



NEAT.

ISSUE 6: Fall 2014

# NEAT.

Issue 6  
Fall 2014

Edited By  
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&  
TM Keesling



StuckInTheMiddlePress

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

For the next four installments of our magazine, we are focusing on music, and we're excited to bring to light all of the lovely work we've received. Music is a big part of why and how we write, and we think it stirs things in our readers, as well.

Our sixth issue is a stunning testament to what music means in our lives. The nocturne is a sad song, full of endings, and our contributors delivered with work about their innermost workings and desires.

We've also got two new wonderful highlighted writers at neatmag.net as well: Courtney Denning and Fred Zirm. Don't forget to head on over to TMI and Liz's Pick to meet these folks and read extra work from them.

Keep it classy. Keep it NEAT.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Jenike  
TM Keesling  
NEAT. Editors

## Missouri Waltz

*Jane Hoogestraat*

*after Jacek Fraczak, printmaker*

This town, near dusk, where the only color rings  
cotton-candy street lamps—a green, two pink,

a yellow—holds more light than one might suppose.  
See there on the edge a lake, rising moon, a glow

through shades on upper floors in gray buildings.  
On the deserted Main Street amazingly

a girl, a violinist, has chosen a spot to practice,  
a future stretching there without malice.

Her dog waits in audience, plaintive  
notes drift over a steeple, follow twilight

toward the darkening green of distant bluffs.  
It's an old tune, almost well-meaning enough,

whose history the violinist will learn about  
in a book somewhere, look up for a moment

to remember how when she finished the tune,  
a light was switched off above in a gray room;

how she realized only then that the town,  
the unseen, had been listening all along.



## Construction

*Jillian Merrifield*

It was raining, only a little, and I was wandering the neighborhood while the landlord showed my apartment. It was too expensive; I'd lost a roommate and gained a boyfriend and our plans for life didn't include an extra bedroom. We were going to have a dog, had already contacted a rescue and put our names in on a little wisp of a thing with ragged white fur around her edges. I wound my way through the parks, walked by our new apartment in the next town over, quickly so as not to be creepy, and decided that it was probably okay to come home. I'd sketched on a napkin how we'd lay out our living room. I'd picked out new furniture on Ikea's webpage. We had scheduled a home visit with the rescue. It was a small place, but the laminate counter looked like granite if you squinted.

The water had soaked through my shoes, and I turned the corner to make my way down Circle. The oyster bar had just closed; my moms had eaten there once and said it was awful—full of hostile servers. When it was open, there were painted boards on the outside, from which oysters with pervy eyes could sexually harass passersby with comments like “You shucked me all night long!” Now, the doors were open, and I glanced in as I walked by. There was a man on a ladder, the top of his head disappearing into the ceiling. He was grabbing bits of sky-colored drywall and tearing them down, ripping at the painted cirrus and crushing crumbs in his gloved hands. He wore a respirator, and it was the first time I'd ever seen somebody who didn't want the clouds in his lungs. He reached from the ladder and a bit of cumulous clattered to the floor, and then I had passed the doorframe's horizon. I'll never know what

the rest of the place looked like. Now it's a barbecue joint that overcooks my boyfriend's burgers, and we've moved yet again and hope to move once more.

When I got home, I went in the front door instead of the back and climbed up to our apartment. We never used the front room; a heavy blanket separated it from the air conditioned living room. All that lived here were my books. The new place would be smaller; our plans did not include extra space.

## **autobiography**

*Miles Solstice*

Most of it was boring—  
had one character.

Then I asked someone  
to stay the night

for a while.

## **We Haven't Learned Discipline**

*Nick Tackes*

(i)

we pressed an armless man on the street  
a movement of white  
cyclone-shaped on the  
roadside

his loose pockets were open hands  
knotty shoulders and a gravel tongue

some lesson about magnets returned to me  
her desert palm  
my hard shell  
cast from eagle's talons

gravity

inertia

and when blood darkened into invisibility

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upon setting

fragrant sounds

a touch of lint between our knees

friction made in a train car

(ii)

we were vellum  
mediums for vanity all about the slant  
a new composition splashed with  
vigor onto waxy spheres  
our birth was devoured by  
lips on Hamlet's bruised fist

her whisper in reply  
the locomotive blare

that night a common dream of  
floral patterns on a paper lantern  
for a hidden reason reminiscent  
of fire, syncopated  
as if significance was a balloon

he dipped his trunk in the channel of her back  
she shed her skin  
and let it die in a city street

his splinters were a residue of  
foam cemented to the porcelain limit of thirst  
she greased up his palm lines with her red thumb  
self sculpture inspired by  
gratuitous attention to the role of hostess  
strumming along the major keys

we pretended to be someone else

(iii)

we haven't learned discipline  
    haven't learned discipline

back from a jigsaw month  
we sit kiddie corner  
and pop red  
petticoat collars at high noon

    rolling sands on a coast  
red fingernails on a coast  
    smirking under curls

                    we read these notes  
in a North American novel

## **tiny beaches**

*Miles Solstice*

I still hate the word “fucking.”

You have to fuck, though, then eventually you might make it to love. If they say it in enough movies it becomes true and isn't that the scariest thing.

Some things are dreamt and feel like they're real.

Other things are real and feel like dreams and isn't that the scariest thing.

When I was small I rode in a two-seater plane, but no one remembers this happened.

I didn't think you would remember skipping class but you did. I miss the tiny beaches and so do you, I think.



