

WRITER'S BLOCK

Magazine for Writing, Art, and Photography

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Colophon

Content

Editorial

A Mutual Parting of Ways | Peter McClung | *Poetry*
The Arms of Your Own Kindness | Tim Campbell | *Poetry*
Landscape | Samreen Sajeda | *Poetry*
All The King's Horses | Peter Newall | *Short story*
Valencian Orange | Julia Fausing | *Poetry*
Black Licorice | Doug Tanoury | *Poetry*
Art Nouveau | Maia Popa | *Short story*
The End | Kevin Novalina | *Short story*
An Expectant Father's Doubts | Dan Burns | *Poetry*
Dido's Pyre | Meg Hansen | *Poetry*
Once We Saw Us | Mark Czanik | *Short story*
Vanessa | Nadya Pheby | *Poetry*
Conventional Usage | John Zedolik | *Poetry*
The Departure Poem, The Dead End of the Year |
Rizwan Akhtar | *Poetry*

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13. Robin van Minnen

Contributors

20. Rizwan Akhtar
21. Dan Burns
22. Tim Campbell
28. Robert Casella
29. Mark Czanik
30. Julia Fausing
Meg Hansen
Peter McClung
Peter Newall
Kevin Novalina
Nadya Pheby
Maia Popa
Samreen Sajeda
Doug Tanoury
John Zedolik

Want to contribute to our next issue? Please send us your
submissions via submissions@writersblockmagazine.com

Editorial

“Everything in this world can be robbed and stolen, except one thing: this one thing is the love that emanates from a human being toward a solid commitment to a conviction or cause.”

Ghassan Kanafani

The process of creating a space dedicated to storytelling is nothing short of a magical experience. This issue emerges as a curated work where disbelief is suspended so that readers are able to fully immerse themselves in the stories told by their talented authors. The beauty of fiction exists in what you can take away from it when returning to your state of reality. From poignant works of poetry to profound short-stories, Issue 52 invites readers to revel in these beautiful pieces of work shared by people from around the world.

Given today’s social and political climate, nurturing a place that safeguards critical and artistic voices is essential—precisely what Writer’s Block seeks to do. Our board remains inspired and eager to facilitate a space where stories can take root and be shared, helping us make sense of experiences that too often feel senseless. Perhaps there is a need to escape the terrors of daily life; perhaps there is a need to tell one’s story so it won’t be forgotten. Either way, we hope to offer a platform for immersion, remembrance, or both at once.

We thank our editorial team and our courageous writers who reached out to us, grasping for an opportunity to let their voices be heard. It is their effort, time and life represented in these pieces, painting a picture of the human condition in all its complexity. The commitment that Kanafani speaks about is visible on these pages: a commitment to the craft of writing, daring to speak and, in the end, creating art that leaves a mark. It is also our editors’ task—and wish—to help shape each piece into its most powerful form, guided by the same dedication and energy. We hope that this issue leaves an impression that sparks new ideas and diversifies perspectives, fostering further discussion and artistic expression.

Proud to present Issue 52,

The Writer's Block team



A Mutual Parting of Ways

Peter McClung | *Poetry*

There's the ghost of a question as the tea grows cold,
We're both unsure, perhaps we'll never be,
We get on, we laugh but, well, but.

Back to the car, the carols leaking from the Belfast bars, wash the streets.
Back into the haze, that chest tightness, I know all too well.
Hold off the troponins, just the death of hope, not measurable in the blood,
But just as real.

The Arms of Your Own Kindness

Tim Campbell | *Poetry*

So hollow is the promise of the past that
Remembering my favorite meal a thousand times
Cannot save me from starving.

The unstoppable arrow of time
Pressed so enormously between was and will be
Is all the time there is left
For whatever grace we might conjure,
Yet one hundred years is not enough
To heal you on its own.

The hound of time's been leashed
There in the corner
By a chain of tears.
Unable to run its course,
And bares its teeth,
And barks and barks,
Deafening.
A thief holding you ransom.

So I offer:
No matter how true,
Here,
The past is a lie.
Here is
The sweetest kindness,
Gentle, awkward,
Delirious transformation.
Deep intimate timelessness,
Rare secret.

Know this,
Hear me clearly over whatever din,
Armour yourself,
The future is too great a treasure
To surrender to a memory.

With all that can be,
We are only
Here.

Landscape

Samreen Sajeda | *Poetry*

Flapping their wings,
Birds tweet
In the sunlit silence

Where I sit
Sipping
The cool stream

Grass rustles
At the touch
Of twigs falling

Swirling
In the perfume
Of moist earth.

Ants drag mountains.

All the King's Horses

Peter Newall | *Short story*

I understand, looking at this photo of my brother Peter, why people in some societies refuse to allow themselves to be photographed, believing that the camera will steal some part of their spirit. I understand it only too well, because when I look at Peter here, on this small rectangle of glossy paper, it is impossible for me to believe he is dead. On the contrary, so much of him is alive in this photograph that I'm certain I will shortly hear him speak, see the half-smile captured here broaden into a grin, then walk with him out the door and down the street once again. And if this piece of paper radiates that much of Peter's spirit, his life energy, it must have taken it from somewhere. And where else but from him?

