

Whispering Spirits

Digital Magazine

2008 Flash Fiction Contest
August 15, 2008



Edited by
Diana Cacy Hawkins
Sandie Bergen
Ilanna Mandel

Featuring
Aaron A. Polson
Joshua Scribner
Valerie Estelle Frankel
Ahmed A. Khan
Mari Mitchell
Lyn C.A. Gardner
Randall A. Martin

"Dark, dark! The horror of darkness, like a shroud, wraps me and bears me on through mist and cloud."

Sophocles

Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine

August 2008

Flash Fiction Contest

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Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine. August, 2008 Flash Fiction Issue. Regular issues published twice a year, with two or three special issues and contests in between regular issues. A division of DCH Design and Publications. Subscription is free for viewing online or for the special pdf download editions. All editorial matters should be brought to the attention of Diana Cacy Hawkins at whisperingspirits@gmail.com or dianacacy@dragynspice.com by email only. All content of Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine is copyright protected to the originating author and Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine, as stated by US Copyright Office at <http://www.copyright.gov> All submissions must refer to the website and follow the guidelines posted online at <http://clik.to/whisperingspirits>
Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine, Managing Editor, Diana Cacy Hawkins
DCH Design and Publications owner and operator, Diana Cacy Hawkins, <http://www.dchdesignandpublications.com>
Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine mailing address: PO Box 245, Hebron, NE 68370

Letter From The Editor

Hello. Welcome to the special pdf download, featuring the amazing winners of our 2008 flash fiction contest.

I'm so thankful for the wonderful stories presented to us for consideration, and how the magazine team worked together to make sure it went as smoothly as possible. We did have some major scheduling problems. Turns out that summer is a busy time for both writers and editors, and so this issue is later than we planned.

Special thank you to all the authors who submitted stories to us. I wish we could publish all of them. It was difficult to pass up on some other good stories that didn't make it to the final eight.

Feel free to chat about the stories on our discussion board at <http://ghostwhisper.proboards29.com> anytime. Soon, we'll be having guest appearances on the board, so keep an eye out.

Read and enjoy the winning entries!
Diana Cacy Hawkins

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First Place

The Ox-Cart Man

by Aaron A. Polson

Until we were twelve years old, Billy Wilson and I searched for the Ox-Cart Man during our summer vacations in New Hampshire. Our searches grew over the years, adding new technology and techniques to find the worn path where that phantom supposedly trekked home from the Portsmouth market.

That last summer was very special—we both knew it would be our last chance to find the old road and maybe catch a glimpse of the Ox-Cart Man together. Billy’s dad was being transferred to California, and I would have to reconnoiter the Piscataqua River valley alone, climbing over rock and stone, through old forests, and near quietly murmuring streams for a hint of the legend. We pledged to find him that year.

Billy collected anything to do with the Ox-Cart Man—scraps of stories in old newspapers, books of regional ghost stories, pictures of lost throughways, bridges, and foundations of homes that time pushed aside. He constructed a map of the region, complete with every reported sighting.

I snuck out of my house on that last night. Both of us traveled by bicycle, dangerous in the dark, but stealthy too.

“I’ve learned some new stuff,” he said, eyes glowing like silver embers under the moon. “Mom drove me to the library in Portsmouth today. They have a whole new local folklore section.”

We slid off our bikes near an old crossroads.

“All the stories corroborate, he was shot by some highwaymen. He was on his way home from the market after bartering all his family’s goods, even the ox and cart.” Billy snapped on a flashlight and ducked under a sycamore branch.

“Okay, we know that bit,” I said, tromping after him.

Billy stopped, turned, and smiled. “There’s a part of the legend I’d never heard before. His son left looking for him after the Ox-Cart Man didn’t return. The son never came home, either.”

A chill breeze danced through the trees.

“They say his son is still looking for him,” Billy whispered. “He was our age.” He nudged me with a knobby elbow. “His name was William.”

