the tongues reversed, laces loose, prepared to slip into, ready for action. Sometimes she slept in them, would wear them to work if she could. Of all her souvenirs, the boots reminded her most of being a soldier. She never cleaned them, wanted to keep the Iraqi sand caked in the wedge between the midsoles and shanks.

The springs shrieked as Sam dug her fists into the mattress and stood. She walked to the counter, unscrewed the top of the Bacardi, poured herself a shot and knocked it back. Liquid guilt ran down her throat. Sam picked up a blouse off the chair, smelled it and looked for stains. It would do. She dressed, grabbed a Snickers bar, took three strides and dashed out her room.

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Heading south on Broadway, Sam longed to be part of the city. Paved sidewalks, gutters, frying tortillas, old movie palaces, jewelry stores, flower stands, square patches of green where trees grew—all of it wondrous—not like the fucking sandbox of Iraq.

The rum kicked in, made her thirsty as she continued down the historic center of town. The sun's heat radiated from her soles to her scalp. A canopy of light siphoned the city of color.

She watched a tourist slowly fold her map and use it as a fan. Businessmen slouched along, looking clammy in shirtsleeves. Women, their dresses moist with sweat, form-fitted to their skin. Even the cars seemed to droop.

Waves of heat shimmered off the pavement. They ambushed Sam, planting her back in Tikrit.

She heard the rat-a-tat-tat of a Tabuk sniper rifle. Ducked. Dodged bullets.

Scrambled behind a trash bin. Searched around for casualties. She looked at the top of buildings wondering where in the hell the insurgents fired from.

“Hey, honey, whatsa matter?” An elderly black woman stooped over her.

“Get down, ma’am!”

“What for?”

Sam grabbed at the woman, but she moved away. “Get down, ma’am! You’ll get killed!”

“Honey, it’s just street drillin’. Those men over there, they’re makin’ holes in the cement.”

Covered in sweat, Sam swerved to her left. A Buick and Chevrolet stopped at a red light. She saw the 4th Street sign below the one-way arrow. Her legs felt numb as she held onto the trash bin and lifted herself up.

“You a soldier?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sam said, looking into the face of the concerned woman.

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“I can tell. You fella’s always say ‘ma’am’ and ‘sir’, so polite-like. Take it easy child, you’re home now.” The woman limped away.

Sam reeled, felt for the flask in her back pocket but it wasn’t there. Construction workers whistled and made wolf calls at her. “Douche bags,” she moaned. Alcohol had always numbed the flashbacks. Her counselor in Baghdad told her they would fade. Why can’t I get better, she asked herself? Shaking, she blinked several times, forcing her eyes to focus as she continued south past McDonald’s.

At 6th, she saw the man with tomato-color hair on the other side of the street, jostling his shopping cart. “It’s Los Angeles, not Los Angelees!” he shouted. His voice rasped like the sick, but Sam heard something familiar in the tone. He pushed his cart around the corner.

The light turned green. Sam sprinted in front of the waiting cars to the other side of the road. She had grown up across the 6th Street Bridge that linked Boyle Heights to downtown. From the bedroom window of the apartment she shared with her mother, unless her mother had a boyfriend, Sam would gaze at the Los Angeles skyline.

She followed the man into skid row.

The smell hit her like a body slam. The stink of piss and shit, odors that mashed together like something died, made her eyes water. A block away, it was another world.

She trailed the man with hair color people had an opinion about. The Towering Inferno. That’s what they called Staff Sergeant Daniel O’Conner, but not to his face. He knew, though, and took the jibe well. After all, he had a sense of humor, was confident, tall and powerfully built, the last man to end up broken, not the hunched and defeated man she was following. No, Sam thought. It couldn’t be him. It couldn’t be her hero.

He shoved his gear into the guts of the city with Sam behind him. The last time she’d been to Skid Row was as a teenager, driving through with

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friends who taunted the homeless. The smell was one thing, but what she saw rocked her. City blocks of homeless lived under layers of tarp held up by shopping carts. Young and old, most black, and male, gathered on corners, sat on sidewalks, slouched against buildings, drug exchanges going down. Women too stoned or sick to worry about their bodies slumped over, their breasts falling out of their tops. It was hard for Sam to look into their faces, to see their despair. The whole damn place reeked of hopelessness. Refugees in the Middle East and Africa at least had tents and medicine.