The photograph shows Peter in a white shirt and a loosely-knotted dark tie, left shoulder slightly higher than the right, as he has. Had. High forehead. Black hair falling in a shock above one eye. His gaze directed at the camera, a slight smile on his lips. Behind him are the grey shapes of people in suits and jackets; it's a formal occasion of some sort, perhaps at university. The back of the photo is blank, no matter how often I look at it, it's blank. I don't have a single word of Peter's handwriting anywhere.

Peter was my twin, but I always treated him as an older brother. He seemed to know more about everything than I, and all through my boyhood it was to him I turned for advice, looked to as an example. I accepted his seniority, and never considered insisting on equality with him, apart from childish things like dividing our bedroom exactly in half with a chalk line on the floorboards.

In the photo, Peter is very much alive. But I know he isn't alive. I know perfectly well, as a matter of hard, empirical fact, that Peter is dead, because the Stasi came to our flat at one o'clock in the morning to tell us he was dead, that he'd been shot at the Wall. And they said it as though that fact, that my nineteen-year-old twin brother, my only sibling, my mother's only other child, had been shot dead, was a criticism of us, of the whole family. 'You got off lightly with only *him* being shot,' they seemed to be saying, with every word, every stare, every arrogant gesture, the way they strode around the flat in their boots, forcing my mother in her slippers to jump out of their way.

They searched the place, especially our bedroom, ripping open all our books, cutting up the mattresses, sweeping Peter's football trophies onto the floor and stamping on them, smashing a chair for no reason except that it was in the way. My mother sobbed, of course; I stayed silent. I kept looking down at the carpet, in case I caught the eye of one of the Stasi men. If our eyes meet, they will see my hatred, and I will get beaten, or even shot trying to escape, I thought, staring down hard at the curving brown and cream paisley pattern between my feet.

Of course I was taken to the cells in Wilhelmstrasse anyway and interrogated, and of course I betrayed Peter. I mean, I lied to them, and by lying I betrayed Peter's desire for truth and honesty and his belief in the freedom of man, and I betrayed his memory and his example to me. They asked me repeatedly if I knew he was going over the Wall, and I swore repeatedly I did not, I knew nothing about it, he didn't confide in me, he wouldn't have told me, I didn't know any of his friends. I suspect I came across as such a snivelling weakling, they believed he might not have told me.

They smacked me around a bit, chipped two teeth, kicked me in the kidneys, but their hearts didn't seem to be in it, and the next evening they let me go. It wasn't so bad. The worst thing that happened to me, in fact, was that I was expelled from university. We weren't even turned out of our flat, as usually happened with the relatives of anyone who attempted to escape. Perhaps by then, even they were getting tired of it; but they'd still shot him, or the border guards had shot him, there was still that. The higher-ups might have been losing their belief in the whole farce of the Wall, of the German Democratic Republic, but the orders to the border guards hadn't changed; it was still death to try and leave that place.

That was five years ago, although it feels like five hundred years ago, five worlds ago, now. And it was all a waste of a life, of Peter's life. And my mother's life, because it crippled her, Peter being killed. And all those that loved him, too, it damaged their lives. It damaged me, of course, both losing him from my life, and from the grief and rage that I can't shed, that still accompanies that loss, even today. And all for nothing.

All for nothing, because six months afterward, Peter would have been able to walk into West Berlin, just amble slowly and casually down the middle of Unter den Linden and through the Brandenburger Tor, with nobody shooting him in the back from a guard tower. No wire, no searchlights, no dogs, no sirens. No Wall, unbelievable as that still seems sometimes to me, born behind it as I was, living all my life behind it.

If he'd only waited six months, just twenty-six weeks, a hundred and eighty days for God's sake, Peter could have, bought a coffee and a Brezel in the West, just as I did on that first day that everything changed, stood on the other side of the Wall – I'd never really imagined how it would look from the other side – and looked back at the cursed, bloody thing from there. Oh, I could cry, almost; I mean I'm not given to crying any more, I've grown up, but everything about Peter's death distresses me beyond any measuring, any telling.

And I hate them still, those bastards, those self-righteous bastards. It's a very specific hatred. I know their names, we all know their names, they put themselves all over the newspapers and TV every day. Not the guy who shot him, just some dumb soldier obeying orders, *orders are orders*, too frightened to think for himself. But the Party people, who gave those orders for my brother to be shot, who gave the orders for us all to be cooped up there so they could be leaders of a State, so they could strut around, wear uniforms, make speeches, give each other medals, have luxury villas in the Waldsiedlung, they're the ones I hate. They built that wall because they knew very well if we were allowed to leave, we would all go, and they'd be left leaders of a state comprising a few fanatics and a few geriatrics, a laughing-stock. They took our lives from us, deliberately kept us all prisoner there, simply to feed their pride. Just bastards, selfish thieving scum. Vampires. Life vampires.

Of course, I say that now, now they don't control us all any more, now there's no Stasi, and I am free to speak my mind without being arrested. At the time I remember trying to be the voice of reason when I talked to Peter. Obviously, I was afraid back then, a coward, or else I didn't value my life as much as Peter valued his.