We found a spot where the old path dipped low beside a dying stream. Billy’s notes indicated this might have been the location the Ox-Cart Man met his fate. I felt a little childish when fear crept in my chest; Billy needed some closure on his own childhood—he needed some verification of his beliefs.

The moon shifted back toward the morning horizon, filtering long streams of pale light through the light forest. The night smelled black: the rich smell of mud and old moss. Billy and I kept the vigil in silence. Then he arrived, shimmering like a morning fog.

The Ox Cart Man looked more solid than I'd expected. He loped with a steady gait, a pole over his shoulder holding a black kettle. His face was drawn, long and rimmed with a reddish beard, just like the legends said. The man wore a rough cotton shirt and black coat. His feet struck the ground with no sound but the light brush of breeze.

Billy stood up. I remember the burning in my arms and legs—the tingling nerves. I wanted to stop him, but all I could do was watch as my friend walked toward the Ox Cart Man.

The man stopped, regarding Billy. He knelt after a moment, smiling. I heard a voice—not from the specter but in my head, *William?* Billy nodded. The Ox Cart Man reached inside his black kettle and pulled out a small candy, wintergreen so the stories told, and offered it to Billy.

They stood for a few minutes in silence until finally without a look back, Billy walked away with the Ox Cart Man. I could do nothing but sit with a throbbing heart as the father and son vanished into the trees, fading like the mist.

**Second Prize
Unrest
by Joshua Scribner**

“**W**hat is that!”

Coming into his dream, the scream of his wife was like an earthquake. Consciousness rushed in and he opened his eyes to see her sitting up in bed.

“Go away! Leave us alone!”

“Shh. Lay down. Go back to sleep.”

Her breath calmed a bit. She lay down and nestled into him. “It was terrible. There was something dancing in the window.”

He kissed her face and held her tight. “You’re just nervous because your boards are tomorrow. You’ll do fine.”

#

“Oh my God! Mitch! Mitch! Mitch!”

This time he opened his eyes to see her pressed against the headboard.

“Please go! Mitch, wake up!”

“I’m awake. It’s okay. Lay down. It’s just a dream.”

She eased away from the headboard.

“It was at the foot of the bed, an orange and green light. It looked like it was trying to take shape.”

“It will all be over soon. You aced the pretest. A few days from now we’ll be celebrating.”

She lay down.

#

The next time, she didn’t scream. She whimpered loudly as she thrashed beneath the covers. He got an arm around her. She sunk long nails into that arm, nearly breaking skin.

“Calm down, Lib. You’re dreaming again.”

She stopped thrashing and pushed his arm away.

“I felt an arm grab me.”

“My arm?”

“No, from the other side. It was so cold.”

Mitch got up.

“Please, don’t go! Stay with me!”

“I’m going to get you some chamomile tea and a sleeping pill. You have to be rested for tomorrow.”

“Mitch. We both know I could pass my boards with half my brain. Please, don’t leave the room!”

He knew she was right. He got back in bed.

#

She did not wake again that night. The alarm went off the next morning and he went to make them coffee. Gone were many things, including the plasma television, both their laptops and his wallet. The locks on the back door were broken. There was a note on the kitchen table.

In case you have any questions: The first time you started to wake, I sent a demon to the window. The second time, I set one at the foot of the bed. The third time, I placed it on the bedside. My demons can only be sensed at certain levels of consciousness, and they can’t actually hurt you, but they make for wonderful distractions while I move around your house. I heard your steps the last time, but you never left the room. That’s why you’re alive. Congratulations, you’ve passed the first test. Now on to part two, which is just as critical but very simple: Speak of this to no one, and I will never come back. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

The Cat Burglar.