## The Swim

*Phoebe Pierson*

The evening sky was light grey, a moody grandfather's long thin beard. The wind was playful, quick-footed, full of ideas. The little waves were eager and impish and looking for fun.

Three bare shapes came hurrying over the hill and ran themselves straight into the stormy lake, with cries and laughing shrieks. A mother, two sisters.

In the blink of an eye the wind's sticky fingers snatched up the little sister's inner tube. The tube sailed over the cattails and escaped, bounding across the waves, afraid but glad to be free.

Raindrops stung the mother and sisters' faces, shoulders, and backs, only because they were feeling too wild to keep within the warm sheltering water.

Instead, *One! Two! Three!* They counted, and jumped as high up in the air as they could. They splashed back down.

When the little sister was worried the wind would blow them away like the inner tube!, her big sister held her slippery body and told her she was stronger than the wind.

If lightning struck on the water, they would all be in danger. *But that will not happen*, they fearlessly said. And so it did not stop them.

Underneath the surface, silvery smiling water caressed and surrounded them like silk, even as the rain fell thicker from above and the sky grew darker. Night would arrive soon. Low thunder arrived and concurred with the wind and clouds. All present now, the storm's mottled members enjoyed themselves and stormed on.

When staying any longer would have been a mistake, would have stretched out the excitement so thin that it tore, the mother

and sisters ran up the path through the rain. They disappeared over the hill, leaving the sky and the wind and the waves to their wild play.

**COURTNEY DENNING**

## Child's Play

*Courtney Denning*

The sleepy village of Millbrook weathered strange and unforeseeable tragedies in the fall of 1867. Sunday's church service was interrupted when the choir broke into a spontaneous game of "ring around the rosie." Wednesday morning, Madge Clemens, the town baker, placed a freshly baked apple pie on every doorstep in town. Friday afternoon, farmer Henrickson dressed all of his sheep in his wife and daughters' best dresses and paraded the flock downtown. No one remembered why they were suddenly compelled to commit such bizarre acts.

Things took a sinister turn shortly after the sheep incident. James Truitt, owner of the general store, and Lucy Davies, local school teacher, both began to suffer stabbing head pains and stomach cramps. A gang of the town's youngsters, led by Marybeth Raines, took to stealing penny candy from the store and causing a ruckus during math lessons.

The sheriff got involved when the town librarian committed suicide by jumping off Darby Bridge. Later that week, both of Marybeth's parents died in an apparent murder-suicide. Their marriage had appeared to be a happy one.

Rumors circulated, Sybill Wainwrit accused her neighbor of practicing dark magic. The town was whipped into a frenzy. Three accused witches were hung for their alleged crimes. Suspected witches fled to avoid persecution.

The strange and dark activities continued even after the witches hanged. During the hysteria, no one noticed little Marybeth and her dolls, full of her mother's sewing needles and pins, quietly playing in a corner of the church's orphanage.

## The Witch's Sacrifice

*Courtney Denning*

Rather than face the remainder of her long life in desolate, dark loneliness, detached and forgotten; Halldora decided to have children. She wanted a family to keep her heart warm in her cold cottage in the Dark Forest. She sought neither a charming prince, a cunning warlock, nor a handsome farmer for the happily ever after and pitter patter of little feet that she craved. A witch cannot create a family so easily. Much more drastic measures would be required: a spell and a planting, performed at midnight by the light of a pregnant, full moon.

The spell required ten gold coins, the thinnest sliver of a mandrake root, and a blood and bone sacrifice. An innocent cat or rabbit would not suffice; Halldora must spill her own blood. With great care and much pain, the witch separated each of her toes from their ancestral home and planted them in the dank, dark earth along with the coins and root. Her children would still come from her body. They would still be her own flesh and blood. She would be crippled for the remainder of her days, but at least they would not be spent alone. It was a small price to pay to lift a lifetime of loneliness.

Each year, on the anniversary of their planting, Halldora bore another child up from the earth. A witch by birth, and a gardener by trade, she found their names in the woods. The girls were named Olive, Cicely, Rue, Willow and Myrtle. The boys she called Rowan, Cedar, Bae, Linden and Alden. Decades passed quickly with her large family to care for. Though their home was a happy one, eventually each child found a reason to leave. Fortune.

Fame. Travel. True love. Halldora shouldn't have been surprised; borne of feet; the children could not stay immobile for long.

Alone again, Halldora stared at her fingers and wondered if it was worth the sacrifice.

## **An Ownership Story, Catalogued in Animals Both Alive and Dead**

*Jillian Merrifield*

I wasn't there, but I know what happened.

She was a Great Dane. She leaned on me whenever I worked with her, swinging her butt into me so that I would love her and nearly sweeping me off of my feet. The other dogs in her play yard ran underneath her; the concrete floor shuddered under her paws when she pranced. She always had a different collar, bright, patterned, seasonal. Those collars sell for twenty one dollars each. She was seal, dark against the astroturf, with ears like hellspawn. Her mom was in the lobby. They let her out of the farthest play yard to run down the aisle and go home. They probably shoved the other dogs out of the way so that she could pass. Maybe she bowled them over. By yard one, she slipped in some shitty mop water. She was dead before she hit the ground, her oversized heart an exploded strawberry in her chest, juices leaking instead of pumping. Her mom was in the lobby, but then she was there, crying, maybe touching, maybe not. The vet from next door, the jerk who patched up fighting dogs under the table, pulled her tongue over her teeth, wrapped her black nose with his lips, and tried to rescue her, but her insides were smeared.

