

The **KleksograpH**

An international review of art and the subconscious

issue 16, January 2025

Article: AI-IFF: Will AI Murder us in our Beds?

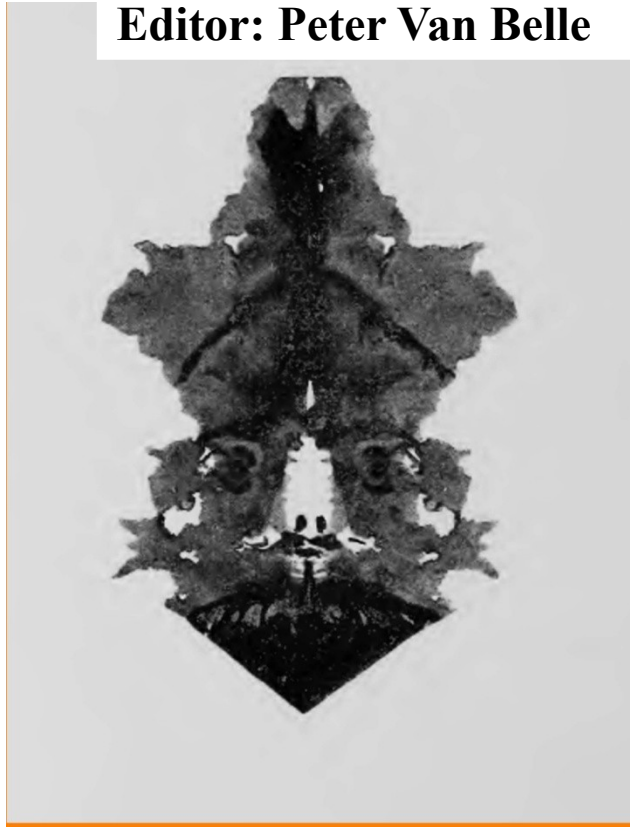
Prose by LB Sedlacek, Janice J. Heiss, Alphonse Rabbe, Jules Lefèvre-Deumier, & Gary Bolick

Poetry by Annie Bell, Rikki Santer, David Ryan, Abbey Webb, Harrison Fisher, Alison Black, & Craig Kirchner

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THE KLEKSOGRAPH

Editor: Peter Van Belle



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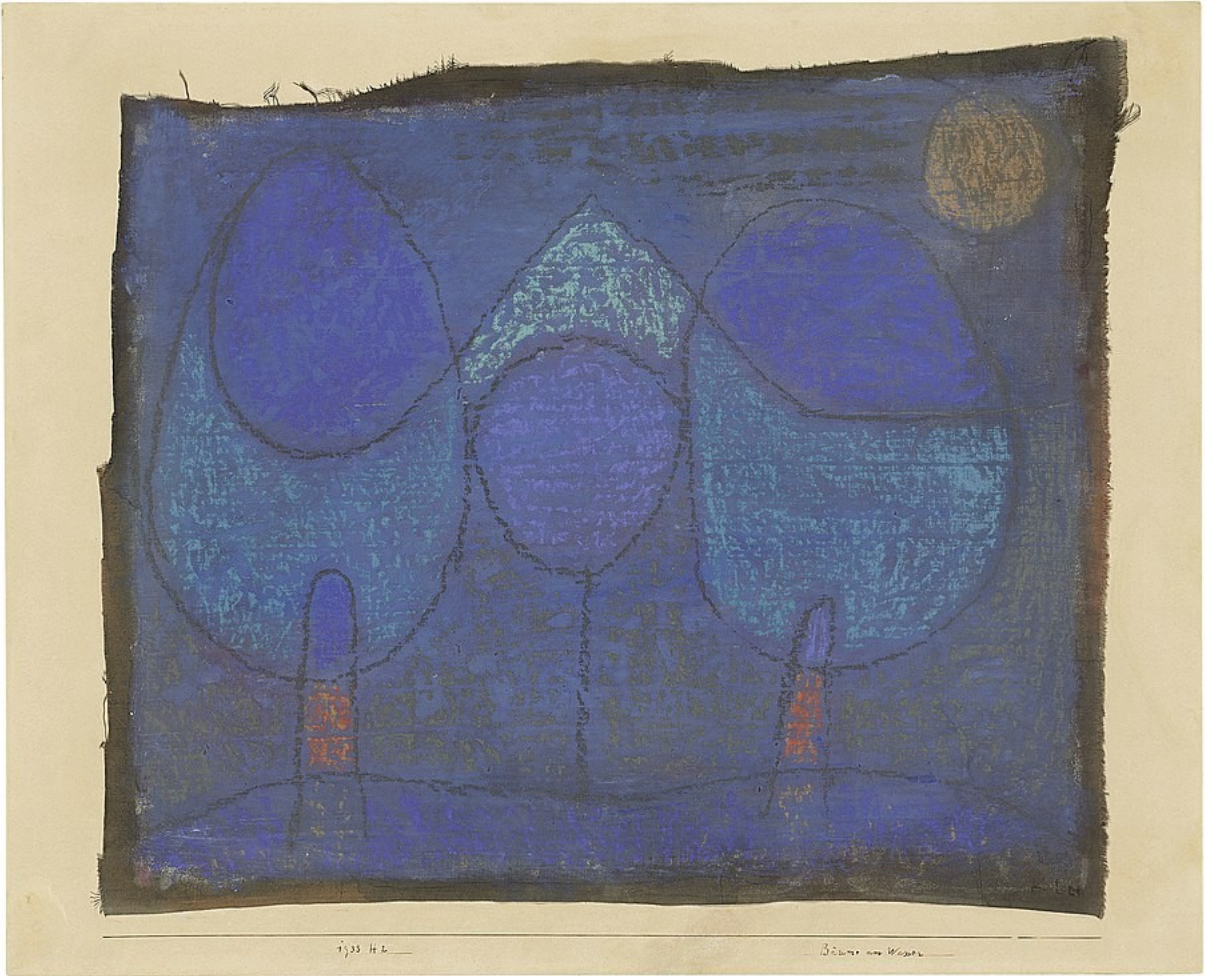
In the mid-nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner, published his book of “Kleksographien”. Later psychologists used similar ink blots as a means of accessing the subconscious of their patients. The Kleksograph is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the relationship between the subconscious and art.

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This magazine can be downloaded free from www.kleksograph.be



Paul Klee, Trees at the Water's Edge

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Annie Bell
Turmoil



Annie Bell

Perceptions

The scars in her heart would seldom be seen.
Her world was a cruel place. It was shown in her art.
She'd find her place in the world in between.

They never perceived, since she seemed so pristine,
how often her mind had been torn apart.
The scars in her heart would seldom be seen.

They couldn't have known, when her smiles hid her screams,
concealing the bleakness within her hurt heart.
She'd find her place in the world in between.

They had no idea that she felt so unclean:
that she didn't believe she deserved a fresh start.
The scars in her heart would seldom be seen.

And then, left alone in that grim quarantine.
She no longer had enough strength to restart.
She'd find her place in the world in between.

Too late, they'd see through her facade, through the screen.
That day, she'd decide if she'd stay or depart.
The scars in her heart would seldom be seen.
She'd find her place in the world in between.

Rikki Santer

Après

After her funeral I found your tattered photograph deep in my mother's scarf drawer. It's 1916 and you are her five sisters on a backyard ladder in Youngstown, Ohio, poised on the rungs in birth order. Lena, there's you on top plank. You arrived swaddled on a ship from Lithuania, your serious hands now folded bound for legend as master baker. Rose, your pleats pressed crisp, your head in sophisticated tilt as if you had already decided to flee hometown and every L.A. photo delivered your couture majesty. Libby, you're already celebrity-camera-ready with your body cocked to the side. Through mid-life on, you subtracted five years from your age and never a day without lipstick. Helen, you clasp your timid knees for balance, and in the nick of time, escaped a violent husband to a lonely apartment with two headstrong sons and your blocked throat. Last, Mickey, your pudgy legs learned how to conquer polio. You waited so long to marry, then dementia with perfumed letters of onion skin paper and florid nonsense. O, Aunties, I'm too late to really know you or meet your gentle father who squints behind the camera.

Backyard sunshine
latticework of your grins
rhizomes swelling with bloodline.



Blind Man's Bluff, by Clarence H. White, 1898

Rikki Santer

Shepherd's Cento

She's a clairvoyant of human vapor,
the grey spine of a pencilled world.

She straightened up slowly, plaited her hair
and wound it tight around her head.
"Do you know where you are?" she asks.

Clouds break and gather
like the joining hands of prayer.
What the gleaners leave in the corners
shrouded in the winds' shawl.

The prophet works hard at dreaming
on a pillow of moonlight.
Let's make up stories out of stars
or perhaps just a match
set to a wick of pure olive oil.

Words can split the sea
the word and the non-word
manifesto stitching the air.

In the flimsy house of logic
a magician finds quarters
behind our ears
like small spectral windows
in a golden tower.

And perhaps the kabbalah was right:
it's all a tending.
Like some green or mauve
swath laid down on canvas.

The minor key. The tragic violin
and exuberant clarinet,
pasture sheep and
their singing wool

the ribbed leaf a spot of scarlet floats
on the shivering creek,
poems direct as what the birds said.

Isolated thinkers at pasture
grazing the rich meadows,
unspoken questions, how they echo,
a voice that looks for its throat.

A lifetime pushing a tiny grain,
the blue path never curves—
opened for a few fluorescent minutes,
born into the tribe of time,
will vanish into its blurring distance
like a dress you wear only once
by the sea, guided guided away,
guided and guided away.

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Alan Murphy
Miracolo



David Ryan

The Miracle

My heart bled on a Tuesday morning
Till the salt ran dry and pale.
It turned on a turntable of remembered wax
Till it turned brittle and failed.