Sam put on her ass-kicking face, the one that said, "Leave me the fuck alone, or I'll mess you up." She walked as if she had on her combat boots, spine straight, eyes in the back of her head.

Skid row mushroomed down side streets. Men staggered north toward 5th and the Mission. She stayed close behind the red-headed man. He turned left at San Pedro. And so did Sam.

It was worse than 6th Street. Not even in Iraq had she seen deprivation like this: cardboard tents, overflowing trash bins used as crude borders, men sleeping on the ground. She watched a man pull up his pant leg and stick a needle in his ankle. Another man, his face distorted by alcohol, drank freely from a bottle. The men looked older than on 6th. Some had cardboard signs. One read, Veteran, please help me. Several wore fatigues. One, dressed in a field jacket, was missing his lower leg. Most, Sam thought, were Vietnam or Desert Storm vets. She felt her throat tighten, the familiar invasion of anger afraid to express itself. She'd been told by the Army never to show emotion in a war zone. But Sam brought the war home with her. So did the men slumped against the wall like human garbage.

The red-headed man passed a large metal dumpster heaped with trash bags. It stank of rotten fruit. He disappeared behind the metal container with his cart.

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Sam looked at the angle of the sun. She had about ten minutes before thirteen hundred hours.

There was a doorway across the street. She went over and stood in it.

He sat against the brick wall emptying his bag of liquor bottles and beer cans. He shook one after another dry into his mouth. She understood his thirst, one that never reached an end until he passed out. He took a sack off the cart and emptied it: leftover Fritos bags, Oreo cookies, pretzels. He tore the bags apart and ran his tongue over the insides. He ate apple cores, chewed the strings off banana peels.

“What are you—” he growled. “You. Lookin’ at?” His eyes roamed Sam’s face.

Shards of sadness struck her heart. It was like seeing Marley’s strewn body all over again. Staff Sergeant O’Conner’s voice, even when drunk, was deep and rich. It identified him, like his hair. How could the man who saved her from being raped by two fellow soldiers and who refused to join in the witch-hunts of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, a leader, who had a future of promotions and medals, end up on Skid Row?

“You remind me of someone,” she said.

How could a once strapping man who led with courage and integrity eat scraps like a dog next to a dumpster? What happened that the Army would leave behind one of their own? Like a militia, disillusionment and bitterness trampled over Sam’s love of country.

She woke up to another hot morning. Her head throbbed from the shots of Bacardi she tossed back until midnight as she surfed the internet, including the VA, for a Daniel O’Conner. She found nothing.

For breakfast, she ate a donut and washed it down with rum. She pulled

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on a soiled khaki T-shirt and a pair of old jeans and slipped into her combat boots, the dog tags tucked between her breasts.

Sam knotted her ponytail, grabbed a canvas bag, stuffed it into her backpack and left. She had to be at work at twelve hundred hours.

If O'Conner slept off the booze, he might be lucid and recognize her.

At the liquor store, she filled the canvas bag with candy bars, cookies, trail mix, wrapped sandwiches and soda pop then headed down Broadway.

The morning sun streaked the sky orange and pink. Yellow rays sliced skyscrapers and turned windows into furnaces. Sam hurried south.

When she crossed Broadway at 6th, the same sun exposed skid row into a stunning morning of neglect. Lines of men pissed against walls, women squatted. She heard weeping.

Sweat ran down her armpits, her head pounded. Sam felt shaky, chewed sand, and looked around. Where was Marley? She stumbled backwards into a gate.

"Baby, whatchu doin'? You one fine piece of ass." The man reached over and yanked at her backpack.

"No!" Sam yelled. She didn't want to collect Marley's severed arms and legs to send home to his parents. "No," she whimpered, grabbing the sides of her head with her hands. "I can't do it," she said sliding to the ground.

"Shit, you crazy. This is my spot, bitch. Outa here!" he said and kicked her.

Sam moaned and gripped her side. She saw a plastic water bottle lying on the sidewalk, crawled over and drank from it. A sign with arrows pointing to Little Tokyo and the Fashion District cut through the vapor of her flashback. Iraqi women wore abayas, not shorts and tank tops. Sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, Sam hit her fist against her forehead until it hurt.