Why is it so desperately important to leave?' I asked him when he told me he was going over the Wall. 'Everyone knows this is shit, but it's bearable shit. You can eat and drink in a decent kneipe, you can see your friends, you can play football and draw and paint; there's still books we are allowed to read and music we're allowed to listen to, you've got a girlfriend, you will get a degree at the end of next year. What's so bloody necessary about going three hundred yards west of here? Do you really think you will have a different life?

You will still be Peter Richter. You will still be a qualified architect, or nearly. You will still speak German. You know it's not a game, you know they will kill you if they see you. What do you want over there? Coca-Cola? Levi's?'

He smiled and said, 'I just want to walk free along a street in my own country. It's my birthright as a human.'

‘It’s my birthright too, and everyone’s here, but you don’t always get all your rights in life. This is just narcissism. You want to have a perfect life because you think you personally deserve it, you, Peter Richter. And for that you are willing to get killed, and you know it will kill Mama as well, if they get you.’ And I wanted to say it would kill me, too, but he would have laughed at me, and rightly so. But I was genuinely afraid of losing him. That’s the real reason why I tried to discourage Peter from going, to tell the truth. I couldn’t imagine how I’d go through the rest of my life there without him if he succeeded in getting to the West. That was how I crystallised my fear, anyway, thinking about him escaping; I shied away entirely from imagining him being shot dead.

And now I am here, in a big, dusty, sunny flat in Charlottenburg, West Berlin, with bay windows and creaking wooden floorboards, and I am looking at this photograph, and while I look at it, Peter seems to be alive, for tiny microseconds I actually believe he’s alive, and I snatch at that belief wanting to hold on to it but it eludes me, because he’s not alive. He’s dead, and his body went into the rubbish, thrown into the morgue incinerator, he doesn’t even have a grave. He’s dead, and I, the lesser brother, the lesser talent, the lesser man, I, who feel utterly undeserving to be on the face of this earth, am alive. No wonder the world is such a poor and selfish and miserable place, if that is how life selects its survivors.

And now they use the word *Einheit*, unity, wholeness, everywhere, every second town square in Germany is renamed Unity Square, there’s a Day of Unity every year, with music and flag-waving and free beer and wurst, and so on and so on; they glibly parrot this word unity, they say we are all back together again, and there’s nothing bad or ugly to remember any more. But nothing, not all the king’s horses, can put Peter’s life back together again, put our mother’s life back together again, put my life back together again, without him. It’s a lie, this unity, just as big a lie as the lies we were told on the other side of that bastard Wall.

And just do not ask me *how* I am to understand God, who allowed all this.



Valecian Orange

Julia Fausing | *Poetry*

It is sweeter than syrup
orange as the raging sun
I unfurl it in my hands and smile
as the oil wets my fingertips
and paints the edges of my nails yellow
I know the scent of it will
wash around me for hours
after it is gone
I separate the segments
eight mouthfuls of joy
I leave the white bits on

as I bite, I am hit by a rush of cool juice
that squeezes through the gaps in my teeth
and runs down my chin
I do not care
I'm no longer there, in that one bedroom flat
but back in the land where the beer is cheap and the sun
is given out for free
where the word is colour and tapas and heat
and the fruits are glimpses of heaven

Black Licorice

Doug Tanoury | *Poetry*

That night, darkness held color when I closed my eyes,
Flashes of neon with bright pastels and she was there.
There was music, Andrés Segovia, playing Capriccio Arabe.

I could feel her next to me, the radiating body heat
Reaching me and I reach out to touch her in half caress,
Half gentle pat and she rolls her body closer to me.

When the music stopped, our hands retreated
To cooler regions, and breathing returned to normal
As we fell from desire's high altitude to sea level.

I stretch across imaginary miles to reach for what I desire.
From my nightstand drawer my hand slowly withdraws
And lays a black licorice whip across her bare belly.

Art Nouveau

Maia Popa | *Short story*

It was a Tuesday when I dug my own grave in the sand by the coast. Eyelashes lined with beads of sea salt and rain. Ivory skin bruised by the cold. My opaque eyes staring right back at me, lifeless. Seaweed clinging to my corpse's ankles. Water pulling at my pearly, livid toenails. It took me half an hour to drag my own body from the furious sea. The beach was empty that day, the sky ashen and heavy with petulance.

I spotted it from up the coast. The corpse, I mean.

I didn't know it was mine until I climbed barefoot down to the beach and dragged it from the foamy sea. The cold bit at my legs and the waves enwrapped my skirts around my ankles. I heaved in desperation to grasp the corpse, but my body floated away the more I reached for it, the more my fingers tried to graze its waxen skin.

We were both breathless when I sat next to her on the sand. She stared at me – at herself – as I gasped for air. She stared while I started digging, averting her gaze.

Skin melting away, rotten by decay. Eyes glossy, white orbs reflecting my face and the coast beyond. Auburn hair sprawled and thick with grains of sand.

I buried her next to the last one. It was a while since I last had to bury my corpse. The last ones I killed off myself - strangled, stabbed, seared. This one, I found already dead. It wasn't any easier, though. The worst part was their watching eyes – bereft of life, yet always full of contempt.