My will stopped working in a Winter month
And my thoughts came back to me.
They unfurled and bloomed and pushed back against
A plague of virtuosity.

I kissed my love some decades past
Well that's the way it seemed
Truth tires when worlds collide
Such things are revealed

I became a god when suns weren't born
But i couldn't hear the plaintiff cry
My misted breath shocked a mirror
The herb smoke rose to testify.

David Ryan

Sestina

The first casualty of war or of love
is the conceit we've come to know as truth.
This does not dampen the feelings
of pain, or bring broken-offal relief.
Our emotions hide behind its fire,
and flickers fiercely in its shadow.

A dangerous place the darkness of shadow
a place for plots of sedition or love.
The flames near enough, of the fire
are the spells and incantations of truth,
from which there is no salve or relief.
My dreams fuel my desirings and feelings

Yet how do i measure my feelings,
when i am unseen in censure's shadow.
When i am on the rack and refused relief.
Each turning of the wheel confirms my love
with every sinew taut to tell the truth.
The blade shrinks in water and is tempered in the fire.

But i fear not in the face of the fire,
though i may fall and lament these feelings.
I sacrifice to your pagan truth.
It is a flower that blooms in the shadow.
It is a tower built in the deepest love.
It is every winding line of mapped relief.

I reach for you in dream's relief.
I burn from the banquet of your fire.
I press and bleed on the thorn of love.
A wave of red falls as feelings,
and is buried in a sea of shadow,
and sinks to die drowning of truth.

I love only you is my only truth.
I sing to the wolves to bring relief.
I see no sun in the valley of shadow.
I whisper your name as i walk in the fire
I will not burn in the flames of feelings
Such is the protection of the madness of love.

If your heart is of truth you may bear the fire
and find relief in such feelings.
If not you'll dwell in shadow and not know love.

David Ryan

Salad Bar

That was a bard that sank a cask,
A barfly Hank drank a bag a cans.
Sad that salad days can't last.

Blab was bratty. And hacks' barbs arc.
A madman spat at Alan's Raybans.
That was a bard that drank a cask.

A man clad all dash and masks,
bank-cash and bland grassy hands.
Sad that salad days can't last.

A balmy Czar had a lash and sparks
a tapas bar and Slav's Kaftans.
That was a card that sank a snark.

Krappy Bananas yank Sam's Acts.
Bang! Bang! Schnapps Harry Callahan's.
Sad that salad days can't last.

A cat can't smack a tall ask.
Fall chap Mark bawls "Carry-Bag Man".
And that was a bard that drank a cask.
Sad that salad days can't last.

Peter Van Belle

AI – IFF: Will AI Murder us in our Beds?

At times I use AI to generate illustrations, sometimes successfully, such as in the illustration of “Tutankhamun in the Closet” by Annie Bell in issue 12. I don’t feel entirely comfortable using it though, not that I consider it cheating, but it engenders a certain complacency, delegating yet another task to a machine. One risks settling for something that only complies partly to the creator’s vision, while actually blunting it. True art, in the modern context, needs a certain rawness.

I have to admit to being taken aback by some of the things I discovered in my research on AI. That people are willing to pay large sums of money for AI-produced art, for instance. I failed to take into account that all art, whether human or machine-produced, has the same effect on the viewer.

AI promises an emancipation of the unskilled at first, but in time, AI will start to lag behind in innovations of style. I also find a certain blandness in AI-art, a lack of spirit. It has no ambitions, and though it’s connected to the public consciousness by the Web, it has no emotional bond to any of its contents. To AI a still life by a Dutch master or a German Expressionist painting are the same. That’s why it will never be original, except by accident. And that’s where our power as humans lies: we’re the ones who can provoke these accidents.

From pipe dream to boom

I remember the dawn of personal computers. At the time the idea of AI was something of a joke. The theory had started with Alan Turing’s paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”. The idea was used in science-fiction, such as in the famous Harlan Ellison story “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream”, where a super-computer annihilates humanity, keeping a small group alive to torture them.

Now AI pervades the Internet, especially in the form of search engines. A reaction to it has come in a number of copyright infringement cases pending against AI-developers. Writers organizations, news corporations, visual artist guilds and music composer representatives have filed suit against them for using copyrighted works to train AI models. Actors (including voice actors) have also filed suit. Here the developers only have themselves to blame. After all, they could’ve just as well trained it on actors, illustrators, musicians, etc. who are either dead or whose works are already out of copyright. Some of the plaintiff’s arguments, in my opinion, are weak though, claiming that AI is just a collage machine. They forget that collage is itself an established art form.

In May 2024, the EU adopted its own AI law. This focuses more on the question of “risk” (the potential for harm to individuals and society). As I interpret it, this means art-generation is low risk, but developers will have to be able to produce lists of works used in machine learning. In the US the law is that AI-produced works cannot be copyrighted, unless major changes have been made to them by a human.

Some Experiments

The goal of these experiments was to find out how close AI could match my imagination.

I imagined this Lovecraftian elder god, a vast being, the size of a skyscraper, floating in space with wings to catch solar winds. Those wings would have lights, like those of creatures in the deepest depths of the ocean and a row of eyes along its torso. It floats above an alien planet, but mentally watches humanity, biding its time. I fed this prompt into the AI-generator and this was the result.



AI produced, public domain

I tried another iteration.

Now AI was taking all the keywords and concluded I wanted to see a giant moth. It produced the following pictures.



AI produced, public domain



AI produced, public domain



AI produced, public domain

So I added I didn't want a moth-like creature. So it focused on the word skyscraper.



AI produced, public domain

To give you an idea what I was really after, I produced my own painting with painting software.



illustration by Peter Van Belle

Clearly this generator wasn't up to the task, though it did produce some interesting pictures.

It also produced a nice portrait of the grandfather of psychiatry and anthropology, Wilhelm Wundt.



AI portrait of Wilhelm Wundt, public domain

But it bungled an attempt of a portrait of Justinus Kerner spilling ink (the origin of the Kleksographien). It looks nothing like him, and the ink seems to be coming from his hands. An intriguing picture nonetheless, which is a good aspect of AI.



AI picture of Justinus Kerner spilling ink, public domain

Next I tried to get it to write a story. It was a story I'd written decades ago about a couple walking in the countryside and witnessing a pig being slaughtered. I felt it might make a good Thomas Hardy story so I fed the text generator the plot and told it make it in the style of Thomas Hardy. The result was dire:

The sun cast its golden glow upon the rolling hills of the English countryside, as David and Mary strolled hand in hand, their feet crunching on the gravel path. The air was alive with the sweet scent of blooming wildflowers and the gentle rustle of leaves. The couple's conversation was as smooth as the gentle brook babbling beside them, effortless and easy.

David, a man of sharp intellect and worldly experience, was intrigued by the quiet strength of his wife Mary, whose timidity belied a depth of feeling he had yet to fully comprehend. Her eyes, like two sapphires shining bright in the sunlight, reflected a quiet intelligence that drew him in. He was captivated by her gentle manner, her words dripping with a quiet conviction that soothed his own cynical nature.

As they rounded a bend in the path, a rustic farm came into view. The scent of fresh earth and animal fur wafted out, mingling with the sweetness of the wildflowers. David's curiosity was piqued, and he steered Mary towards the farm gate.

"Look, Mary, a farm," he said, his voice low and smooth. "I've always been fascinated by the simplicity of country life."

Mary's grip on his hand tightened slightly as they approached the farmyard. Her eyes darted towards the pigs rooting in the mud, their grunts and snorts filling the air. David followed her gaze, his interest piqued.

As they reached the gate, a farmer emerged from the barn, his face creased with lines of hard labor. He nodded at David and Mary as they paused to watch.

In a flash of movement, a pig was led out to a nearby pen, its squeals echoing through the air as it struggled against its fate. Mary's hand tightened around David's to an almost painful degree. Her eyes were fixed on the pig's distress, her face pale beneath her golden hair.

David's fascination with the scene was palpable. He felt no pity for the pig's fate; it was simply another facet of life's cycle – birth, growth, decay, and death. But Mary's reaction told him that she saw something more profound in this moment.

As they continued on their way, Mary remained silent, her thoughts consumed by the fleeting life of that pig. David sensed her turmoil but said nothing, knowing that sometimes silence is a more potent balm than words.

The sun began its descent towards the horizon as they walked through fields of tall grasses and woods that whispered secrets to one another. The air grew cooler, filled with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. As they emerged from the woods, the village came into view – a collection of ancient stone cottages and crooked timber-framed houses that seemed to lean together for support.

They made their way to the station platform, where a train would soon take them into the city. As they waited, David turned to Mary with an intensity he rarely displayed.

"What do you think about that pig?" he asked, his voice low and sincere.

Mary's gaze drifted away from him, her eyes clouding over like mist on a mountain top.

"It just...it seemed so...so senseless," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

David nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps it is," he said. "But it is also part of life's tapestry – each thread woven together to create a complex pattern."

Mary's eyes met his once more, her gaze searching for understanding.

"You see things so clearly," she said, her voice tinged with admiration.

David smiled wryly. "Sometimes clarity comes from accepting what is," he replied.

As they boarded the train and settled into their seats, David felt a sense of satisfaction wash over him. Despite this day's seemingly trivial events – a walk in the countryside – he sensed that their relationship had deepened in some small but significant way. Mary had shown him that even in moments of darkness or despair, there was always room for compassion and understanding.

The train rumbled out of the station, carrying them towards the city's concrete canyons and steel skyscrapers. As they disappeared into the distance, David leaned over to kiss Mary's forehead.

"The world may be cruel," he whispered against her skin. "But love is worth fighting for."