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She saw the American flag hoisted on a pulley from a cherry picker over the 6th Street Bridge, heard the click clack of a shopping cart, and the music of Lil Wayne. The sounds pulled her away from the memory, away from a place that had no walls to hang onto.

Sam held the bottle as she crawled to the edge of the sidewalk. She took deep breaths, focused and glanced around. What the fuck was she doing sitting on a curb in skid row with a dirty water bottle? “Or you’ll end up like that homeless man you were staring at.” “Oh Jesus.” Sam dropped the bottle in the gutter and trudged toward San Pedro Street.

She had thought that when she came home, she’d get better, but living with her mother almost destroyed her. It began slowly, little agitations about housework, arguments that escalated into slammed doors. Then, one day, her mother called George Bush and Dick Cheney monsters who should be in prison. She accused Sam of murder for killing people who did nothing to the United States. Sam lunged at her, when she stumbled over a chair and fell. Her mother ran screaming into the bathroom and locked the door. “Get outa my house and don’t ever come back!” “Don’t worry! You’re a piece of shit for a mother, anyway!” She left and stayed with her friend Jenny until she told her to stop drinking and get her act together.

In her combat boots, Sam scuffled along, hoping to catch O’Conner awake and coherent.

She turned left. The shopping cart poked out from the trash bin. Sam walked to the dumpster and peered around it. O’Conner wasn’t there, but his bags and blankets were. She stepped into his corner and was using the toe of her boot to kick away mouse droppings when someone grabbed her hair and yanked back her head, forcing her to her knees. Terrified, she caught a glimpse of orange.

“Private First Class Samantha Cummings, United States Army, Infantry Unit 23. Sergeant!” She raised her arms. Sweat streamed down her face.

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His grip remained firm.

“Staff Sergeant O’Conner, I’ve brought provisions. They’re in my backpack. Sandwiches, candy bars, pretzels!”

He let go of her hair. The ponytail fell between her shoulders.

“I’m going to take off my backpack, stand, and face you, Sergeant.” Her fingers trembled, searched for the Velcro strap and ripped it aside. The bag slid to the ground. She rose with her back to him and turned around.

She saw the war in his eyes. “It’s me. Frap.” His skin, filthy and sun-burnt, couldn’t hide the yellow hue of infection. He smelled of feces and urine. His jaw was slack, his gaze unsteady. “You want something to eat? I got all kinds of stuff,” Sam said. Her emotions buried in sand, began to tunnel, pushing aside lies and deceit.

O’Conner tore open the backpack and emptied out the canvas bag. “Booze.”

She knelt beside him and unwrapped a ham and cheese sandwich. “No booze. Here, have this,” she said, handing him the food. “Go on.” Her arm touched his as she encouraged him to eat.

O’Conner sat back on his heels. “It’s all . . .”

Sam leaned forward. “Go on.”

“It’s all . . . stuck!”

“What’s stuck?”

He shook his head. “It’s all, stuck!” he cried. He grabbed the sandwich and scarfed it down in three bites. Mayonnaise dripped on his scruffy beard. He kept his sights on Sam as he tore open the Fritos bag and took a mouthful. He ripped apart the sack of Oreo cookies and ate those too. “Go away,” he said as black-and-white crumbs fell from his mouth.

Sam shook her head.

“Leave. Me. Alone!”

“I don’t want to.”

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He drew his knees up to his chest, shut his eyes and leaned his head against the metal dumpster.

Here was her comrade-in-arms, in an invisible war, where no one knew of his bravery, where ground zero happened to be wherever you stood.

“You saved me from Jackson and Canali when they tried to rape me in the bathroom. I should have been able to protect myself. And when they tried to discharge me. For doing nothing. You stood up for me. Remember?” O’Conner didn’t move. “I never, thanked you. Cause it showed weakness.”

O’Conner struggled to his knees. “I don’t know you!” His breath smelled rancid.

“Yeah, you do.”

“I don’t know you!” he cried.

“You know me. You saved me twice, dude!”

O’Conner stumbled to his feet and gripped the rail of his shopping cart, his spirit as razed as the smoking remains of a Humvee. He shoved off on his morning trek. For how long, Sam wondered.

She gathered the bags of food and put them in the canvas bag. She kicked his rags to the side, took his blankets, flung them out, folded them and rearranged the cardboard floor. She put the blankets on top and hid the bag of food under his rags.