Third Prize

The Horns of Elfland

by Valerie Estelle Frankel

I heard the horns of Elfland piping over the hill, cloaked in soft scents of mist and fountaining spray. There, at the base of Vernal Falls, Yosemite, with its bath of shifting rainbows, my mind felt it could encompass the cosmos. On one side, the grassy meadow pillowing me in the open-faced smiles of purple petals. On the other, crashing whiteness. My eyelids drifted down onto my cheeks. I treasured these moments beyond all others, when the gentle fingers of inspiration tickled into my mind. Unseeing, I slid my ever-present green notebook from its separate pouch of my shoulder bag and sat, cross-legged on the grass. Antique pen poised over the paper, I opened my mind to whatever glimpses from the other world might trickle close.

“Sweet Thomas, open your eyes.”

My eyes burst open at the intrusive voice; it seeped over me warm as soft sunlight in a gentle invasion of my craft. My mind clung frantically to the fairy outline of my story, unwilling to squander it to a chance comment. Yet somehow, the humid creative energy eluding me in the corners of my mind lingered. Inspiration swelled within me, widening until I wobbled drunkenly on the joy of it, a celebration like fermented honey, bubbly and unguessably sweet. I gazed up at my beautiful intruder.

You stood on the hill of summer grass, the blades sopping. I remember, your gown glowed so greenly that the glare of grass blushed and faded away beside it. Your eyes were even more emerald than your finery, telling tales of thousands of years of hay-scented grass and glorious golden leaves and flawless sunsets. Your hair haloed you in heavenly gold, the unearthly sun in all its splendor. I bowed my head.

“So, Thomas, I see you recognize me.”

“Who could not?” I said, rising to the occasion. I was a storyteller; surely, I thought, I could please anyone, even you. “For thousands of years, men have dreamed of you, sacrificed to you above all their pagan gods. You are Nature and you are Fairie. You appear over and over in my stories and visions, bursting like a shock of silver lightning slicing the sky. And so I honor you.”

Your first finger brushed my lips, and I felt as if sweet water had flowed from its tender tip, quenching the desperate thirst that choked me. Your fairy eyes dazzled me with their greenness. “You can do me more honor still, and follow the chance of a thousand lifetimes,” you said, voice sweet as a silver bell. “Come with me. Follow me to Fairie.”

I gazed at the world encircling us, faded beside your beauty and yet still standing brown and strong, the human world I had cherished for so long. The scents of sharp acorns and dusty bark encompassed me. “You honor me, madam, but how could I abandon this life, even for a chance at greatness?”

Your eyes flashed darker, emeralds ready to burst into crimson flames. “You're no bard on earth, only a simple teaser of words, a poet to prattle at public events. Follow me, and devote your body to inspiration, as you have your heart. Follow me and know the wine of poets and the dances of bards. Rhyme for me and serve me as another Thomas did long ago.

I knew this tale. Seven years of perfection, my mind flooded day and night by inspiration. And then all would vanish, leaving me forever broken, empty of my purpose for living.

Such a price! I opened my mouth, challenging the one woman who had never been challenged, who was beauty and nature and poetry and all things wrapped together, the soul I had devoted my life to without knowing. “My queen, True Thomas spent seven years in your world, and then returned to ours, tongue-bound so that he could never lie. He was your lover and slave, but he left Fairie changed forever.”

You tilted your golden head. “Truth is a gift we give artists, to purify their craft. You will not find it onerous.”

“But I tell stories of your world. Myths, legends, fantasies, wonders. Would you steal away my gift?”

“Never.” You leaned forward and kissed me, your breath like hot apricots. I clung to your soft shoulders, to your perfect lips, unwilling and unable to part from you. I remember, you pulled away, gently, gently. The brush of your lips lay between us, sealing our bargain. “Those legends that you tell are the truest of all. Now come away with me, embrace the purity of your gift.”

In a Joycean epiphany, I saw. To you, all stories and visions were true. Like True Thomas of the legend, I would return home unable to lie, but I would still tell tales and craft wonders. The struggle between craft and desire was only that of surrender.

I did not look back. How could I, feeling your hands on mine, lips still tasting of sunlight like crystallized honey? You were a greater truth than the brown grass and pounding, steady waterfall. You were song itself. And no singer could refuse his song's summons.