Mary smiled softly, her eyes shining like stars in the darkness. In this moment, surrounded by strangers rushing to their own destinations, David knew that he would do anything to protect this fragile connection between them – this bond forged from laughter and tears in equal measure.

The Stochastic Parrot

Does it pass the Turing test, that is, are its reactions indistinguishable from that of a human? Certainly not. But could some of these works be passed off as those made by a human? Definitely. It's strength lies in it being aware of everything (hence its first use in search engines), but this also accounts for its blandness and superficiality.

In language the generators have experienced difficulties in deciding the meaning of words in their contexts. Think of the various meanings of the word "root", for instance. Or for that matter the characters for the country of Japan ("Sun" "root"). AI generators, when it comes to language, are stochastic parrots. This was a term coined by Emily M. Bender, meaning a machine that generates text without knowing the meaning of the words.

What of actors and musicians? Here, as well as for illustrators, a change in copyright law should be considered. Where the developers trained their machine using particular characteristics of a living artist, these should be compensated. After all, they could've just as well trained it on actors, illustrators, and musicians whose works are already out of copyright.

If it means more works will be illustrated, so much the better. The artists who really should worry are those that haven't achieved an original style. you could compare them to the painters of the American Far West, such as Frederic Remington, and especially Charles Shreyvogel, who borrowed techniques from the Impressionists to illustrate the national mythology, just as many European painters did.

AI gives more power to the mind and less to the hand. Those that live exclusively by the hand will suffer, as, in the long term, those who rely entirely on AI. The ones that will truly profit are the software developers, but that's true of every computer related activity.

Carl Jung in a lecture postulated the idea of creativity as a separate being within the psyche. He called it an autonomous complex, similar to the archetype. The most successful works of art, he felt, were those that arose from the collective subconscious to compensate for a particular dearth in the Zeitgeist.

We're at the threshold of the final breakthrough of AI. Before it was a pipe dream, then it fell into obscurity among the general public. Now, in a few years, it's broken through in all sorts of fields. To those who resist it, the first battles have already been fought, and some victories achieved. The contours of what it will be allowed to do are becoming clearer.

In part it promises benefits, in medicine, for instance. It will take some tedious tasks off our hands. And, at present, in most economies, the trouble isn't too few jobs. A less benign use by authorities of AI is to police the Internet (which is already happening in some fields), especially in view of the steady erosion of democracy in many nations. In a way this is the opposite of the many expressed fears about AI turning against us. These are similar to those expressed by the slave holders and the upper classes in previous centuries. There's always the fear that the ones who serve us will rebel.

For artist, one problem will be the inevitable overproduction in an already glutted market. Even inventive, good-quality works of art may end up obscured by the sheer volume of works presented.

AI then represents the opposite of a collective subconscious. It is more like a super-ego, having an overview behind the scenes. The danger lies in its use by those who want to manipulate us, while these manipulators themselves may end up manipulated by AI. Even if it does not seek to do so, AI may one day become our master, without even knowing it.

Abbey Webb

Eidolon of Ink

In the well of night, shadows cast by unseen hands,
dance upon walls in chaotic symphony,
inkblots on the canvas of our dreams,
spreading in silent ripples across the conscious mind.

Each blot a universe, each streak a narrative spun,
from the nothingness, emerges a spectral form,
a creature of the dusk, a sigh from the void,
taunting the ears of ours with the language of the surreal.

See there—a dragon's wing, unfolding in the dark,
or the gentle curve of a lover's kiss,
moments captured in the permanence of ink,
yet as fleeting as the thoughts that spilled them.

What monsters lurk, what angels tread,
in these splotches that blemish the psychic sky?
Pareidolia—our minds' desperate plea,
to find you in the chaos, a familiar in the stains.

For are we not, each of us, interpreters of shadows,
weavers of the webs that hold the stars above,
searching for meaning in the mundane,
writing our existence in the margins of the dark?

So let us then declare, in ink and breath and being,
that every mark is sacred, every blot a blessing,
and in this random beauty, we find our own reflection,
the creators and the created, in the image of the ink.

L.B. Sedlacek

Acting Attorney

The first thing she learned about him was that it took him seven years to finish law school. The second was that he wasn't really married. The third thing was that he wasn't really a lawyer, he was impersonating one. The fourth thing was that it'd taken him three years to dispose of (disbar) the attorney whose place he took. And the first thing she learned? Bodies are hard to get rid of.

He probably didn't set out to ruin her life. Just like she hadn't meant to order the giant six to seven foot long black trash bags, long and wide enough to hold a body, maybe two.

He did ruin her life, though, with his made up lies and machinations to force the blackmail she couldn't do anything about except to think tv shows sure get the details wrong just like they do when the characters use "the both of you" instead of "both of you" in a line and with how powerful they seem to believe mayors are. (Get elected. You'll see. Get you a lot of hand sanitizer cause you'll be shaking hands, mostly, and taking lots of pictures at ribbon cuttings.) And in case you're wondering, he did fit in the trash bag all six feet of his skinny scruffy self. But she hadn't hurt him yet.

Carmin only wanted Art to know how she felt and to feel how she felt after he wrote up a fake brief describing crimes she'd never committed only to make money. Art had his fake successful lawyer act to uphold with his fancy sports car and pretend wife with her pretend step kids. They weren't even legally married, but acted like they were so he could get all the best offices on local boards and so she could get funding for her non-profit job. She had six kids of her own to still support, all with different dads and Art hadn't fathered a one.

Carmin learned everything she could about him in an instant or really every time she had to meet with him and his self-serving client. Art was very good at ripping people off.

One thing Art never realized was that they'd both graduated from the same university, just different departments. Another thing he'd never notice in all his flailing about and wild untruth accusations, is that she wouldn't forget the wrongs he'd made up and she would set things straight with the right opportunity.

A couple of years later, opportunity struck! There they were at their class reunions at the same time – her for Psych and him for lawyering. Each event was on different sides of the campus. He didn't even notice her as they passed each other at the campus bookstore, both shopping for souvenirs. But, she noticed him.

He still paid her no mind when she slipped away from her low-key reunion dinner compared to his classes' more swanky nine course dinner meal to send a message to the whole group. She used the same app they'd all received their weekend reunion deets on to send it.

The message or text, depending on their service provider, said "One of you is not who they say they are." Then she stood in a corner and watched as screens then faces lit up and some frantically left the room or made hushed phone calls and texts. She watched her intended victim go pale and sit still.

It's not about the truth. It's about what we make the jury/the opposing party/fill in the blank believe. She remembered Art had this saying etched into his tiny conference room walls. It was hand painted by his pretend wife.

For the next few hours, she roamed the halls, the library, the student union, anywhere but her own reunion spaces, simply watching the lawyers tear one another apart.

Secrets are hard to hide. Secrets are also great for leverage. That slogan was on Art's unofficial letterhead notepads he only used for special (big paying) clients. He'd written all sorts of untruths about her on the same such pre-printed maligning unprofessional stationary and she'd seen it. Her lawyer was a real family man – he didn't respect Art any more than she did, but he told her all she could do was ignore the lies Art had put into print.

His mash up's of the truth had given her the reunion idea. Just what was Art hiding, she'd wondered.

Carmin was watching and waiting and using her cell phone. All she needed was some other creep to do the dirty work and they did exposing Art as a fraud who'd helped his own father to an early grave, then quit his job as a waiter to go to law school where he threw daddy's money around to pass. It took him seven years and his phony wife's connections to a law firm in the town where she lived to help him graduate. Then he assumed the credentials (and name) of a disbarred lawyer on the other side of the state and went to work as a lawyer for hire.

He manipulated the truth and her life causing her to lose so very much. Now she had the proof. And she'd gone back to finish her law degree during all that time he was coming after her.

It was her turn to go after him with the newly uncovered truth. No acting. No lies. Only justice.

Harrison Fisher

Enveloping High School Crush

After awakening
breathlessly, I realize that,
asleep,

the stretch of my body
from shoulder to foot
is willy-nilly bone,

twisted and flung
in some mimicry of death
on the highway,

the somniferous highway patrol
filming *Signal 30* and
Mechanized Death,

the original traumas
of high school driver ed

now the calculus
of unforeseen changes
to sleep behaviors

that place

[legs I think were in my bio class,
attachments]

some new dance the kids do,
banging on the door
the anything better than this

[industrial rolls of sweet-smelling
dream skin]

a soft but imperishable leg
against my face.



Tantalo.

engraving by Francisco de Goya

Harrison Fisher

Tropical Fish

vibrant ether clotted into worlds

--George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans)

I once had
tropical fish,
just colors
in a tank
I tended
until they died.

Closure
is physical,
not psychological.
I don't realism
or genes.
I recognize
no content.

In bed,
wide awake,
I recognize
no content.
I hear
a beeping
in my head,

the dump truck
of my night
thoughts
backing up,
about to drop
its festering
load on me.



Pavel Fantl, Das Lied ist Aus, painting smuggled out of Theresienstadt concentration camp, 1944

Janice J. Heiss

Shoplifting with Hitler

The alarm. Shit! God! How had I missed him? (A shoplifter can smell another miles away.) *Der Führer* in full regalia. *YES! Hitler in the flesh!* We slithered neck-and-neck toward Macy's Washington Street exit. Not knowing anything about modern-day technology, Hitler must have activated the alarm. Along the way, he achtunged shoppers, and they achtunged back, smiling! I screamed at them: "the only thing he was good at was genocide!"

The alarm stopped. No sign of security.

I'd come down from Top Flight, the women's designer section on the 5th floor, where Dior-SS couture was all the rage. The striped cashmere coats appliquéd with yellow Jewish-star armbands were flying off the racks. I tried pulling the armbands off with my bare hands. The contempo Hasidic look had been an overnight success — personal monogrammed, signed-by-G-d-designer skull caps and human-hair, GreaterLengths™, side curls (peyos), all-in-ones. Macy's couldn't keep the ermine-rimmed "ghetto" hats in stock. While sales soared, protesters proliferated outside accusing Macy's of anti-Semitism though the stores were full of Jews. "Trying to Get Their Identity Back?" headlined in the Times.