What nobody talks about when they tell this story is that the dogs in the play yards were barking. Barking at the dead dog, but also barking at the man who didn't care but tried to save her anyway and barking at the woman who loved her in collars and cried over her body—barking because they had to tell the people that this was not their place.

## So Easily Given

*Robert Walz*

They hauled lawn chairs across wet grass, arranged them into a circle around the skull. It sat on a stump, a yellow butterfly bouncing around the eye sockets. It missed a few teeth, had a strange purple thumbprint on the right cheek, plastic gemstones glued to the jaw hinge. It stared past the Hawkins family, beyond Reem's patchy beard and Coleen's caked-on eye liner. Right into the sky, unblinking at the small sun.

Then it sang.

"Is that Conway Twitty?" Reem asked.

It was.

Reem bent at the knees, hiking work pants up in trembling fists. He was the oldest of them all, fifty nine, his neck a turkey wattle of whiskers and cigarette treks. The wattle slouched as he fumbled for his menthols, dumbfounded.

"I told you sons of bitches I found a singing skull." Marijoe Hawkins crossed her arms and stomped a foot in the springy ground. She was nineteen, a mother once, and knew how to file divorce petitions all by herself. She took a menthol from Reem.

"You found it at the General Pawn?" Reem's eldest boy, Little Reem, asked. He looked like his father twenty years younger, bent at his knees the same way, bunched up his pant legs in younger hands.

"I done told you that I did. It was in the back, they thought it was plastic or chalk or some shit. Dollar and a half. Started singing this damn honky-tonk crap about the time I cross the county line."

"You're shitting me, Marijoe."

"Well, hell, you hear it singing don't you?"



"There's just some damn batteries and a speaker or something in it." Eli grunted. He was a soybean farmer that couldn't make any money, like most men his age in Jackson County.

"There ain't none of that." Old Reem reached to touch it, pulled his hand back, scared.

"Yeah, looks like real bone," Young Reem added.

The skull finished with Conway Twitty and moved on to gospel hymns they didn't know.

"Well, what are we gonna do with it?" Little Reem asked, not expecting an answer.

The Hawkins scraped boot heels in grass, rolled cigarettes around fingers, rubbed hands to chins, till Coleen grunted: "Get rich, what else?"

In Dairy Queen parking lots across the state, they'd set up shop. Marijoe sprayed her hair up high and pulled her top down low, carried the singing skull around half circles of farmers. They'd spit brown squirts into summer dust, arms crossed, eyes blinking in the graveled sun but when they saw there were no batteries, their arms dropped and the dollars came out. The Reems collected the money in coffee cans and all summer they ate pizza and smoked good cigarettes.

The money wasn't in the ground for more than a week before Marijoe stole it all, and Eli's van with it, and the skull too since she'd found it in the first place.

In her first memory there was a wide, green place overrun with weeds. On sun whitened posts, birds with black faces sang. Noon brought clouds of yellow flowers. Marijoe had a mother then, for a short while, then the car wreck. Her father dragged what was left of the scorched Mercury into the grassy space. A wasp nest took root in the twisted heap and grew through the summer. Swelling bigger and bigger till a buzzing cloud menaced the yard. Not many

came around the home then, no friends and just a few family. They'd just park at the end of the gravel driveway, point to the seething cloud of wasps and whisper.

Her father tried to spray the wasps out, but came running inside, choking on stingers. She couldn't recall when the wasps left, but one day they were simply gone, a blistered heart of mud paper shivering in autumn storms.

Marijoe ran away twice, years later, and on one trip she met a man in Deltona, Florida. He had skin the color of weak coffee and smelled like gasoline and grease-cutter. He told her how beautiful she was. She felt like a wasp nest, pregnant with menace, getting fat on his good words. Then one day she really was pregnant with a baby and that was the end of Florida.

Marijoe thought about the cloud of wasps when they pulled the baby out of her, squealing and healthy. She thought about her daddy, choking and red, face swelling with wasp stings when the social worker made her sign the papers that gave her baby away. The social worker even stopped at the end of the driveway and looked back, his black shoes chalky with gravel.

“I wished they'd let me tell the stories I'd come up with about you, but fuck em, they never cared about what I had to say anyways.”

Marijoe leaned out the van window and plucked a honeysuckle from a drying vine. She was parked at the riverbank where water slid away on a dirty belly to living woods and nameless roads. The skull sat in the passenger seat, singing songs she didn't know because they were songs no one had written yet. The metal firebox lay in clots of dirt on the van floor.

“I wanted to tell all them gawkers that you were a singing preacher that had died, but what are you really? I wonder. How'd you get that thumbprint on you?”

She sucked a bead of nectar from the petals, twirled the flowers around and remembered she was out of cigarettes.

“You sing all them songs like a man. I wonder if Jason will turn out to be a singer like you? I’ll be twenty soon, that’s four years on but I still feel him crawling around, even feel his little gums on my tits like when he was hungry. He was a hungry baby. Don’t matter, I can make as many babies as they want to give me and they want to give me a lot of ‘em, you know what I mean?”

The skull was reddening in the sunset, singing a line about a door broken by forgotten light, about a river of moths in a blizzard without time. Marijoe listened for a while. She wondered if any gift so easily given was a gift at all. She wondered if heaven was a place where the sun never set but just kissed the edge of the world, if it was a place where time stood still, frozen at the moment before decisions were made.