You swept me up behind yourself on your white horse, both of us surrounded by gold and silver bells tinkling like raindrops in the air of summer. Wind soft as heated pillows pressed against my face as we rode to the East, towards the sun. And so I tell you this first of my tales here, before your banquet table laden with figs and olives. In the future, I shall spin stories of marvels that seem myth to you, of flying through clouds on spreading silver wings and speaking across a continent as if the hearer stands a handclasp away. But I imagine now, my queen, that this will be your favorite, the real tale of how I chased the horns of Elfland and discovered the truth behind my dreams.

Fourth Prize The Presonic Man by Ahmed A. Khan

What would you have done if you were in my shoes?

It happened suddenly. One night, I had gone to sleep, a normal man. The next morning I got up, a thoroughly abnormal individual.

At that time, I was a moderately well-to-do writer. I had no living relatives and lived alone in my apartment.

That morning, I switched on the TV. A cartoon was being shown but the sound I heard was not the sound of a cartoon but of news being read. Was something wrong with the TV? Had two channels somehow got mixed up? Then I heard the news reader announce the date. I sat bolt-upright. How could it be the 25th of May, today? Yesterday, when I had gone to sleep, it had been the 20th. What was going on? Had I slept for four days – a modern day Rip Van Winkle? I ran outside, picked up the newspaper lying on my doorstep and looked at the date. Twenty first of May.

So, after all, I had not slept for four days.

That was just the beginning. That whole day, I kept hearing voices: Voices of my friends, my neighbors, the voice of my sweet heart, and my own voice. What was going on? Was I going mad? But there was no insanity in the voices I heard.

I thought hard, struggling against a rising sense of panic. Slowly, almost shyly, a tiny idea raised its head. I had a hypothesis. It was fantastic. Nevertheless, I decided to test it.

Next morning, I switched on the television. Once again, the picture on the tube didn't match the sounds. I heard the date being announced, and it was the twenty sixth of May. Hypothesis proved!

No matter how fantastic, it was probably true. My sense of hearing had extended four days and a couple of hours into the future.

First, I went into panic. Then, recovering, I quietly sat at my writing table for hours, mentally working out the ramifications of my condition. There were various things, big and small, to take care of. For instance, if someone rang the doorbell, I wouldn't hear it. I had to have some kind of visual indication for it. Then there was the phone. This was one instrument that would become almost totally useless to me. And what about conversation with people? I could talk to them and they would hear me but when they talked, I would have heard it four days ago. How then to have a coherent conversation? The only solution was to tell everyone that I had gone totally deaf. Let them communicate with me via writing or sign language.

And life went on with all its strangeness.

My pre-sonic condition had its advantages. I made it a habit of hearing the business news bulletins on the TV, and armed with advance knowledge of the market, I started playing the stocks. Inevitably my income became healthier and healthier. In turn, I became quite a philanthropist and had no end of fun.

No one knew about my abnormality till I heard himself telling my sweetheart about it and didn't hear her scream or panic. So four days later, I did tell her about it and she, after a brief adjustment period, accepted it and said so in writing.

And one day, I wrote a note to her, asking her to marry me. She accepted and soon we became man and wife and lived happily for quite some time...

...till the time – yesterday - that I heard my wife crying with grief. And this grief was over my death.

I immediately got busy straightening out my things, preparing my will, loving and cherishing my wife.

Today, I heard my friends come to bury me.

And then my world went dead silent for some time.

And then I heard a terrible voice say: "Who is your God?"

And now I have three days to find the correct answer to that question.

Fifth Place
It Came With The House
by Joshua Scribner

“What’s wrong, Lannie?”

“Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“Because, I can read you like a book.”

“And here I thought I was more complex than The Cat in the Hat.”

“Very funny. Now tell me what’s wrong.”

“You have to see.”

Isaac joined his wife at the big window.

“Looks like an old woman walking down the street,” he said.