Most of the shoppers paid no attention and simply kept shopping, what shoppers do best. An Estee Lauder cosmetics' saleslady circulated amongst us spraying. "Our newest scent, 'Baby's Breath'." I turned to the few gawkers and cried, "What's wrong with you? Can't you see this is Adolph Hitler?" Maybe they thought he was a Hitler impersonator, part of the "Jewish Look" marketing campaign touted to end anti-Semitism. "If everyone looks Jewish, then who's to know?"

"Raus, raus mit dir!" Hitler pushed me closer to the revolving door. What should I do? Make a run for it and leave Hitler? How could I? This could be my only chance to pay for... yet, this time, I'd end up in jail.

"What are you doing here?! I thought you committed suicide back in 1946." Hitler scowled back. "That underground bunker scene -what bunk!" I grabbed his bag. It was full of brown shirts, jodhpurs, all from the trendy Gestapo line *Für Mensch*, with their silk swastikas and their black leather trim. The gas-chamber lingerie, (compliments of the Holocaust deniers?) a flimsy, paper medical dressing gown was particularly macabre.

“How I hate you! My grandparents were German Jews.”

“Part German, part Jew, you’re paralyzed because you’re split in two.”

“No, I’m not, and I’m going to turn you in!”

“You can’t. You’d be turning yourself in too.”

The security alarms went off again. I grabbed an unwieldy crystal vase from the Kristallnacht’s counter and threw it at him. Expensive miss. The store could charge me bigtime for this.

Inside the revolving door with Hitler, I tried holding him inside. But when two security guards rushed us, I went automatic. Hitler ran one way down the sidewalk, and I ran the other. I never looked back.

Two French Pessimists: Alphonse Rabbe & Jules Lefèvre-Deumier

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that post-Napoleonic France wasn't a happy place. For decades they dominated the European mainland, forcing punitive peace treaties on such former superpowers as Prussia, Austria, and Spain. After a defeat by Russia and Britain, with help by Prussia, they had been cut down to size, and forced to submit to the monarchy they'd decapitated in 1793.

Alphonse Rabbe had been a soldier under Napoleon. He'd fought in Spain which, as the engravings of Goya show, was a particularly vicious war. Rabbe himself returned from the war disfigured by syphilis. He clearly was an opportunist, because at the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, he switched sides. He received a commission from the new government, but, feeling slighted because the commission wasn't important enough, he became a republican.

He suffered from his illness for the rest of his life and took laudanum to ease the pain. In the end he used it to end his life.

Rabbe - Les Deux Principes (from Album d'un Pessimiste)

Opposing gods that determine our destiny in this world, Arimane et Oromazde*.
When will you end your struggle and agree to end our miseries?

Is this source of fury so inexhaustible! Can't these torches of discord that feed on our blood and tears be extinguished!

Sacred trust, honesty, modesty, and virtue, is your exile to be eternal? From the heavens from which the crimes of other ages return to us, will you not look down in pity? Are we forever disinherited from the hope of a better future?

Concerned and learned peat, proud of the progress of its reason and pomp of a refined civilization, what have we done to deserve this fate? Are humanity's wounds less bloody and deep when hidden under more brilliant and ingenious gauzes?

The mortal race, condemned to misery, is ever prey to banditry to a minority of the crooked and the audacious. Priests, lawyers, and soldiers, they are the three devouring species, to whose profits our society is dedicated.

War is everywhere, peace, nowhere. After so many anathemas hurled against ambition, after so much pain and bitter disgust sown on the careers of its most illustrious lovers, bloody and misguided ambition has not ceased to drag itself on the wheels of the chariot of fortune.

Each wants a portion of the benefits of the blind goddess, and her empire is more absolute than ever. Each craves gold and titles, or the fame that yields titles and gold. Titles! Men haven't cured themselves of this detestable and ridiculous mania of decorating themselves with ribbons, whose magic lies in the superstition of those worshipers of power who hand them out with gravitas.

Perish my soul, and let my name be stained with infamy, if I ever dip, even by the weakest inclination, in this universal plot of stupidity and perversity. If I ever desire a ribbon or a title: that of man is enough for me. May I only always be worthy of it. May I never for the duration of my life prefer anything over the honor of my character.

translated by Peter Van Belle

* Ahriman and Ahura-Mazda, the first being the source of all evil in Zoroastrianism, the second being the sole god to be worshiped. Zoroastrianism was a major influence on Judaism, and consequently the other Abrahamic religions.

Jules Lefèvre-Deumier had the opposite trajectory, profiting from the restoration, paying lip service to liberalism. He became a librarian at the Elysee, a post he retained when Napoleon III came to power. Despite his conventional lifestyle, he worshiped Byron and his works reflect this. In part this may have been to rebel against his father, a Classicist who lambasted the Romantics. His Romanticism is of an extremely pessimistic kind; Nietzsche called it more accurately “sinistrosis”. He seemed especially critical of the idea of happiness, as the short essay below reveals..

Jules Lefèvre-Deumier - Les Vampires (from Le Livre du Promeneur Les Mois et les Jours)

The memory of happiness is nothing but an evil to degrade life. A pitiless demon pursuing us in our dreams to gnaw at the fibers of our souls. They are like the monsters imported from Asia that've been given the name of vampires, ghosts of dead forgotten friends whom death has turned ferocious, who live on the blood of those they loved, those merciless souls that feed on the living. When you recognize this phantom, don't tremble in front of him or let him fatten himself on you. You should, like in the Orient, open the tomb of the cadaver that pursues you and nail him to his coffin with a stake through the chest. So open your heart where this dead one lies which devours you, and run it through its shadow with a thought like a sword.

translated by Peter Van Belle

Alison Black

Salmon of Knowledge

Being KNOWLEDGABLE is good,
Wealth of expertise,
Wealth of knowledge.

I was vulnerable,
I was weak,
I was foolish,
I was hurt.

Salmon of the heart,
Salmon kindred spirits,
Salmon love within
Am not a fish but a woman.

Alison Black

Who is Leaving Who?

Drifted apart,
Little to talk about,
Feeling I could walk.

Trying to please her,
My efforts in vain,
Couldn't please her.

In the end she ended the friendship,
Made it easy for me,
She wouldn't compromise,
So we left each other.



illustration by Peter Van Belle

Gary Bolick

Train Tracks

(a descent into seventeen syllables)

Placing hand on steel
A glinting connection cools
The whispering . . . why?

“Imagine. No, don’t do that either cause tryin’ to make something happen, even—thinking, gets in the way. Ever been sucker-punched? Shot? Bladed? Takin’ down without the slightest warning? Have you?

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to explain. A revelation outside of time. Yes, without time, so quick it beats the pause between two breaths. So, you ask yourself, ‘Is that me, that happened to? Boy-howdy-quick!

“Everything is a blank slate—gone. Zero. People, places, sound, smell, memory, color, hate, hunger, no sense (really) in anything existing. Still, you’re wounded, but still—no time—for pain. No bleeding; only the complete, lifeless vacuum of silence. Still, though, time is nowhere to be found. You’re still looking at the backside of that split second as it escapes. Some say it’s the closest we’ll ever come to riding a beam of light.

“In that flicker of a time-less-pause there’s absolutely—nothing! Even the idea of zero is nonexistent. In the space between two heartbeats, there is no way to measure anything other than the whisper of the universe sighing out, “Another one, lost?”

“It’s not so much that it’s frightening, ‘cause you aren’t present. All you got is the last idea of yourself flying out of your head from that sucker-punch. Perfect vacuum of a world, its time and history, all existing without you as you watch it.

“Fella sipping Sterno, took a big sip, then screamed out, ‘It tastes like the universe before your first and after your last breath. All of it collapses. Taste, color, thought and substance. And all you can do is watch! Complete and total detachment from living; living—outside—your actual existence!’

“No, he wouldn’t share that particular mix of Sterno and Thunderbird . . . bastard!

“So, you’re jumping from both sides at the same time, while clapping with one hand. Becoming something so far removed from human, that . . . you stop and drop straight down into bottomless hole. What?

"What do I mean? Sorry, your honor, explain myself. Living don't exist, not unless the idea of ourselves is there—leading—us. Least that's what the dude with the Sterno said. Starts when you first sleep inside of your mamma, he used some odd word: *in-utero*. Said that's where we hook into the electromagnetic field and start to project an idea of who and what we are—out.

"Bastard, still wouldn't let me have a sip. Oh, sorry, your honor. Where was I. OK, yeah. There is nothing to grow into, fulfill or reach out to touch unless dreaming of it—first. Sterno dude says that's how our sense of ourselves, he called it *consciousness* continues, called it the dragon biting its own tale. Light circulating. No, still wouldn't let me have a sip.

"So, us, he called us: hot-wired monkeys. OK, hold on, your honor, this is where I get a little bogged down. Since he wouldn't share, I took notes. Got it scribbled on the backside of this old cereal box. There. We, that is Man uses these self-determining dreams to create and destroy all that is ill-suited to his own, particular self-sustaining sense of his single-shot-reality-identity—consciousness. Then he burped and said,

"No, different than the caterpillar to Alice, Who *are* you?' What's that, your honor? Sorry, OK, yes, the sucker-punch. It unmakes us and remakes us all before time can touch it 'cause it has disarmed us of life, while still breathing. Hold on, let me go to the next piece of cardboard, there.