## What We Do, Installment 83

*Vincent Renstrom*

My daughter, nearly two, owns her highchair.  
She wears it, she claims it as her birthright  
and she sits in it this evening,  
pulled into the living room  
so she can watch *Phineas and Ferb*  
because they rock. And it dawns on me  
that she's just like the rest of us now:  
sitting in her comfy chair  
with her last drink of the day  
and maybe a toy to play with,  
eyelids getting heavier as she giggles  
and makes unintelligible comments.

**ambition***Miles Solstice*

While strumming a scale  
and missing every fifth note,  
you decide this dream is gone.  
But it did not live alone  
on Alaskan tundra, reclusive,  
hidden from the other dreams.  
It is not the last soup can  
in a fallout shelter.

Remember: you used to want to be  
a dinosaur or a Roman centurion.  
You used to think night happened  
because the sun fell asleep.

You used to pray  
for wings or strength  
or other superpowers.  
You used to hide  
in a cave made of blankets.

**This(was)***Jon Naskrent*

(eyes heavy he)'s hardly stayed awake,  
 leaning against a shoulder;uncomfortable(he is comfort)-able  
 with a lass who is perhaps un-able but perhaps not(she  
 leans on) him just the same. night-time-morning-Dawn-Yawn-  
 'Hun?-This(wasfun)  
 lips taste salty(and AllOther spices, seasoning)the bland Plain taste  
 s(he)asks  
 “so wha- ?” and is interrupted mid-sentence): mid-passion

## Sweet Heat Dreams

*J.L. Harlow*

The birds fly away from me, their sharp wings slice the air.  
Snow is a ghost, flying off the distant fences that bind them into  
place.

The trees have not abandoned their grace,  
They have bellowed down and swept it clean into their poetic  
hands.

Leaves like fingers, Branches are extended arms.  
The sweet hum of a secretive song,  
And the sound of an underground coffee voice.

Bongos are the earth's impatient grumble, a lullaby for the dead.  
So many branches die this way: stuck in a shroud of dust;  
Too cold to maneuver, basking in the old ache of dangerous days.

The wind, like the hot, fiery breath of a dragon turns hearts to ash.  
There is no melting point. Now everything has frozen over.  
I sweep my feet across this rug; dead, and still and brash.

Stagnant thunder grumbles at the soles of my feet.  
These quiet things soar past me.  
These quiet things are breaking the sky like glass.

Wings still trill around the snow, but not near me.  
I watch the ice. I long for sweet heat I may never meet,  
Except for in my dreams, and even then, intangible.

## A Poem I Dreamed My Wife Wrote About Me

*Adam Hughes*

I wonder what you're dreaming  
about, your eyes fluttering  
like horseflies  
from flank to flank, dodging  
the tail. My guess is  
it has something to do with

sex. You're sleeping  
through the rain on the farmhouse  
roof, drops pinging  
their springsongs, lyrics  
tap, dervish, sprawl  
like our daughter at her dance class,

askew. Your mouth  
moves, you mumble,  
your breath escapes like a musk

from under the house,  
a trapped skunk. I love you  
anyway. You'll wake soon

and want to make love. After  
you brush your teeth  
I'll give you something  
to put in your poems.



## **Midnight Waters**

*Catharine Clark-Sayles*

Cut the darkness like a plum  
to suck the sweetest juice.  
Keep the pit and polish it  
then hang it for a moon.

Weave swift-flowing cloud  
and night into a net for dreams.  
The deepest empty places seine  
for memories of fish. We

swim the midnight waters  
followed by a trail of light.

## **A Nocturne for Starlings**

*Jane Hoogestraat*

Mozart kept one, taught it melody,  
and mimicked from it a line or two,  
the song of one caged, not seven.

Drawn by heat from the winter city, five million  
have flown in Rome near sunset,  
each shadowing seven others, wings iridescent

over domes, air currents gilded, made visible.  
And when the falcon is hunting prey  
the formations tighten, fifty or a hundred

wound in a single, erratic ball plunging low  
toward the ground to fool the raptor, which is how  
the wreck happened at a Midwest crossroad,

a small pick-up scattering carnage at dusk  
otherworldly so many birds dead at once.  
Now there are parallels everywhere, shadowy

figures in the landscape. Was the falcon puzzled  
as any human sleuth? In what key do starlings sing,  
the one or two who swerved that day?

## The Princess from the Land of Porcelain

*Jennifer Finstrom*

*After the portrait by James McNeil Whistler (1863–65)*

Among the things that this portrait doesn't tell us is that she is a younger sister. Also that she sickened while being painted and that death would come for her at thirty-eight. This, I think, might be hinted at behind the pale folding screen at her back. Something waits there behind the birds and flowers for Christina Spartali, daughter of Michael Spartali, Greek-Consul General in London. I wonder if Whistler brought the gray kimono, red sash, pink robe for her to wear and if she felt like someone else when she put them on. Marie Spartali Stillman, older by two years, lived into the twentieth century, painted seriously, studied hard, knew Rossetti, Swinburne, Ford Madox Brown, married against family wishes, dressed with eccentric style.

A pair of lily fans,  
one in Christina's loose hand and one jutting  
out from behind the screen, shield nothing:  
clasped fingers let go with ease. The rug

she stands on is a blur of blue and white,  
feet invisible beneath the trailing robe,  
and she is trapped, immobile, in the paint.  
She doesn't know that this portrait, refused  
by her father, will end in the Smithsonian,  
the showpiece for a room to hold  
porcelain the color of the rug. She doesn't  
know that she will be Countess Edmond  
de Cahn for what remains of her life.  
The self left in the portrait continues  
to gaze off to the side in silence, younger  
sister in a story she doesn't know, bride  
given to a room that no one lives in.