The next one I'll send off to sea, I thought to myself. Rammed in a coffin, I'll release myself into the vastness of the dark sea, and I'll watch as the wooden casket gets swallowed by the wrathful waves. Yes – that, somehow, seemed better.

The End

Kevin Novalina | *Short story*

Michael drives his fist into his wife's face and her head snaps back, slinging a web of blood across Kalem's *Spider-man* poster.

He finds the phone, his knuckles raw and shaking, breath muffled in his throbbing ears. "Please hurry," he yells, dropping back to his son contorted on the floor in his pajamas. Mouth ajar, there's a melting ice glaze in his eyes as blood soaks the carpet beneath his head.

Rolling over the scattered contents of her stepson's toybox, Sandra wails so hard she's silent.

"Son," Michael says, lifts the boy to his lap, and rocks. He kisses the Hulk temp-tatt slicked red on the back of his hand. "It's okay, buddy," he sobs with sirens in the distance. "Daddy's here."

Go back.

"Hell's going on?" Michael says, squinting in the light, and Sandra jerks around, standing. Ghost white and shuddering. Michael's eyes slide from her to Kalem on the floor, his neck twisted in a way necks don't twist.

Michael looks back at Sandra, then Kalem, and his insides lose gravity.

"Kalem," he yells, diving across the floor.

"I didn't mean," Sandra says.

With one hand, Michael shoves her away, a bloody print on her nightgown. "Call an ambulance."

"He fell that way."

"Go!"

She runs out as Michael kneels, his trembling hands hovering over the boy like a crystal ball. "Hold on, son," he says. "Hold on!"

Sandra reappears, rattling off information into the phone. She raises her swollen hand before her as if checking her nails. "He bit me," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

Go back.

Sandra's not looking at Kalem twisted on the floor. Doesn't see him not moving, his eyes rolled back to fluttered slits. With shallow breaths, she's trying to make a fist, but the knuckle's like shattered glass inside the skin. There's a cowlick of blond hair in the prongs of her wedding ring and deep divots shaping his bite around her thumb joint.

Well, this is divorce, she thinks, wagging her hand at the throb. Little shit'll play this out until I'm out the door. But he *bit*. We don't bite. And if he bit a nerve. "Kalem, if you bit a nerve," she says, trying to work her thumb. "I'm sorry," she says, "but we just don't bite."

The boy still hasn't moved.

"You hear?"

Nothing.

She moves toward him, stepping on his Batman figure and snapping off an arm.

"Hey?" she says, jostling his shoulder with her good hand. She tries to roll him and sees the blood puddled under his temple.

Behind her, Michael opens the door and steps from the dark hall.

Go back.

Michael snaps awake to a muffled sound like an axe blade striking wood from somewhere down the hall.

"What's that?" he says, patting the bed, but Sandra's not beside him.

Still drunk, he stumbles toward the door and through the foyer. Sees a bar of light under Kalem's door. Hears a muffled voice saying, *Kalem, if you bit a nerve*.

They're fighting again. Goddamn it, he told them about the fighting. Last time this happened, he came in from work with both of them crying. The story was, Kalem hit Sandra, so she spanked him and might've gotten carried away. The half-moon nail marks on his neck where she'd held him down showed that. So did the bruises along his ribs. "He may not be yours," Michael told her. "That's up to you." Grinding his teeth, he said, "But he's mine, so keep your goddamn hands off."

"He *hit* me in the *face*," she said, stepping to him a nose apart between noses. "*Anybody* hits me, I'm fighting back." She turned away. "Divorce me if you fucking want."

Later, he massaged her shoulders, moving down her arms. He loved his wife. She wasn't Dawn. Her touch wasn't Dawn's, but it was touch.

He told her he'd spoken to Kalem. He did hit her, so Michael had taken away cartoons from his son for two weeks.

But he told them both, no more.

And here they are. At two in the morning.

Michael moves down the hallway, hand sliding along the sheetrock as a guide. Kalem? he hears as he nears.

Go back.

Michael runs his tongue along the cords of Sandra's neck and can taste the vodka bleeding through her pores. They'd been drinking since they got back from hearing the news. He's inside her and starting to move faster, but Sandra's just lying with her hands flat at her sides. Head turned toward the alarm on the nightstand, she watches 12:15 click 12:16 a.m. as tears run the bridge of her nose and drop dark on the pillowcase. At 12:20 she puts her hands against his chest and pushes away.

He slides off, heaving. "Thought you still wanted to try."

She knuckles her eyes, chuffs a sigh.

"Cup half-full," he says. "Right?"

God closes one window, He opens another to jump out of.

"What's the fucking use?" she says. Rolls over.

Go back.

The doctor cuts his eyes from Michael to Sandra over the rims of his glasses. Michael massages her hand with his thumb while tears pearl the lips of her eyes. Near the window, Kalem's reading one of his many comic books, occasionally raising his new quarter machine Hulk tattoo and roaring.

Michael says, "And there's no procedure or medication?"