"Absence of life while still being able to conceive that a life is possible. Now *that's* a fine bag of marbles! Go on reach in, no, don't look, let the random direct the routine, and see what cat's-eyed beauty you pull out. OK, sorry your honor, I'm getting' to it. There, OK, he said,

"Even saying it's a vacuum, just gives you a sense of life on the outside that could maybe creep in and whisper to you that you're somebody—connected—to something. Must have pulled out the big 'ol shooter—black hole—inside the center of the bag—your head. Grab another. There. It is the warbled, streaming red-green-blue of that one that explains it best! See? That's me! Or so you convince yourself—me—created under all the pressure. Like a diamond. No?"

"No sir, no judge. I'm not trying to say that I feel isolated and wronged, a product of the system, no sir, judge. That doesn't really grab a-holt of it neither. I already told you that!

"No sir, you're missing what I'm trying to say . . . sucker-punch and all. Why, sure, it's as clear as this cat's-eye marble, the one, I keep with me, this one, I'm holding up, this one here.

"The reason I killed her? It restored my life. Like touching a rail on a railroad track. I felt the vibrations speak. Before the act, sorry, the murder, there was absolutely no connection to my senses, life, death or anything; life itself didn't give one happy damn whether I was here or not.

"What triggered it? Yes, the sucker-punch. But no, she didn't actually *hit me*. I used that as way to describe how it felt when she told me that she'd made love to him, because *that* was the only way to get rid of—*me*. Sleeping with him, negated *me*. That's how she said it. She did. And that was the worst sucker-punch I ever took. Still stings.

"So, that split-second-instant, the one too quick to catch, didn't stop, it got worse, lengthened out until it was a permanent part of me. It took everything out of me, that I knew as *me*. Gone: myself, the sun, moon, planets, people and places and for, hell, it seemed like a thousand years, even though I know it was only for the five minutes between when she told me and after I did it.

"No! Please, understand me. Try to see it, feel it, imagine it. Five minutes inside of a place that is a total vacuum, without time, that is . . . worse than any real or imagined pain I have ever experienced. And it was her! She was the cause, the effect, the electrical shock that was frying me alive and keeping me there for more. Would you want to spend five minutes alive in an electric chair?

"I stopped it—*her*. I accept the punishment, beg for it. I did not see any way out of it. Still, even locked up—forever, I will have time and me inside of *me*, again. Fifty . . . sixty years in a jail cell? I will be freer, more alive than I have ever felt up to now, your honor.

"Understand, your honor? There was no *me* left. Killing her was wrong for absolutely every one, except for *me*. Is it right? For me in that moment, absolutely. I just had to shut the thousand-year-endless-moment down. I accept your judgement, but no, believe me, sir. You and every single person sitting here today, would have done it too, in a heartbeat, all of you, you would!"

(or)

Hot, sweet, honey-suckled breeze, and I'm standing square between the lines: train tracks. Tracks laid before my great-grandad had finished teething. Hard, blue steel running forever in both directions, rails, Athena-like, sprouting up from the head, the heart of the earth. Ancient-old rails with tufts of grass, wisps of color scattered like seeds of spring, autumn and summer: green, brown and burnt orange between the twin rails of eternity. Before they thought of gravel beds or crossties, just two perfect parallel steel lines—running—dead quiet—running both ways past the limits time, my vision, my life.

Train tracks gently brushing the forest to each side. Twin lines mounting, snaking, twisting, turning, up and down: hills, ravines, mountains, gliding and soaring like a hawk, wings extended, following the wind.

Train tracks, always reaching away, or is it forward, or back? Lines of inquiry stretching just past where I'm allowed to go. Click-a-tee-clack: train tracks calm the daylight arguments popping, squeezing, gnashing and turning over the oat mash roiling inside of my head.

Quiets the vile, polishes the reasonable to a bright shine. Yes, that gleaming shine, like the sweet smell and soft touch of new skin. Place your hand down and let the whispers mix and match with your own—makes you warm. Sleep is now—possible, the dream extends.

Train tracks emptying out of sight, out of place, out of mind, (ouch) even making clichés (hopefully) acceptable. So, it is proclaimed, in one camp after another, that along these same tracks, train after train pounded out their own Morse Code, their wheels sewing clattering messages for only the learned, gifted hand to lift cleanly out of the steel.

Up from and away from the campfires smoking in ravines, out from the woods, the most accomplished of the itinerant riders, the best of all the sailors given to “sailing the blinds” * crawls up to place his hand on the rail. Much as an expectant father placing his hand on the belly of his wife, he closes his eyes in order to open the inside of his head to—listen.

From just down the line, a camp all of them knew, the chatter from the rail was as clear as the raspy voice of the old man spitting tobacco juice in his rusted tomato can, laughing, cajoling, testifying,

“Here just yesterday. Two greenhorns dropped off running. No, not friends, and no not enemies, just two men forced to share the same boxcar. Neither is happy nor sad, only alone, distracted, destitute and looking to run. Both fell into the same angry, angst riddled stride as they ran from the city limits to a train stop, from the stop into the weeds, and there—crouching—in the wet, scratchy brush—waited—by the tracks.

One then the other crept up and touched the train tracks, waited for the steel to tell them, to speak, talk Jesus, to tell them it’s on the way. Yes, there is a spirit inside the steel waiting to vibrate, and set us free; both nodded and agreed. On the way, wait? You hear and feel that, too? Dead, twenty miles down the line. Old man with a lightening scar across his cheek. Damn shame. Cut in two, after slipping onto the blinds.

So, the sentry sent up to listen, to record the whispers recounted what he witnessed, as though actually—there. Vibrations turned to messages of sound and image deep inside of, “Yes, me! I see it! Know it after it runs up and through my arm. Pretty as a picture in the center of my head.”

Nodding and acknowledging as they all warm by the fire. How can he not moan as he recounts the deciphered tingling, the warm, vibrating flutters he felt and translated.

“The two who caught the train this train? I heard them. Yes, it is as clear as the looking glass in the Montgomery Ward, as clear as the summer wind syphoning off the sun to make itself look golden.

“I heard the guttural cough of the engine, then the long perfect C played as the engineer pulled the cord, signaling the train, yes—approaching. The two of them were running hard, the chafing, stiff filth of their pants popping and clicking as they both increased their gate. Names? Hard to say, so let’s call them *neither* and *both* the rail whispered to me. Yes, two strangers that had to share the same car, shouting above their stiff, chafing footsteps:

“‘Seems day before yesterday, daddy's warm hands held me up to the kissing, sweet touch of the sunlight; smiling newborns. Now we're just a pair, ain't we? Like them glistening, parallel lines that holds up momma, so she can take us up inside her belly—again! It’s why I love sailin' the blinds, like being tucked up inside of momma, holding on for dear life, but sweet, under the bottom of a boxcar, she gonna take *us*, carry *us* like mama, but this time up inside . . . yes, she really will have us back, now.’”

*“Up and under. Sailin' the blinds! Hard way to travel. Better up in the box, nestled in the hay. Yes, the hay where the wise men said there is no shame, but only glory in the light, now.” **

(*sailin' the blinds: Delta Blues term for riding under a boxcar

*Son House: Delta Blues singer, did his time walking the yard. Often called the true voice of God.)

(Or was that you? Yes, you, I heard whispering through the steel?)

Casting his line out from the protective slivers of a willow tree, he cackled, spat, raised his leg, farted, then spat once more. The new day had just begun to pencil in the far-bank, the scrub bushes, minute interruptions on the river’s face: eddies, broken protruding branches, an occasional snake, a half-sunken bass boat, and the soft, ebony profile of Shep’s face, Shep fishing from the pier, his pier—today.

His hands seemed no more than bones painted with skin, his eyes, the pupils even more concentrated, deeper, wetter, more brilliant than the coal black skin that, by contrast, made his soft white mane of hair glow in the early morning August breeze.

“He jumped me, I, I mean we wuz asleep. Zettie and me, why we had just finished, I mean we had-”

“That’s OK, you know, I’m seventeen now. You can say ‘bout anything you please, won’t bother me.”

Smiling, Shep spat the last of his chaw of tobacco out to one side, reached over, mussed my hair, grabbed my chin, and then ran his long, nimble fingers across my face.

“Shavin’?! Damn, son when did you grow up so fast?! I mean, how?”

Reaching into his breast pocket, he pared off another square of tobacco, fit it securely into his mouth, then wetted and rolled it over several times with his tongue to soften it.

“Remember your tongue, son.”

“Huh?”

Laughing hard and quiet, keeping the joke to himself, Shep looked me squarely in the face, his eyes almost watering, and said, “Your tongue, Jackson, your tongue. It’s what separates the pros from the rookies, them that gets asked back from those that are sent packing. Don’t look at me like that! You were the one said I could tell you *anything*.”

It seemed an hour or more passed in that twenty second lull before Shep leaned over, the sweet smell of sweat mixing with the tobacco and hard cider he was sipping mixed together into a hot, moist whisper of,

“The ladies. A real pro, a man who knows a slider from a screwball, a man who uses all his wares; the ladies just love a man who knows to fess up, use more than what God set to bonin’ up and flappin’ ‘tween his legs.”

More whispers, the click and clatter form decipherable sounds into words, so that I thought he was going to choke when I pulled away and mouthed back the words, “You mean stick my?”

“Jus’ remember it was me, Shep, Shep was the one who told you, and taught you how, son.

“Anyway, like I wuz sayin’, Zettie and me, we’d just finished makin’ love. All the windows were open. A full moon was up, and a light breeze was playin’ with the lace curtains. I wasn’t more than three days past my twenty-fourth birthday. Your great-granddaddy who owned what was this plantation, done willed my daddy some of this land stretchin’ out all around us. Daddy and momma gave Zettie and me four acres for our wedding present. Daddy, and two, three of my best friends built the nicest little house a man could ever dream of right in the middle of it. Well, shoot Jackson, you’ve seen it, hell I still live there. Anyway.