## The Doppelgänger

*Lanette Cadle*

*At the Ulrich Museum, Wichita State University*

I saw a sculpture once of an art museum guard—the detail was perfection. The uniform, faded blue, the badge, not quite shining, and his mustache was a triumph in quiet despair, the kind that comes from a useless job at about 4:40 PM when closing time is always twenty minutes away. There he was, standing, ever patient; I could feel his breath trying to be quieter. And across the room, not looking a bit uncomfortable about all this was his shadow, the breathing one trying to look ceramic, also in faded blue, no moustache, but the planes of his skull were polished by time and perspiration, and I really wanted to look closely, to see if that shine made another palette, one that truly made art from the moment. A family moved into the room, startled at first. “Which one’s real?” the smallest boy tugged at dad, seeking wisdom through the shirttail. “Shhh,” mom hissed, “We’re in a museum,” as if art was never to be questioned, just silently viewed. They all half-slid their eyes over man and mannequin, and shuffled on to the next room, leaving me unsettled. I do wonder about this, not because I don’t know which was which, but I agonize over the wrongness of the question and the lack of response. *Which was first? Or even, Which breathes?*

would have been the way, one of those teaching moments in reality so important for the young mind, or even older ones but, no, it passed and went on to see the paintings. Look at the brushwork, so light—it could almost be a photograph. So I go home and pick up grains of sand with tweezers and move them from one pile to another simply because it's sand and the tweezers are right there. It's the rhythm that counts, I think, that and something to do. It doesn't even have to be sand. The motion is the end, the silence, the beginning of something greater than the sand or the motion of muscle under skin, breath marking each ripple and curl until at last, it ends.

## Portrait of Frédéric Chopin and George Sand

*Jennifer Finstrom*

*After the portrait by Eugène Delacroix (1838)*

Large portions of the original canvas are lost  
—including the piano and some dark red  
curtains—and while we don't know why  
the portrait of the couple was cut in two,  
the reasons are thought to be financial.  
In the portrait, Chopin plays music,  
—a nocturne or an étude—while Sand sews  
a piece of white cloth, head bent, dark  
hair falling forward. It seems unnecessary  
to bring up the obvious metaphor here,  
that the split portrait has something to say  
about Chopin and Sand and the end of their  
relationship, his worsening health. And it  
hardly matters now that he is in the Louvre  
and she is in the Ordrupgaard Museum  
in Copenhagen. Still, this reminds me  
of the time—weeks before my new lease  
began, well before the movers came to take  
the boxes—when my ex-husband asked  
if he should move to the couch, and I told  
him that at that point, it wouldn't make  
a bit of difference what room he slept in.

**FRED ZIRM**



## Shadow Walking

*Fred Zirm*

When I walk the lamp-lit streets,  
my shadow shifts  
with each new light I pass:  
behind, beside, beneath, before  
behind, beside, beneath, before—  
each pool of brightness, a sundial day,  
a brief night of dimness in-between.  
By this measure, each block I circle  
is half a month, and I've walked more  
months than I have lived, only to return  
to a home, either warmly lit with welcome  
or so dark and cold  
my shadow  
disappears.

## The Last Days of Pompeii

*Fred Zirm*

Company's coming, and I set about my appointed tasks. The first is to clean the dining room table, so I grab a paper towel and some Pledge, spraying and wiping the table until it shines. I turn away, proud that I have cleaned and polished in one easy step when I hear my wife say from the kitchen, where she is busy making her famous *coq au vin*:

"Honey, you missed a spot."

I turn back to see that, indeed, she is right. The whole table is covered with a thin film of dust, becoming thicker by the moment and threatening to become a layer -- or even a coating. I realize a paper towel is inadequate, wrestle the vacuum cleaner out of the front closet, and plug it in—ready to witness Hoover's patented Cyclonic Action at work, but someone has reversed the motor, and the vacuum spews out a week's worth of dirt in a cloud that begins to spin and swirl around the room. The vacuum's off switch has vanished, and a Kansas farmhand appears at the open dining room window, his coat clutched close to his throat.

"There's a storm a brewin'," he hollers through a cupped hand. "A whopper!" He stumbles off, struggling against the wind. I reach for the golf umbrella in the closet to protect our guests, but all I can find is a tiny Totes. The automatic release button is broken.

"Honey, don't open an umbrella in the house," my wife says, slicing some *Shiitake* mushrooms.

I can hardly hear her and certainly can't see her through the dust-blizzard. The loud sputter of a sick engine fills my ears. A gaunt, grizzled man emerges from the dirty fog. It's Henry Fonda and behind him, crammed into a decrepit car, the whole Joad

family. We pose for a Dorothea Lange photograph; then Henry leans toward me and whispers in my ear, “Man will not merely endure: he will prevail.”

I am about to tell him Faulkner said that, not Steinbeck, when he clammers onto the battered jalopy and heads toward Beverly Hills. I wave farewell for a while and then face the darkness made visible. There is a faint rapping, tapping at the chamber door.

“Honey, can you get that?” my wife asks. “I’m in the middle of a raspberry vinaigrette reduction.”

“Sure,” I reply. The wind begins to howl. I’m up to my knees now in sand, not dust. I hear the theme from Lawrence of Arabia. A dim figure approaches, walking on the surface of the sand without sinking. I don’t recognize my father at first; he has lost so much weight since the funeral.