The doctor sighs and shakes his head, lacing his fingers on his desk. "There's adoption," he says. "More and more couples are—"

"I don't want to adopt and I don't want surrogates," Sandra says, her voice cracking. Mascara inks down her cheeks and she looks at Kalem hunched in his chair, lips sounding out the words. "Nurture's not Nature," she says. "*A mother is not Mom.*"

"I'm sorry," the doctor says, "but with your previous complications..." He leans back in his chair. "Conception's just not likely."

Go back.

Kalem plays with his *Justice League* action figures in the backseat. Michael's driving while Sandra forces down a Greek yogurt smoothie.

"Nervous?" Michael says, takes her hand.

She looks at him and smiles. Truth is, she's shaking so hard it feels like her bones might pop their sockets. There are benchmarks in life that alter the way you live the rest of it, and for her, this is that. All she wants is to be a Mom. A real Mom, down to the cellular level. Something so many take for granted. Something she took for granted the year she was old enough to drive.

"Little," she says, licks her thumbpad, and reaches back, smearing down a sprung lock on Kalem's crown.

That year, she'd hidden the bulge from her mother as long as she could, not knowing what to do or how to do it. But one day, her mom sat her down at the kitchen table, spun an abortion pamphlet around and, tapping it with her fingernail said, "God closes one window, He opens another."

"Don't be," Michael says, squeezing her hand.

She and Michael have been trying to conceive since before the wedding. He thought it was him, but she knew better. She knew what tests would show before tests were taken.

"No matter what, you got us," he says, and glances in the rearview at Kalem lifting Batman above his head. "Right, buddy?"

Kalem nods, his lips swishing the Dark Knight's cape.

Sandra looks back, then down. "I know." But she also knows it's not enough. Because she carries within her a seed of sorrow that has blossomed into bitter rage. And she knows if science or faith or both fails, it'll only grow into a hate toward them to match the hate toward her mother.

And herself.

"Besides," Michael tells her, "gotta keep optimistic." He lifts her cup and swirls it. "Half-full," he says, the thick dairy muscling around the bottom. "Not half-empty."

Sandra smiles, lays her head on his shoulder. Life's taught her to see it however you want.

"Right," she says, thinking it's still half a cup no matter how thirsty you are.

Go back.

In the bathroom mirror, Kalem watches Sandra brushing his hair, her lips stretched thin with effort. He knows they're running late for the doctor, and he knows she blames his cowlick. She knots her jaw and closes her eyes. Squeezes the bridge of her nose with trembling fingers.

When his mom used to brush his hair, she'd say: *Superman has his kiss-curl, you got your kiss-lick*. Then they'd laugh with her tickles. "Mom used water," he says, and faster than a speeding bullet wishes he hadn't. Mentioning his mother often resulted in some quick and painful retaliation, and she's been even rougher since the baby stuff started.

Behind him, she opens her eyes but doesn't look up.

He tenses. Waits.

Then she hocks a gob of spit in his hair. Begins brushing in forceful strokes, each one harder until the handle is thumping off his head. "Wet enough?"

"It hurts," Kalem says.

"Yeah," she says. "It does."

When Sandra's like this, he focuses on his mom to carry him away. How she'd fix him peanut butter and sweet pickle on toast. His favorite food, he called them superhero sandwiches. He remembers how she Magic Markered the Superman logo on a red towel for a cape, practicing on paper over and over to get it just right. Then she attached it to his blue pajama shirt with safety pins and flew him on her feet before the box fan.

But now, he's thinking about the accident. About her funeral. How the casket stayed closed, so the last time he saw her was when she dropped him off at school that morning. It was storming hard and when she walked him in, she kept the umbrella over him, her hair dripping down her face. She kissed his forehead and touched the tip of his nose. "Learn something fun to teach me," she told him. "Pick you up this afternoon."

Then she slid off the road and died.

Sort of.

He'd heard grownups say how firemen had to cut her out of the car. That paramedics kept her alive for twelve minutes.

"*Hold still!*" Sandra screams at his reflection, then pops his head with the wood ridge of the brush. But he's at the funeral now, where everyone's weeping as they pass by the casket. They're all hugging him and saying it's okay to cry, it's okay to cry, but he was still waiting for her to pick him up.

Go back.

Kalem sits in his dad's lap watching an old *Spider-man* cartoon. Yawning, his father's still nodding off, but Kalem's Spidey senses are tingling wide-awake. He never misses his favorite crimefighter in the mornings, no matter how bad the nightmares foil his sleep.

His stepmother is in the bathroom down the hall, getting ready for her doctor's appointment, and Kalem jumps every time she slams something hard.

On TV, Spidey slings a web around a group of bad guys, lowers upside down to crack a joke, then swings away. Not looking away from the screen Kalem says, "Know what I wanna be when I grow up?"

His dad blinks one eye open, then both. "What's that?"

"A superhero."

"A superhero," his dad says. "Now why didn't I guess that?"

"I wanna fight evil," Kalem says. "Make the world safe for all mankind." He scratches his cowlick and says, "Can I?"

His dad musses his hair. "Sure you can," he says. "You know, there's real superheroes in the world."