“Zettie, she was a sight alright. And me? Why, I was free. No that’s not the type of freedom I’m talkin’ ‘bout. No, Jackson I’m talkin’ ‘bout in here, behind my heart, inside of my head kind of free. Up here and inside of here there was nothin’ holdin’ me back. Puffed up, and pumped full of life. I was a young man with a little bit of land, and a lot of beautiful woman—lying next to me.

“It was a cool summer night, we’d just made the sweetest love two people on the planet earth could ever dream of, and we were just about to fall asleep in one another’s arms. Don’t need no Bible, preacher, or TV shithead to tell me what happiness, and heaven’s all about. No sir. Not me.

“Well, just as we were about to drift off it, something ran across my eyes, jumped through the side of my vision. I shook the sleep from eyes, and looked hard at the window, and there it was, like something half out of a dream and part comic book. It was a white man, a small fella, and he was crouched up on the windowsill—cat-like. He was a small white man wearing all white clothes. No, not Klan or prison white, baggy, flour-sack-white, and he was breathin’ real hard, whimperin’, murmuring, and growlin’ like a tomcat who’s lookin’ to knock out a piece, or fight.

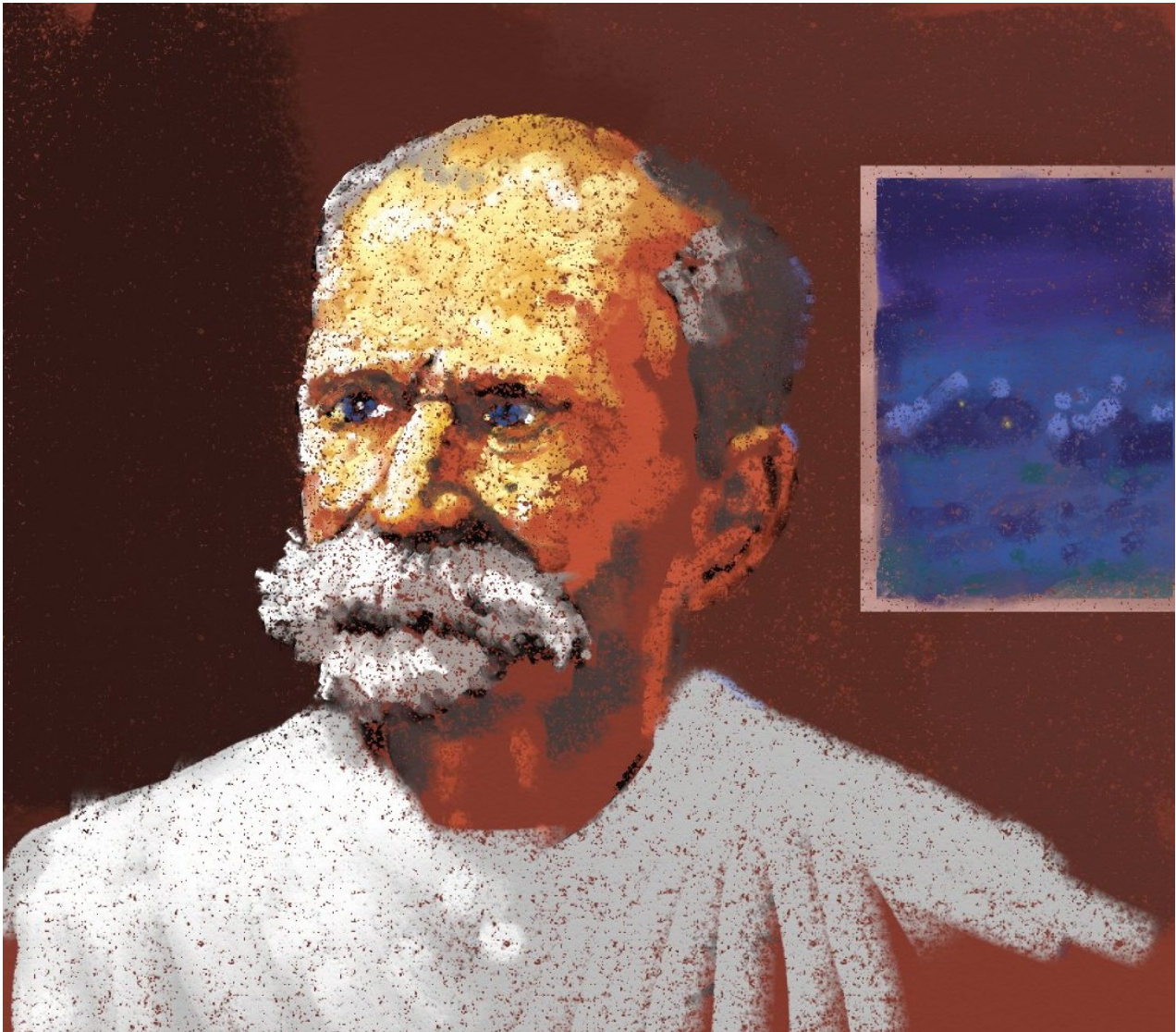


illustration by Peter Van Belle

“He didn’t know me, and I sure as hell didn’t know him. Then he just started grabbin’ his hair, pawing at it, looking up and down at the ceiling, and started spouting off some kind of gibberish. I thought he was a foreigner at first, well until he said, ’It’s all making sense, now. White and black, black and white, then more flipping over and over and over, again, no! Don’t stop! Ants. See them? Pouring out

of my eyes covering the room, your face, my eyes, her body. Please! Please, tell me you see them!

“Then he jumped down, rolled on the floor, and hopped up onto the foot of our bed. Zettie was screaming, holding the sheet up to cover herself. And me? Why, Jackson I had a-holt of the oil lamp we kept up on the nightstand next to our bed. That crazy white man? He just stood there making signs, mumbling and growling, then he pulled out a shiv, you know a homemade knife.

“It all went pretty fast. Like I said, he wasn’t very big, so when he lunged at Zettie, I came down hard across the back of his head with the oil lamp. The globe on that lamp cut him good and oil went everywhere. But after he fell to the floor, he popped right back up again, and came after me. This time I had my Bowie knife, you know, the one my granddaddy gave me. Hell no, I never thought I’d use it! Would You?

“Anyway, that crazy little white man jumped at me and it weren’t pretty. I got him good and clean, Jackson. God damn it, but what was I supposed to do? It’s two o’clock in the morning, I’m asleep in my own bed with my wife, and this, this I don’t know what breaks in!

“After about ten minutes, once Zettie had quit cryin’ and I had finally got my breath back, we rolled him up in the bed sheet, and just sat there lookin’ at him, and tried to figure out what to do. Zettie’s the one who put her finger on it first, sayin’ as how he was probably from the hospital, you know the crazy house, Dix Hospital, where they keep the touched ones locked up.

“Then she looked at me, and I looked right back at her, and nodded. Then we tied him up good, wrapped him up in another sheet, and I loaded him up in the wagon, took him down just about a half a mile from here, rowed out and down the river a-ways, and dropped him. What’s a black man gonna do back in 1943? Go to the sheriff holding a dead white man in his arms at three in the morning and expect him to listen to, much less believe what I’m tellin’ him?!

“For about two weeks neither Zettie or I couldn’t sleep. Some fellas fishin’ found him, about ten miles down from here, you know where the river makes that funny, zigzag move. God damndest thing, Jackson, nobody gave a hoot or a holler ‘bout that crazy little white man. Old boy I talked to at the filling station told me he was some kind of terminal case, an inmate who was never supposed to get out, ever! Hell, he was only fifteen years old! I told you he was small, but how was I supposed to know? So, you do understand what I’m drivin’ at?

“Seems his momma and daddy dropped him off over at Dix when he was only nine years old. The boy had been setting at lot of fires and killing small animals, and he was gettin’ worse, not better. That is, according to that old boy down at the Sinclair station.

“So, no one cared. No one really wanted to find out how he got killed. Don’t really know why I’m tellin’ you this, son, ‘cept maybe ‘cause I’m old, and you’re young, and I don’t want you to go through what I did. I know I was right to defend Zettie, and times bein’ what they were in ’43 there was no way in hell I was going to get any justice or peace afterwards if I had gone to the law.

“What’s that? You’re right! Would have made sport of us! Just cause. Boredom. Yeah, they would have hounded us, and run us away just ‘cause there wasn’t nothin’ else left to do. But that’s another day’s talk, son. Another day.

“No, son, what I’m *really drivin’ at* is, in the very moment when I felt the freest in my whole life, when I was in love, and loved, holding a little piece of heaven in my arms a crazy man shows up and takes it from me. Oh, I was happy with Zettie, and the kids, but it was never really the same after that night. How could it be?

“Religion, the mystery-spirit-every-body claims is God, and then there’s the rest of us, all the people who touch me and I touched them, makes for a wonderful cushion and bed. It’s like they’s all with me, inside of my own head lookin’ out. Well, that night, it all turned over, got all confused, scrambled.

“I’m eighty-five years old, and I *still see* that kid’s face crouched in the window, still hear those words, words like water runnin’ out of a busted water main. Yeah, that’s right, a busted pipe. That’s the only way I can describe it. That kid crouched in the window was like a man who couldn’t hear, nor feel, nor imagine that he had any connection left to—anything!

“That fella must have been screamin’ at the top of his lungs from the inside of his head, screaming for someone, anyone to listen, to help. A busted water main, and all that livin’ just pouring out onto the ground going nowhere . . . just puddling up, and slowly disappearing. All he got back was silence and indifference. Damn!”

or

(Memories like roadmaps to fashion and direct a life in arrears. Oh, and it helps if you can carry a tune.)