“Lung cancer’s not so bad once you get used to it.” He coughs a couple times and then hands me a cigar. “It’s from the Big Guy,” he says and continues on his way toward what had once been the dining room. I notice he’s dressed as Fidel Castro.

The rapping now becomes a thunderous knocking.

“Knock, knock, knock,” I mutter, making my way to the door. I’m now on some sort of conveyor belt, headed the wrong way. I walk faster to stay in place. The door begins to bulge and splinter, like a cartoon door. Finally it bursts open and a shaft of golden light illuminates the slate foyer. I hear seraphim and cherubim singing *Hosannas* and a white-haired man in glowing raiment floats across the threshold.

“Honey, did you put out the *brie*?” my wife calls from some other world.

**After***Lanette Cadle*

His name was written by the stars  
in the sky. There were no stars.  
There is no sky. The house is warm.

There is no house. There is no warm.  
A snail shell empty, blown to the curb,  
ridges died long ago. The grass

comes up every year. So does clover.  
So do wild onions. The dust returns  
to the shelf and I polish again. Dishes used,

meals consumed, and tablecloth changed.  
It is all ashes, ashes, just not yet. Dust,  
dust stirred, settled and caked.

# **REVIEWS**

## **Review of *Tomorrowland* by Joseph Bates**

*Magdalena Waz*

To call Joseph Bates' debut story collection, *Tomorrowland*, strange would be doing it a disservice. Yes, it's weird in all of the ways that genre-bending fiction is (cities built in the small square of a backyard, a television that can access multiple universes), but underneath the conceits is a deep pool of human feeling, which only the best weird writing knows how to dive into.

Invariably, the stories in this collection start off funny, like they're winking at the reader or at least providing her with so much sensory detail that there's no way to avoid being sucked in. But the sheer relatability of the characters and their sadnesses provides a moment for reflection even when the stories are set in worlds that are unlike ours or told through structures that would normally alienate. I guess that's a long-winded way of saying that the collection plays with tension beautifully.

"Boardwalk Elvis" is a perfect example of this tension. It takes a microscopic look at the life of a man who performs as Elvis on the boardwalk of an unnamed city. On the hottest day of the year, he puts on his heavy polyester costume, his synthetic wig, and sets out to entertain the masses. His body does not fare well, and it's clear that the physical humor will soon turn into discomfort as the story comes close to nearly killing our protagonist through heat exhaustion and humiliation. Someone who at best would be considered a marginal member of society ends up shining a light on how we think about difference and how we punish those who are not useful in the traditionally capitalist sense of the term.

“Future Me,” on the other hand, moves further away from the trappings of the everyday. It tackles the age old question of how time travel works in science fiction by offering a comical encounter between two selves that turns into something more when the selves in all of their iterations keep making mistakes, mistakes I don’t understand because I don’t understand time travel. So I’m left with helplessness, concern for my own future and for my dwindling ability to impact it.

In fact, the packaging of the stories themselves reflects those themes. Each story has a title page that is all black save for the title. And the only image on the cover is a little faceless astronaut floating in space. Both these details speak to the overwhelming isolation almost all of these characters face. In “Gashead Tells All,” Gashead (who is exactly what it sounds like) says, “I don’t always understand what I feel, I guess I’m just looking for a connection, you know? A feeling like I’m not so alone.” And at their best, these stories are isolated moments, that when taken as a whole, reflect so many versions of the same human feelings.

In the vein of the science fiction that threads through the entire collection, these structures resemble the deep space maneuvers of deep space observers and rovers that use the gravity of a distant planet to correct a course and draw spinning power to travel distances that I can’t yet imagine.

## Review of Jordi Alonso's *Honeyvoiced*

*Brenna York*

Desire is our most natural vocation. Its sensations cause us to speculate and speculation causes us anxiety. This is an anxiety we enjoy, however. We enjoy it in the same way a person plays with stitches or runs her tongue over a sore tooth. Yet, just who and/or what and/or where are we inside desire? I posit this question to Jordi Alonso's book, *Honeyvoiced*, and describe its answer.

Alonso's task is no small labor (even if it is one of love). He fills in the gaps of Sappho's fragments with his own writing. Gaps which create pause and mystery in the ancient greek poet's work. The many devotees of Sappho's poems enjoy the plaintive stare of those gaps. Alonso's project of interweaving his and her sentiments heads out onto another experience, one that backgrounds the original material. To read *Honeyvoiced* is not to read Sappho, but to experience work deeply inspired by her.

In the introduction to his text, Alonso talks the harmonious marriage of food and drink to eros, how he was guided in this project by the revelation. A useful one since much of Sappho's work denotes getting as far as possible from human consciousness (i.e. the need to rationalize, make our experience of the world linear, etc) and cozy up to what's left of us that's pure animal (our instincts and natural propulsions to eat, fuck, sleep, shit).

Alonso intuits this about Sappho and incorporates it into his mode. In "Fragment 20", he writes, 'To want a body/next to mine/is to reason with the sea.' This line is representative of the tone



accomplished in *Honeyvoiced*. It is interesting that Alonso characterizes the text as a collaboration' between himself and Sappho. One might, instead, think of the work as a conversation, both latent and immediate, at times. Or, an independent study wherein the student is graded by the efficiency and complexity of one's intimacy with a self-created reading list. The line 'I will have neither the honey/nor the bee who makes it' denotes an awareness cultivated via Alonso's process composed of diligent study/write, study/write, study/write.