“Yes, but look how she walks with her hand cupped in front of her, like she’s holding something. And I’ve seen her move her mouth like she’s talking to herself.”

“So. She’s probably senile.”

“So, we just moved here and I’ve already spotted a nut job.”

“It’s still a nice neighborhood. There are only four other houses on the cul-de-sac, and there’s obviously a lot of money.”

“You’re equating financial wellbeing with sanity.”

“Yeah, well, just give it a night or two before we put the house we just bought up for sale.”

#

“You’re awake aren’t you, Lannie?”

“No, I’m testing to see if I’m able to answer questions while unconscious.”

“You’re lucky you’ve got that round booty, because I sure didn’t marry you for your sense of humor. So you want to tell me what’s bothering you?”

“That sound.”

“What sound?”

“The sound that can only be heard by husbands who listen carefully.”

Seconds later, holding his breath, he heard what she was talking about.

“It sounds like scratching.”

“I knew you’d get there eventually.”

Isaac got up.

“Where are you going?”

“To check it out. It’s probably a squirrel or a cat in the crawlspace.”

“Be careful, and if it comes to a battle of wits, you’d better come get me.”

Isaac left her in the bed. He was downstairs before he heard her moving upstairs. She came down holding a tennis racket.

“Here, take this and be the brawn. I’ll be the other part of that combo.”

He took the racket with a sigh. They both went into the laundry room.

“It’s scratching on the crawlspace door,” Isaac said. “I’m going to open it.”

“I’m right behind you, just seven feet away, halfway out the door.”

“I knew I could count on you.”

The door was on the upper part of the wall. Isaac positioned the racket so he could trap the creature should it attack. The scratching stopped. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open. He reached inside and flipped on the light.

“Do you see it?”

“No.”

“Is it hiding?”

“I don’t know where it could hide. There’re just the pipes and a bunch of little rocks on the floor.”

“Let’s go back to bed.”

“Isaac!”

He shot up in bed.

“What?”

“Someone’s here! I heard them moving around!”

Half dazed, half freaked, he got out of bed and grabbed his pistol from the closet.

“Wait here,” he said.

“You’ve talked me into it.”

He went in every room, turned on the lights and looked around. He returned to bed.

“I checked everything. All the windows and doors are shut and locked. No one could have gotten in without setting off the alarm.”

“Did you check downstairs?”

“Of course. The crawlspace door was open, but I probably didn’t shut it all the way last time. Besides, the only access to the crawlspace is from inside.”

“Bull! Critters can obviously get in and out.”

“Well, unless we have a critter-sized burglar, we’re safe.”

#

The first irrational thought to come was that his wife was breathing funny. The second irrational thought was that it was early for Bolt to be awake. Then he felt the pain of his wife pinching him and heard her shrill voice.

“Wake up!”

Quick steps moved away. He then remembered his wife never panted and that Bolt, his childhood dog, died ten years ago.

“Did you hear that?” Lannie asked.

“The panting?”

“Yes. And then it ran away.”

Isaac got up again. Again, he got his gun. He went through the house flipping on lights and looking behind things. He knew it had to be here. He and Lannie couldn't have both heard the same thing and it not be real. He was downstairs, looking in the laundry room, when Lannie called from the top of the stairs.

"Somebody's at the door."

Isaac rushed to the top of the stairs, where he heard the next knocks at the front door.

"Do you think we should call the police?" Lannie asked.

"Let me see who it is first."

Isaac walked to the front door and looked out the peephole. Recognizing the figure in the porch light, he spoke through the door.

"Mr. Bingham?"

"Yes. I saw your lights were on and thought I knew why. Let me in, and I can help."

Mr. Bingham had introduced himself when they were unloading things into the new house. He seemed very kind and trustworthy.

Isaac opened the door.

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way, but if I'd told you up front you would have gone telling people the crazy story your neighbor told you, and we like to keep them secret. You see, they get us things."

"Things?"

"Yes, lost things, forgotten things, valuable things. And they're easy to take care of. You just have to walk them once or twice a day."