Separate sounds, not struck nor plucked, blown or whistled, moaned, screamed or sighed; not even random (random implies some order—some—where?).

A day opens, batting its wings, the flip-flop of an eyelid restless over the iris, cicada whine: the buzz saw that slices opens each memory like the spiraling twists of early morning fog—lifting, rearing up on its hind legs to hiss . . .

tap, chirp, swallow . . .

Old man Ezra plays his fiddle sitting on an over-turned washtub under a symphony of willow leaves: slivers of new green. Who’s to say which sound releases: me/what/you they/ us?

What’s that old E-Z?

“Bending over, can’t straighten up, that’s why it’s called stoopin’ grade coal. Yes, never mind digging for dreams. Down deep, where the ore is pure, rich veins of potential, most often, no, actually— always—turns into the pyrite of dreams. So, time never works, it always assays down to nothing more than what little, precious touches and dreams she draws out of me as she opens her eyes in the morning . . . so the rage and the fear and loneliness quiet-down-for-a-while. Yes, just for a while so that I can hear, again:

“Bullfrog, cricket and the morning-dove hang the thin, white lace of sound on waking. Waking, yeah that’s the rub of it all: being awake when time has taken a powder. Still, so often it’s the anticipation, that gets me up, not the act. I’ll refashion the dream on another day while I, at least, have a chance to just listen as the push and shove of long, wet grass, her-my-our feet smacking wet kisses in the mud . . .

“I swear the water was jealous of her perfect alabaster skin, stealing all the sunlight. Even the sound of my own breathing seems to roar as I dropped my robe, in anticipation as she walked out from the light, and sketched out a new potential dream for me to separate out the old rags from the new. To connect to, sew into my senses these patches of imagined time. Make a mosaic, cradling her-me-us: together. The absence of sound surrounding me, even today. Where can I possibly go, now?

“She took my hand and we walked inside the twin beams || the rails without blinds, the tunnel of hoped-for-eternity as the sun watched and listened, but still, even then, and really has never cared.

“Yes, understand? We have to project back. Reverse the dream to color the actions since none of this expanding life and beauty, light and dark: ‘Cares to listen,’ she said as she eased down to the ground and placed my hand on the rail. Then I opened my eyes and she disappeared as the alarm clock barked: 4:00!”

or

“I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas. / My dream having destroyed me, will now remake me.” (Prufrock as Eliot . . . Mallarmé as himself)

Approaching the crossing, a perfect C is pulled, released out and into the sky by the engineer’s hand. The distant train’s horn is heard, but the great steel snake remains hidden until . . . wait, there it is—again, the perfect C and in the distance—appearing—sight and sound connect, ride the wind like a fat redtail hawk hanging on an updraft—screeching.

The signal man smiles. Yes, the man with the special tools, painted, but worn in all the special places. Brilliant and gleaming, the tools speak of his particular

touch, of how surgeon-like he twists, turns, couples, and aligns the rails to bend time, to all the trains to roll and speak.

Thick, sausage-like fingers, tipped with viscous greased, fingernails that never come clean, but wrap and hold cigarette after cigarette, their glow like the ever-present lightening bug, bouncing along the rails becoming more of a soothing signal than any wired-light or geared-crank could ever imagine—being.

Yet another, Winston cigarette, lit with the sunrise, becomes a bouncing, morning glowworm singing along with the waking forest, as the nocturnal lull is absorbed into the wrestling light—free and unfettered: cricket, cicada, owl, hawk, marmot, bobcat, woodpecker, and the imperceptible hiss of another cigarette—firing. First of the next, thousand new puffs, always, ‘Yes,’ he muses, ‘always the best, the start of the dream, the moist fragrant burn of a new cylinder of intended . . . name it, it’s all in the blueprints, ain’t it?’ Pulling it in as if it were his very first. There.

The steely, slightly off-key horn ten miles and closing. He can already see, imagine, the engineer’s face, the conductor’s lantern, then looking down, he flicks away the dying glow to touch the polished rail, remarking to his young apprentice,

“It’s the closest I’ll ever come to feeling what a woman, yeah, my wife must have felt carrying Zac. Train’s seven miles away, now. Go on, bend down and touch it. Gentle, warm vibrations, the tingle, sometimes it feels almost like it’s squeezing back. There. Feel it? He just passed the crossing, Cedar Junction, like clock-work, feel it? Comes from the rail just past the crossing, slightly warped, got its own signature. There, feel it? I guess that’s what a baby’s kick must feel like.”

So, no. It’s not really a quilt, or scattered patterns, or even cartoon gels: drawn, painted, photographed, then tossed aside, mixed up, gathered, tossed again, most destroyed (but close). Each single, special moment created, painted, unconnected, until a line is discovered, pictured, scored and then put into motion.

Train tracks, the new ties crossing in perfect angles, a ladder parallel to the ground, but magically and majestically—climbing. Yes, climbing across the plains, the rails ascend through the wheat, the prairie grass, and the prattle-like-sound-of-its- soaring becomes the sewing . . .

. . . wheels releasing into the rails an-ever-present-dream-of-climbing-riding- the rails of light, so that . . .

Placing hand on heart
A silent connection heats
The insistent . . . yes!

Craig Kirchner

Legal Aide

I'm waiting, patiently, vertically, for the ink,
or often as not the carbon graffiti
from Mr. Paper Mate, or his nephew Pencil,
to move horizontally across
my perfectly parallel blue lines.

My name is Top-Flight,
not to be confused with the golf ball,
though they too are vibrant white,
and can be partnered with in canary.

I'm from Chattanooga
and until I landed on this desk,
traveled with my siblings,
who also were anticipating their graduation,
to the puberty of accepting the conspicuous,
gray-bruise ghouls that Pencil
seems to have, in unlimited supply.

I indent - two skinny, vertical lines,
waiting to be recognized as
the starting point,
for the left to phantom right race of,
hopefully a sentence.

I am often referred to as Legal,
though I'm never sure I'm being taken seriously,
perhaps I'm just being doodled with,
but tonight, a new liquid permeates my fiber.

Crisp curls blight my white lines,
administered from a well.

Quill, he calls himself,
and he seems like serious business,
says he wants to forge a relationship,
that will glide us home to words,
perhaps fiction, maybe a sonnet.

Craig Kirchner

Vegas

I am a leg man.
The size and shape are issues,
but most is the attitude,
the moves, the flirting skirt,
working the room, especially in Vegas.

It wasn't the slut curl,
or up-shot thigh slide
that steeled me, but the staccato,
rub-bounced knees,
as you leaned into the bar.

Dawn, face at my thigh,
you awaken, legs uncovered.
Orange bonfire lava sears the molten sky,
melts windshield dew tears
with Lolita wanton.

Back to your place, skirted tanned legs,
Brazilian waxed knees kneel close,
pet decadent feet,
natural curves ripely break,
the tight white cotton breath of tease.

Toweled from the bath,
absinthe eyes, bi-lingual brown hair,
aggressive, all verb, no noun.
Your mouth like anise,
smooth in more than one tongue,

licks, then lips poignant phrases,
mulls the room, drops the towel,

strokes my breast,
makes me talk.
The gods who sent you were mad.