Perhaps, to return to my main question for the text, we are searchers inside of desire. Not haphazard or accidental searchers, but richly studious ones. Searchers with an investment in the outcome. The outcome which we are kept from knowing until it arrives, either to nourish or spend us. Speaking of arrivals, I particularly liked how Alonso describes how he came about his process of ordering. Instead of following the typified path of ordering the fragments by number (flexing a more reasoned, measured approach), he followed an 'emotional trajectory' which allowed him to find the relationships between his poems in a more naturally. That's a part of the role as searcher inside desire, anyway: to root out where your inclinations lead so you are able to develop your own path and/or pace.

It's not uncommon to think of desire as a world inside of us. Yet, might it be more apt for us to consider desire as a world outside of us? Even as a world wholly indifferent to us? *Honeyvoiced* often equates desire with consumables. But, to desire, are we not food and drink?

## **Review of *Fall Love* by Anne Whitehouse**

*Jennifer Finstrom*

The main characters in Anne Whitehouse's novel, *Fall Love*, are Althea, Jeanne, Paul, and Bryce: four twentysomethings in New York in 1980. And while we meet other characters over the months that the novel takes place, as I read, I found myself feeling that one persistent theme was so integral that, to me, it almost functioned as a character as well. The idea of what it means to be an artist is a theme impels the action throughout the novel and that is returned to again and again in different ways. I found myself as curious to know what the last thoughts on this would be—what final takeaway we would be given—just as I was curious to know where the novel's end would leave the characters themselves.

These four main characters are looking for a way not only to define themselves but also to define the identity they are presenting to the world. For Paul and Althea, this has a great deal to do with artistic identity that I mentioned above—he is a dancer on the cusp of creating his own dance and she is a painter who resists showing her work to others. We meet members of Paul's dance company and at the end of the novel, follow Althea's art on its first foray into the world. But for Bryce and Jeanne, a lawyer and theater manager respectively, this search is no less real, and it sends them back into their pasts and familial relationships. It's interesting that the only families we meet in the novel are Bryce's—for an extended period—and Jeanne's, more briefly. At the novel's beginning, Bryce, who has MS, has gone home to the south to spend time with his uncle Bill, the one family member that he feels an affinity for, as he is dying. Bryce leaves without explaining any of this to Paul, with whom he is

in a romantic relationship, beginning a rift between the two men that is instrumental in the events that follow. Paul is wounded by this lack of communication, and aware that Althea is attracted to him and finding her attractive in turn, he agrees to her invitation to visit her at the property she has rented at Block Island, the pastoral setting where the novel begins. Althea knows that Paul is in a relationship with Bryce, but she cannot keep from being pulled into a vortex of emotion that she knows will lead nowhere. This is further complicated by Jeanne's arrival. Althea and Jeanne have been friends since they were young, and on the island, all three are involved sexually, leading to confusion and lack of communication in varying degrees when they return to New York.

Setting is also important to this story, both the where and the when. As a reader, I found myself paying avid attention to details of the time period—1980—not least for how some of the plot hangs around miscommunication. Due to changes in technology over the past thirty-plus years, *Fall Love* couldn't happen in quite the same way if it happened now. Early in the novel, a letter from Bryce asking Paul to telephone him at his parent's house in Meridian, Mississippi is lost, keeping the men even farther apart. I can only imagine the frantic texting and social-media searching that would have taken place if the novel happened in 2014. Whitehouse's protagonists are a decade or so older than I would have been in 1980, and I can still remember the world they live in: payphones and answering machines and the elation of getting a personal letter in the mail.

In the latter half of the novel, I found the takeaway that I was looking for regarding the question of what it means to be an artist. Althea attends a lecture on art conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Paintings are like people," the lecturer tells her

and us. “They start to die as soon as they are born.” I stopped reading for a moment here to give it some thought. Just as we go out in the world and form relationships without knowing where they will lead, so too does art. I thought of how Whitehouse had been dealing with this idea of art and impermanence throughout the novel: she gives Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* to Althea, who visualizes the anecdote of young Michelangelo creating a sculpture out of snow. She has Paul discover whale song as the means of bringing his dance, *Savage Landscape*, to life. Paul and Bryce plan their rooftop garden together, creating something symbolic of their relationship, and Paul gives Bryce an Aolian harp, an instrument played by the wind that never creates the same music twice.

And while I am satisfied to have this realization about art, I am just as satisfied that not every relationship between the characters is as neatly resolved. While some of the action of the plot does revolve around improbable coincidence, the end is believable to me in that I can see these characters’ lives continuing and not ending where Whitehouse has left them. Whitehouse is a poet as well as a novelist, and after finishing the novel, I read what I could find of her poetry online. One piece in particular seems, to me, as if it could be commenting on *Fall Love*. It is called “Delete, Delete,” and it appears in [Poetic Medicine](#). The poem begins by talking about email and the constant deluge of our inboxes (again, technology) and moves into the wish to delete character flaws. The poem ends with the line “Knowing I cannot choose / the way my life will end.” This awareness is something that I see in the lives of these characters. The initial questions of identity are still there at the novel’s end, and if progress has been made, it is uncertain progress. And I didn’t really feel as if the story ended: only the part of it that I had been watching.

## Artist Biographies

**Lanette Cadle:** “The Doppelganger” and “After” (poetry)

Lanette is an associate professor at Missouri State University who teaches writing and writing theory. She has previously published poetry in Connecticut Review, NEAT, Menacing Hedge, and TAB: The Journal of Poetry and Poetics, and Weave Magazine. She is a past recipient of the Merton Prize for Poetry of the Sacred.