"Please start making sense," Lannie said from behind Isaac.

Mr. Bingham sighed. "There was this boy who lived on the street who walked everybody's dogs. One day, a truck ran onto the sidewalk and . . ."

Mr. Bingham stopped and grimaced. He pushed open hands forward.

"Take this."

Isaac hesitated, then said, "Your hands are empty."

"No, they're not. You'll have to trust me."

"Go ahead," Lannie said. "Empty space can't hurt you."

He reached forward and was stunned to touch something like a rope. He took the invisible item.

"Everyone in the neighborhood has one."

"What is it?"

"It's an invisible leash."

"What?"

"An invisible leash to walk your invisible dog."

Sixth Place
My Love Is Like ...
by Mari Mitchell

Lost in beauty, Thomas wandered off the path. The scent of the flowers was almost overwhelming as he took a rest in the cool shade under an old oak. To the side were copious amounts of creamy roses. Only the tips of the petals had a blush of color.

Thomas looked around the wild overgrown forest. "I've no idea where I am. At least it's a lovely spot to have lost one's way."

A soft breeze brought the words, "Thank you," as a woman stepped from behind the goliath tree. Her long white dress flowed in the wind, red hair aglow in the sunlight.

He straightened from a slouch, and sucked in his tummy. His words fell together, "Can you tell me where I am? I'm so lost."

She smiled. "I think of it as mine."

"Then you know where I am." He laughed a little trying to sound confident. "I mean, where we are." Too-casually, he straightened his shirt and tried to slick back his sandy hair.

"Yes, I do. You're in a lovely garden with me."

Thomas thought, 'Wow, she's into me.'

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "What's your name?"

"Lauren. What's yours?"

"Thomas Hunter. Do you live nearby? I drove up from Boston College for a break from studying. I pulled over and I started hiking . . ."

Lauren smiled as he rambled on, both listening and not. She broke in, "And you found my special place. Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, please."

She handed him a glass. "It's tea. My own blend."

A little taken aback, he took the glass from her hand. Lauren stroked his fingers in a gentle, inviting manner.

"Thanks." He drank the tea that was cool as river water. "What kind is it?"

"Red tea. I use the petals."

He shook his head as he sipped more of the tea. Thomas sat back down, this time with less control. His body heavy.

Lauren ascended, the sun behind made her appear to be like an angel. "Tell me Thomas, did you study history at Boston College?" She mocked his Kennedy-Boston accent.

"Yes. History is my minor. I am majoring in . . ."

"Hush."

Thomas stopped in mid-sentence. His eyes shut.

"It is time for you to listen. Somewhere in pages of your textbooks there must have been a mention of local history? After all, Massachusetts is full of history. History full of blood and tears." Her voice echoed and changed in tone, no longer soft and sexy but full of contempt.

He thought he shook his head but could not be sure.

"It was here, in the year 1692, when William Hunter, your ancestor, came to me and spoke words of love. When I paid his sweet words heed, and gave into the wants of flesh, I found myself with child."

In his mind the story unfolded as she spoke, the surrounding morphed into the past.

"Nay, it did not please Master Hunter to hear thy words, for he had promised to marry Sarah Putnam. I shall make haste and speak to the Reverend Parris, and he will see thy sins. Thy good name will be muddied by thy lies and ill deeds."

"Nay, it was thou who cast a spell. It was thy sins. I did confess my earthly sins and was forgiven."

"I am no witch. I cast no spell on thee. If thou wert forgiven, it was by a greedy, lustful man. Surely not by God."

Lauren, laden with child, tried to leave her small cottage but William would not let her. Two massive hands that once stroked her red hair held it tight and dragged her outside. Hands that once caressed her alabaster skin now tore at it like a wild beast.

Thomas felt what Lauren had endured, every strike was his to share, every pain his.

William grabbed her broken body and threw it upon the roses she loved so much. Roses her mother had brought over, a connection to her family roots. Roses that she tended to so lovingly.