From down the hall, Sandra calls: "*Kalem, we need to brush your hair!*"

"There's really?" Kalem says.

"Really, silly," his dad says. "There's cops and firefighters, doctors and soldiers working every day to make the world safe." He yawns again and says, "Did you know that?"

Sandra yells: "*Kalem Kidd, you hear me?*"

"That's not the kind I'm meaning," Kalem says. "They always catch the bad guys *after* they rob the bank or help a building *after* the fire burns it down." Onscreen, Spider-man shoots his web at a car, stopping it from crashing into a bus. Eyes tranced, he says, "Real superheroes get there before." He looks at his dad. "That's the kind I'm gonna be."

"*Get in here,*" Sandra screams. "*Now!*"

"That's real good, buddy," his dad says. "We could really use superheroes like that."

An Expectant Father's Doubts

Dan Burns | *Poetry*

Your eighteenth birthday seems to me
to be like folklore. Witches, devils,
your graduation - they appear as one to me.
If life is a staircase, it is designed by Escher
(one day I'll show you this artwork).
My father never stayed to watch
the consequence of his actions unfold.
That vague term - 'father' - synonymous
with monk, or king, or bad example.
What am I but a remote figure
in history, charged with its future?

Dido's Pyre

Meg Hansen | *Poetry*

Elfin ballerina
Hair tied up high in a neat bun
She once pirouetted
To tunes of tinkling bells
Atop my jewelry box

Portrait of innocence betrayed
By the guile in her eyes
She'd rather pose seductively
Over a subway grate
Cotton candy tutu fleeing her waist
Let's call her Marilyn

Who flung the teak box
A casket of youth lost
Bursting with costume jewels
As if it were a tennis ball?

Heroic lampstand by the wall
Rose to catch the doll, broke
The fall
Sparks flew

She now lies, glass slippers up high
On that fortuitous pyre
Mangled
Draped in tangled wire
Marilyn tries to twirl in defiance
A shiver here, a quiver there

She's cindering, eyes wild open
Into the amber glow

Once We Saw Us

Mark Czanik | *Short story*

Cedar had built a float tank in his room. For this he had used a blue plastic pool with sides about half a metre high, fitted it into an alcove in his room, filled it with water from the hosepipe, and was spending an hour in it every day rebirthing. Frank had tried float-tanking once himself at the Floatland centre where Miriam worked as a receptionist, but couldn't say he had enjoyed the experience. Far from slowing his body down and releasing cosmic amounts of dopamine into his brain, lying in a soundproof, coffin-like box in complete darkness while his weightless body was carried out to sea connected to the shore only by the delicate thread of his heartbeat, had worn him out. Not that Cedar's pool could really be called a float tank. Since he hadn't used salt water, his body didn't so much float as lie on the bottom totally submerged. Frank had discovered him meditating in there, breathing through a snorkel with his long blond hair spread out Ophelia-like around his face. He had opened his eyes and waved.

It didn't shock him. Things just happened when you lived with Cedar. One morning he came down from the roof to tell them they no longer had to worry about the electricity bills. They didn't ask why. Another time, as a tide of apocalyptic barrel clouds rolled in from the Pacific, he led the three of them to a mysterious abandoned house in Forest Lodge where he showed them a fridge full of rotting food, and a black antique telephone at the top of the stairs from which they could phone anyone in the world. Frank rang his big sister in England and talked to her as the rain pounded the windows. Ida called her aunt in Denmark. It was all part of Cedar's unique and peculiar talent for life.

There were those who thought there was nothing going on behind those Capricorn eyes, or they didn't like the way he stared. Dolorous Derek—as Miriam had taken to referring to Ida's new bearded goliath in the message book—said he thought he was a bit insipid.

'Inspid!' said Frank.

'Well, okay, maybe that's the wrong word,' said Derek. 'Detached maybe. I don't know. Something's not right.'

But he was never boring or predictable, Frank said in his defence. Who else had been hitching in the sea?

Not all of his eccentricities were so agreeable. Much to Frank's alarm, Cedar had also begun giving himself daily enemas first thing in the morning. It was a rude awakening for anyone whose bedroom was right next to the toilet. After a week of being woken by these violent expurgations and their accompanying, almost sexual sounding moans of release, Frank had to confront him about it. Cedar agreed to delay his sessions by a few hours which at least gave him and Kiera a chance to vacate the room before the fireworks began if nothing else.

It was difficult to understand what toxins his friend felt so compelled to evacuate from his body, since he barely ate anything. Frank would occasionally catch him picking at a saucer of toasted sunflower and pepita seeds, or a bowl of grapes, or the alfalfa sprouts he grew in glass jars on the windowsill, rinsing them out in cold water every morning, but he saw little in the way of real food pass his lips. Frequently he left them bowls of porridge oats to soak overnight, three matching bowls lined up on the breakfast bar to greet them in the mornings, or three blushing golden peaches, but he didn't seem to eat breakfast much himself.

He had few vices. Like Miriam, he didn't really drink and or take drugs. Even normal toothpaste was avoided in favour of more puritanical alternatives like powdered orris root and sea salt. About his only trespasses were a scavenger's opportunism for things that were lying about not being used, and a tendency towards silence—both character traits Frank could identify with, although Cedar's silence did not appear to have its roots in the painful self-consciousness Frank was cursed with. It was more unfathomable.