Emotions overcame her. Loyalty, compassion, anger, love—feelings so strong tears fell like a long-awaited rain.

Sam couldn’t save O’Conner, but she could save herself.

She ripped off her dog tags and threw them in the dumpster. Once home, she’d take down the flag, fold it twelve times and tuck the picture of Marley and herself inside it. She’d throw out her military clothes and combat boots. Pour the rum down the sink. She’d go to the VA, badger them until she got an appointment. Join AA. She’d arrive and leave work on time.

The morning began to cook. It was the same sun, but a new day. Sam walked in the opposite direction of O’Conner.

**Boots* was first published in *Our Days Encounter*.

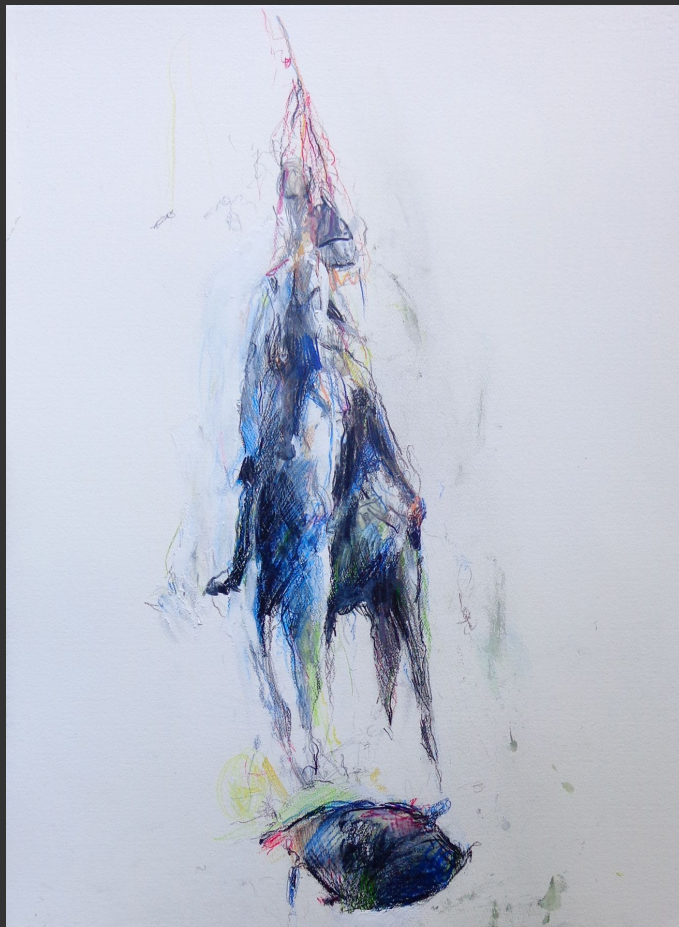
DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer with hundreds of stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. Her bio is listed in 2020 & 2021 *Who's Who of Emerging Writers* by Sweecat Press. DC's stories have appeared in: Penmen Review, Progenitor, 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, and others. DC's short story collection *Stepping Up* includes Pushcart Prize and Sundress Publications' Best of the Net Anthology nominated stories. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

Howard Skrill

Bear



Floating Equestrian



Memory erasure and its intersection with monuments has been the focus of Howard Skroll's Anna Pierrepont Series (howardskroll.blogspot.com, @skrollhoward) since its modest inception as plein-air drawings in 2011, principally in Green-Wood cemetery in walking distance from Howard's Brooklyn home. 2015's 'Bear' is a particularly remarkable gravesite monument drawn out of doors in Green-wood. Monuments can both distort and elide memory in their raising and their removal. A radical shift in Howard's practice towards studio works on paper depicting removals such as 2023's 'Floating Equestrian' has corresponded with a critical mass of others recognizing monuments as elemental to the manipulation of their own memories and corresponding identities. The current iteration of the series is "Monumental Follies", the title of Howard's 2020 solo exhibition at the Fairfield University Art Museum [<https://www.fairfield.edu/museum/skroll/>]. Howard's studio works are a product of an infinite variety of found gestures and colors that depict monumental surfaces as palimpsests for popular discontent and in the process of removal. Years spent translating the tracery of ruin honed in works such as 'Bear' has enabled Howard to create studio works documenting this moment's extraordinary reckoning.