**Catharine Clark-Sayles:** “Midnight Waters” (poetry)

Catharine lives in Northern California and practices geriatric medicine. She has had two books of poetry published by Tebot Bach: One Breath (2008) and Lifeboat (2012). She has had numerous poems published in medical anthologies and journals. Recent publications include Spillway, Pirene’s Fountain, Locuspoint.org, The Healing Muse, The Midwestern Quarterly and The Healing Art of Writing vol 1 and 2.

**Courtney Denning:** “The Witch’s Sacrifice” and “Child’s Play” (fiction)

**\*highlighted writer (“Master Botanist” found with interview at [neatmag.net/lizs-pick](http://neatmag.net/lizs-pick))**

Courtney was born and raised in Ohio where she still lives with her husband and three ornery cats. She collects hobbies as a hobby and

is currently interested in gluten-free baking, blogging, photography, flower arranging, watercolor painting, hiking and of course, writing. Her favorite color is green and her favorite sound is the chirp her cats make when she gets home from work. You can read more of her work at [ThisOhioLife.com](http://ThisOhioLife.com).

**Jennifer Finstrom:** "Portrait of Frédéric Chopin and George Sand" and "The Princess from the Land of Porcelain" (poetry)

Jennifer teaches in the First-Year Writing Program, tutors in writing, and facilitates a writing group, Writers Guild, at DePaul University. She has been the poetry editor of *Eclectica Magazine* since October of 2005, and her work appears or is forthcoming in *After Hours*, *NEAT*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *One Sentence Poems*, *YEW Journal*, and the Silver Birch Press *The Great Gatsby Anthology*, among others.

**J.L. Harlow:** "Sweet Heat Dreams" (poetry)

Author of poetry books *Dragonfly Island* and *Mosaic of Ashes*, J.L. Harlow has now had eight poems published both in print and through online literary magazines such as *White Ash*, *Fat City Review*, *Surrounded Magazine*, *Riveter Review*, *Neat* and others. In her spare time she enjoys creating art work, drinking coffee, reading and learning about cultures of all kinds and searching the world for inspiration. J.L. Harlow is currently working on a novel, she hopes to inspire and be inspired throughout her future work.

**Jane Hoogestraat:** “A Nocturne for Starlings” and “Missouri Waltz” (poetry)

Jane's book of poems *Border States* won the 2013 John Ciardi Prize and will be published by BkMk Press in November 2014. In addition, she has published in such journals *Crab Orchard Review*, *Elder Mountain*, *Fourth River*, *Image*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Poetry*, *Potomac Review*, and *Southern Review*. She teaches at Missouri State.

**Adam Hughes:** “A Poem I Dreamed My Wife Wrote About Me” (poetry)

Adam is the author of *Petrichor* (NYQ Books, 2010) and *Uttering the Holy* (NYQ Books, 2012). He was born in 1982 in Lancaster, Ohio. He still resides near there on a farm with his wife and daughter, two dogs, four cats, and four horses. He works as a drug prevention specialist with high school students.

**Jillian Merrifield:** “Construction” and “An Ownership Story, Catalogued in Animals Both Alive and Dead” (fiction)

Jillian is a graduate of DePaul University's MA in Writing and Publishing program and currently teaches at the College of Lake County in Grayslake, IL. Her work has previously appeared in the *Curbside Splendor* E-zine and in *Midwestern Gothic*.

**Jon Naskrent:** “This(was)” (poetry)

Jon is an English Education major at Western Illinois University, located in Macomb, Illinois. An aspiring poet and writer, this is his first publication.

**Phoebe Pierson:** “The Swim” (fiction)

Phoebe grew up in Minnesota's lakes and Wisconsin's woods, and is a student of Intercultural Studies in Washington. She enjoys painting, reading, and editing her school's academic/philosophical journal. She is a habitual collector of objects from nature, such as rocks and pinecones.

**Vincent Renstrom:** “What We Do, Installment 83” (poetry)

Vincent lives with his wife and two children in Middletown, Ohio. He received his Ph.D. in Hispanic Literature from Indiana University. His poems have appeared in Little Patuxent Review, MARGIE, and Spillway Magazine, as well as in the online journals Alba, The Centrifugal Eye, Gutter Eloquence, Red Lightbulbs, Shark Reef, Slow Trains, and a few others.

**Miles Solstice:** “ambition” (poetry), “tiny beaches” (poetry), “autobiography” (poetry)

Miles lives in Madison, WI. This is his first publication. He's partial to wooded ravines, traincar graffiti, and yellow curry.



**Nick Tackes:** “We Haven’t Learned Discipline” (poetry)

Nick Tackes makes whip-cracking sounds when he winks, and also writes some poems. His poetry has appeared in the Brevity Poetry Review, Centrique Magazine, Ephemera Literary Journal, and won the Chapin-Tague poetry award in both 2011 and 2012. Nick has taught several creative writing workshops to elementary through high school students, and now studies South Asian Religion in New York.

**Robert Walz:** “So Easily Given” (fiction)

Rob Walz is a writer from Kentucky that currently lives in the concrete fissures of Los Angeles. He is writing daily about small, dark things.

**Fred Zirm:** “The Last Days of Pompeii” (fiction), “Shadow Walking” (poetry)

\*highlighted writer

Fred went to high school in Ohio and college in Michigan and Iowa, so his upbringing is very Midwestern. He has had a few pieces published, a couple plays produced, and has won some minor awards, but only now that he is retired will he seriously focus on submitting more of his work for publication.

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