Meanwhile he stuck to his daily regime of enemas and detox diets. The water in the float tank soon became unusable, but he never stopped looking for new ways in which to purge himself of impurities.

However, none of these peculiarities put the girls off, who were entranced by his abstemious physique, Maasai warrior height, and his unabashed way of meeting their eyes. At a party at the house a statuesque artist called Alison had spent the whole evening caught in his trance. The two of them had stood in the living room a few feet apart with the congas between them, staring wordlessly into one another's eyes. If there was a touch of new age exhibitionism about this behaviour, it would be churlish to say it wasn't also moving, and Frank couldn't help feeling envious, especially since that week Kiera had returned to Tasmania to pick berries, leaving him scratching out notes for love letters to her on the back of telesales scripts again. How to explain then why for weeks afterwards when Alison called the house asking after him, Cedar wouldn't come to the phone, and it was left to the others to make his excuses. Frank wondered if he should offer himself up as consolation.

A few weeks later he was at a gig at The Harold Park with Cedar and Miriam, watching Not Drowning, Waving for the first time. He and Cedar had been standing with her while she chatted to a friend working behind the bar. The barmaid was wearing a low-cut, spaghetti strap black dress and was devilishly endowed.

'Why don't you touch them if you like them so much?' said Miriam, turning to him.

Frank's eyes flitted between the two girls.

'Go on, she won't stop you. You won't move will you, Mia?'

Mia shook her head.

Frank took a swig of his beer and tried to concentrate on the band, like everyone else. They were doing 'The Marriage is a Mess,' one of his favourite slow tracks from The Cold and the Crackle. But the prospect of Miriam's invitation kept dragging his eyes back with the absurdity of his restraint. He was still fighting the temptation when Cedar went ahead and did it anyway, reaching forward and resting his long clever fingertips briefly on the barmaid's breasts. Just as promised, she made no move to prevent him.

'You can't tell anyone what to do with their gifts,' said Miriam when Frank tried to follow suit—somehow it was more like a lurch than Cedar's graceful uncurling—and the barmaid took a wordless, preventative step backwards that left him floundering in space.

Yet Cedar seemed unaware of his allure. Maybe this was another reason girls were so drawn to him. They wanted to discover the key to his otherworldliness. Those few women that did succeed in getting him into bed though, were baffled by his sudden lack of interest. Miriam's macrobiotic friend, Dossy, said he had spent the whole night lying next to her in bed like a log.

Rumours began to circulate. Ziggy, from the Bridge Road squat, made a few appearances at the back door asking after him, standing there with lusty eyes. But Frank didn't think he was gay. He knew he liked girls anyway. Why else apply to be a contestant on *Perfect Match*?

It was the usual infantile fodder: tacky, primary coloured sets; a sycophantic audience; and a vapid host with an inflated ego and Cuprinol tan who thrived on belittling his guests. The idea that Cedar would willingly subject himself to such an ordeal! He was their prince of innocents, their Boo Radley who left them offerings at night and watched over them while they slept. The show would make a mockery of him. And a dating show! It was the first time the thought that Cedar might be lonely had ever occurred to Frank. Like most lonely people, he had always assumed he was the only one. Yet they soon forgot their misgivings. Cedar was going to be on telly! From the thousands of hopefuls who had applied they had picked him. They rented a television and in the weeks leading up to his appearance, he carried something of the glow of celebrity about with him, and one or other of them was often humming the theme-tune in the shower to themselves when they thought they couldn't be heard.

He didn't win. By the time the show was broadcast he had already received his consolation prize of bathroom toiletries. They tried to put a brave face on it. Three days on Boomerang Beach would have been nice, even with a camera crew shadowing your every move. But there was no disguising their eagerness as they gathered in front of the telly that Friday evening and, suddenly, there was Cedar, contestant number two, sitting on a high stool with a big red padded heart behind him. It was touching how at ease he looked in his blue suit and tie, his Apollonian locks cropped to a downy fuzz of sun-bleached gold.

‘It’s the real you, Cedar,’ said Ida.

Afterwards no one could quite remember what his answers had been to the compatibility questions the girl put to him from behind the dividing screen. Only that beforehand the programme makers had cynically tried to get him to change them because they didn’t consider them sexy enough, and the studio audience had always seemed to laugh at the wrong time, or in the wrong way. She chose contestant number three. They looked for a glimmer of regret in her smile when the screen slid back and she finally saw what she had given up, but none was in evidence. Still, Cedar didn’t seem to mind. That night he was up on the roof again in his sarong, sending drum messages out over the rooftops – of welcome or warning they could not decide, though they found a small clue to his feelings the next day in the message book written in his black biro, spidery hand:

‘Cedar will be most appreciative of regaining his captivity;’ it said.