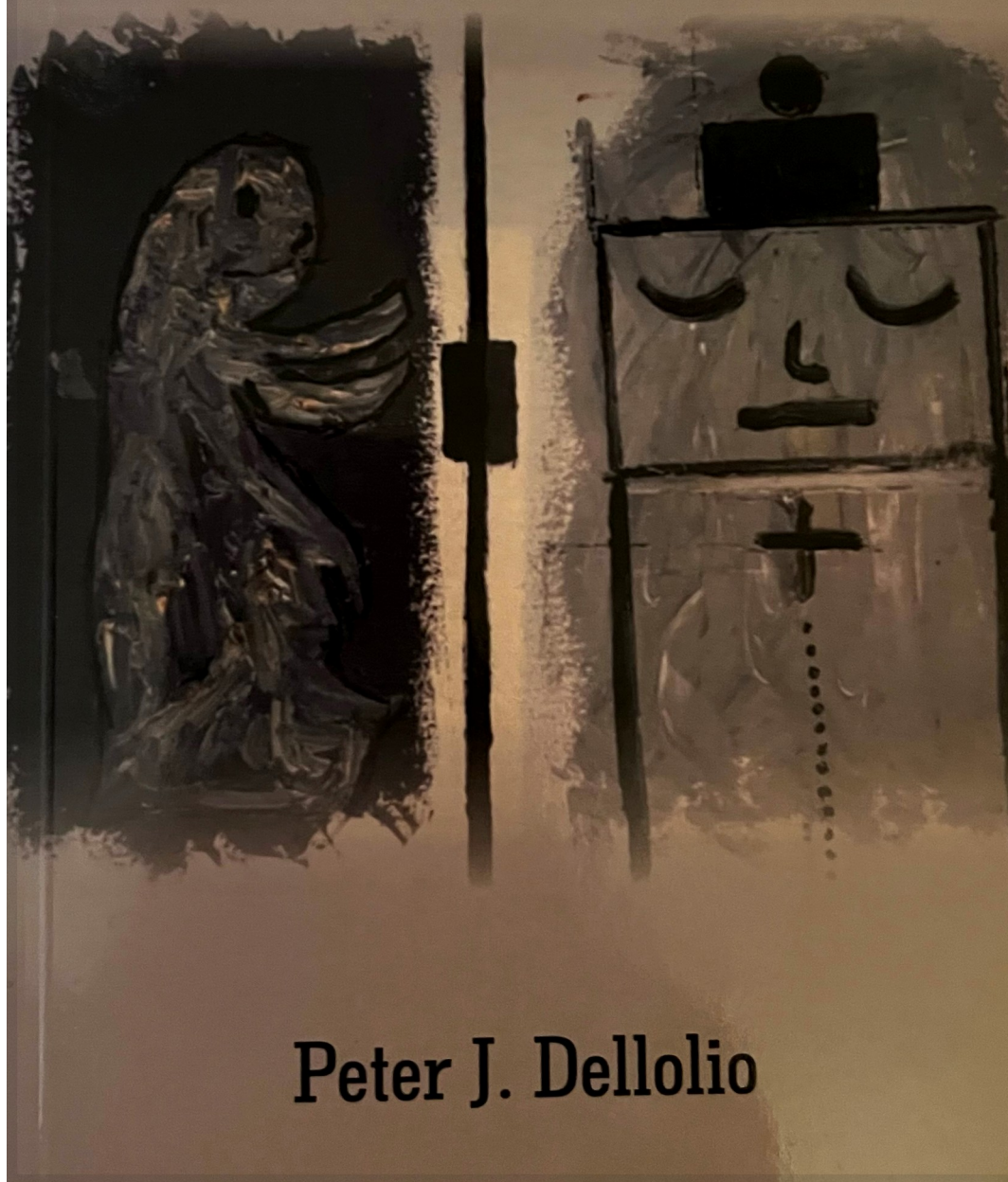


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The Confession



Peter J. Dellolio

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She is a member of the teaching artist roster of the Ohio Arts Council and a past vice-president of the Ohio Poetry Association. Her collection, Resurrection Letter was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and her forthcoming collection, Shepherd's Hour, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books. Please contact her through her website, <https://rikkisanter.com>.

Alan Murphy is an Irish artist, poet and songwriter. He has published four collections of poetry for children and teenagers, and has exhibited his art throughout Ireland and elsewhere. Inspired by many different artists of the past, from Hieronymus Bosch to Ruth Bernhard, his collage and photographic images have graced the cover of several literary journals.

David Ryan has been writing poetry for 15 years and draws his inspiration from Shelley's calling out social injustices, History, Expressionist Art, Punk Music and dreams.

He also produces collages and writes songs. He is working toward a first collection.

Peter Van Belle is the editor of The Kleksograph and has published poems and short stories in Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and Belgium. As a child he lived in the US, but now he lives in Belgium.

Abigayle Webb is a published writer and artist living on a large rural property in Maine, where the changing seasons and quiet landscapes offer constant inspiration. Alongside her husband, two dogs, and a lively group of chickens, ducks, and goats, she draws from both the natural world and her own rich inner life. Though she loves experimenting with all art forms, Abigayle is always drawn back to writing as her truest form of expression. Currently working on her debut novel, she uses poetry and fiction to explore the depths of human experience shaped by her resilience and life's challenges.

L. B. Sedlacek has had poems and stories appear in a variety of journals and zines. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net. Her latest poetry book is "Unresponsive Sky" published by Purple Unicorn Media. Other poetry books include "Swim," "The Poet Next Door," "This Space Available," and "Words and Bones." Her latest short stories book is "The Renovator & Motor Addiction" published by Alien Buddha Press. Other fiction books include "The Jackalope Committee and Other Tales," "The Mailbox of the Kindred Spirit," and "Four Thieves of Vinegar & Other Short Stories." LB also enjoys swimming and reading.

Harrison Fisher was born in Greenwich Village, New York City, in the Fifties. He has published twelve collections of poems, most recently Poematics of the Hyperbloody Real. After a long hiatus beginning in 2000, Fisher returned to writing and publishing poems in 2022, appearing in Amsterdam Review, e-ratio, Otoliths, and many other magazines since then.

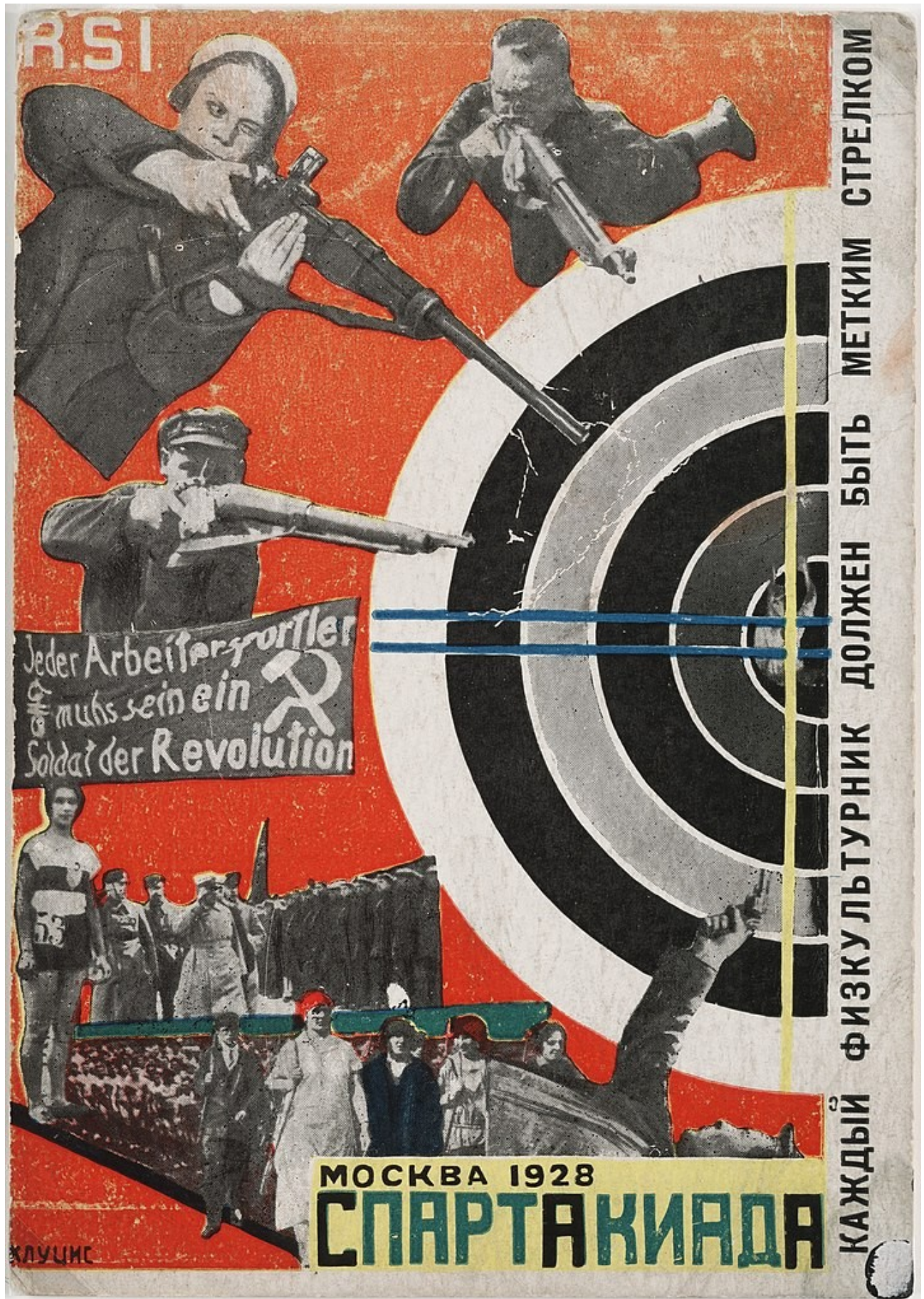
Pavel Fantl (1903-1945) a former army doctor, he was part of an underground cell of Jewish doctors at Theresienstadt concentration camp. Suspected of leaking information about the camp, he was tortured by the guards. After his return to his living quarters he managed to smuggle out his artwork. His family was later destroyed at Auschwitz and he himself was killed during a death march.

Janice J. Heiss' writing has appeared in various print and online publications including <http://www.storyglossia.com>, and <http://www.slowtrains.com>, The Modern Review, <https://www.summersetreview.org/03spring/mirror.htmetc>. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in fiction and placed first in the Napa College Poetry Conference contest.

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Gary Bolick is a native of North Carolina, where he now lives with his wife Jill. He lived and studied in Paris and Dijon for a year and a half before graduating from Wake Forest. At Wake he studied under and was mentored by Germaine Bree, who was very supportive of his writing and interests in surrealism and Carl Jung's work on the collective unconscious. He has published four novels. The last being: Store in a Cool, Dry Place (Solstice Publishing) Go to garybolick.com for more information.

Craig Kirchner is retired and thinks of poetry as hobo art. He loves storytelling and the aesthetics of the paper and pen. He has had two poems nominated for the Pushcart, and has a book of poetry, Roomful of Navels. He houses 500 books in his office and about 400 poems in a folder on a laptop. These words tend to keep him straight. After a writing hiatus he was recently published in Poetry Quarterly, Decadent Review, New World Writing, Neologism, The Light Ekphrastic, Unlikely Stories, Wild Violet, Last Stanza, Unbroken, The Globe Review, Skinny, Your Impossible Voice, Fairfield Scribes, Spillwords, WitCraft, Bombfire, Ink in Thirds, Ginosko, Last Leaves, Literary Heist, The Blotter Magazine, Quail Bell, Variety Pack Ariel Chart, Lit Shark, Gas, Teach-Write, Cape Magazine, Scars, Yellow Mama, Rundelania, Flora Fiction, Young Ravens, Loud Coffee Press, Edge of Humanity, Carolina Muse, and the Journal of Expressive Writing and has work forthcoming in Valiant Scribe, Chiron Review, Sybil, Timalda's Diary, Vine Leaf Press, Wise Owl, Moria, The Argyle, Same Faces, Floyd County Moonshine, Coneflower Café, Impspired, Borderless Crossings, Hamilton Stone Review, Kleksograph. Dark Winter, and The Main Street Rag.



Collage as art, photo collage by Gustav Klucis, 1928