They got rid of the TV later that week. Which was a shame because a fortnight later Cedar made a second appearance on it, far more enjoyable than the first. Frank discovered this quite by accident when someone at the luncheon voucher company he was working for asked him if he’d seen himself on the Six O’clock News the night before. Frank shook his head, imagining the worst. But it wasn’t a wanted poster exposing his illegal status; it was footage of him dressed up as an Egyptian foot soldier marching down George Street with three thousand other extras to promote a forthcoming outdoor production of Aida. Cedar was with him that day, and Frank was the first to acknowledge he made a less convincing soldier than his friend did. When the camera crew had picked out the tall man he had gone into an offensive crouch, brandishing his balsawood spear with the plastic spike defiantly, while Frank stood next to him, too worried by the fact that he wasn’t wearing underpants under his toga to follow suit.

When the opera was performed at the football stadium that month the two of them worked together again, this time as sandmen whose job it was to shovel up the dung the elephants dropped as they lumbered across the stage during the Triumphal March past the Pharaoh, and sprinkle the affected areas with sand behind a curtain of Amentet mist. After that the stress of Cedar's television debut was hardly spoken of again. The one time Frank recalled it being mentioned was on that sultry night when he, Miriam, Derek and Ida were walking back from another vacant house Cedar had taken them to investigate, and he took off all his clothes and walked the rest of the way home naked. After which they all agreed it was probably best he hadn't won in the end.

Vanessa

Nadya Pheby | *Poetry*

red waves beat down the granite coast
memories linger in nooks of bone
a poor cocktail of calcium and thought.
my body might've washed up on a beach
the deep might've made pearls of my teeth
i was born to violence - it unmakes me.

a letter tops my tombstone,
shaking slant, i always get the last word
whispered in the almost-dark, almost too loud.
put my pieces into the ground,
pain arranged into an artful pose
they'll stay there until they don't.

flayed on the eternal bed:
my ancestors make space for me,
they hold me, so sorry for what's been done
our hair weaves a silken shroud atop the bier
star-points. softened bruises
let the warm seawater wash us clean,
blood spills into gold, skin grows black
& the red is the red of a sunset.

Conventional Usage

John Zedolik | *Poetry*

Such an ingenuous term—moving pictures—
even *cinema* despite the Classical Greek root

still preserving our inability to name
adequately this once nascent art

or technology if you like, since paintings
aren't rolling down a gallery's polished

floor—and what about the sound—
does it move or do something else,

which we cannot determine?

—so settle under heavy inertia
and abbreviate to “movies”—the suffix connoting

the familiarity and affection after a generation—
let alone one hundred years and more

that the form has garnered from our masses
in the dark, moreover the suffix suggesting

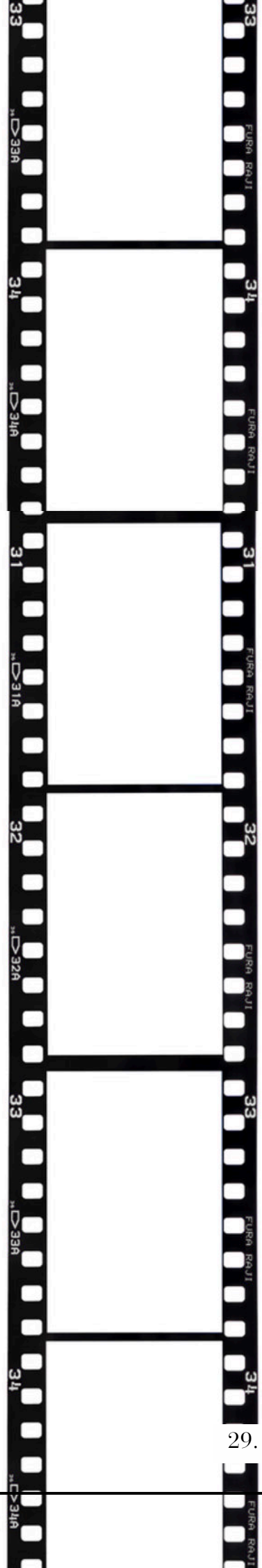
fun and access to fantasy free of any
staid and stodgy critics,

academics of the filmic pursuit aspiring
to elevate it with a more formal term

unneeded now since worthy, proven
by past masters and present despite

the franchises and sequels obligatory,
even ending in “ies,” the real deals

rise above the nugatory.



The Departure Poem

Rizwan Akhtar | *Poetry*

the respiring sound of the steps
night clubbing with a flimsy silence
unaware, I came out on the pavement
cars parked like shut desires
trees still, as if collaborating

a bird flew out from the incarcerating foliage

dispersing words, adjectives of egress
topography of withdrawal
books read, returned, handle-worn pages
stale vouchers, slips, a paid bill
the carwash argument, binned
heads snowed in speculation
the deadline is set.

The Dead End of the Year

Rizwan Akhtar | *Poetry*

trees are like dark moods
suddenly wet and dripping
someone missing someone
on a window or a portico
confabulation of memories,
a hand around some skinny
trunk, an icy touch of bark,
dreams soughing, the road is too
alone with rows of coniferous
bodies, among is your shadow
counting the yield of promises,
signals failed after a windy passage
among leaves weltered, unguarded
you texted me I ended up around
the fence of a house, a crow on cable.



WB