Lauren lie on her bed of roses, weeping bitter bloody tears. Sharp thorns impaled her soft skin, entangled her red hair, embraced her pain.

"I call upon Lucifer, Lord of Darkness, hear thy prayer. Grant thee revenge and thy I will serve forever."

The woods surrounding her garden lit with fire, as a dark man appeared before Lauren.

"Rise and forever remain and claim your revenge."

#

Thomas's eyes opened. The world was dark but Lauren was ablaze. Her body no longer desirable but broken, and bloodied.

"To each generation, one of William's descendants, the one holding the most promise finds his way here and to my roses." She said as she stroked a blossom. "Love is like roses. Sweet and lovely, but only for a short time, though thy thorns are always sharp."

With that the roses took off like vampire bats into the night sky, filling the air with their heavy sweet scent. One creamy white blossom dove at him and struck him on the cheek, drawing blood. The petals tipped with blood, Thomas's blood.

"Thy children are thirsty. Tis been twenty long years since last they drank."

"Please, I did nothing."

Like madding snow, a flurry of white blooms whirled above Thomas, descending, biting with thorns, petals partaking of blood.

She smiled her cat-smile. "Thy blood carries sin and my children must have nourishment." Her deep brown eyes glinted with an inner fire.

The last of the thirsty roses struck taking Thomas blood and life.

Lauren laid herself in the cool dark earth under her roses, waiting for the next generation to arrive. The rose's roots lovingly embrace her, as a forest of strong stems stood--an edifice of secrets, sharp thorns guarding, green leaves flirting with the breeze, as creamy white roses sing lullabies of love. . .

Seventh Place Silver As The Night by Lyn C.A. Gardner

Bob ushered his visitor to a chair, took his place behind the desk, folding French-cuffed arms on slick mahogany. The kid looked like a mongrel--torn T-shirt with rust-colored stains, the shirt's worn image of a shaggy rock star a princely contrast to the boy's own shocked and fire-singed hair. A soot-blotch like a handprint marked one cheek. The boy's hand shook as he took the glass of water. He held it in both hands, his face alight with simple gratitude that was painful to see.

Bob said gently, "So you're William Hartman."

"You've heard of me?"

"Officer Taylor offered to vouch for you if I'd let you in. That's rare, in my experience. I'm normally a bit more picky about who disturbs my clients. Mind telling me why you're interested?"

The kid held the water between his knees, faded black jeans whose grass and earth stains were all too visible, as if he'd been sleeping on a newly turned mound. He took a deep breath, his pale eyes fixed dead on, his voice low and intense. "I have a deep philosophical appreciation of the ways of death."

"The ways of death," Bob murmured, feeling an odd twinge in his gut like the onset of flu, a malaise he sometimes got on days that were particularly bad, when more deaths came than the mortuary could handle, condolences offered until his own eyes were leaking, stinging for relief. He had never been able to see it as pure business. Hearing about the lives of the dead, hearing their stories, he had never been able to forget that they were people. Particularly at night, when most everyone had gone home, the corridors and sitting rooms darkened, suites identifiable by the differing scent of the flowers . . . by the whispering of the folks who stayed behind when all the mourners had gone home.

Carefully, he asked the boy, "Would you care to explain just what, exactly, this appreciation has to do with those in my care?"

Will rose hastily, the chair skittering backward, the drink splashing his hand. "Better than that. I can show you. Take me to your newest arrival. I'll bet she came in looking as though she had all the life sucked out of her. Gray. So thin you want to cry. After I'm through, death will rest on her like the lightest blossom, enhancing her beauty, till you'd swear she was alive."

Bob hesitated. How did he know--how could he have known? The police had brought her, unknown, unclaimed, victim of no crime that could be discerned, dead most likely of the city's cold. Bob had a fund for the special ones, the ones it broke your heart to put into the ground unmourned. Officer Taylor had taken pity, seeing her broken-stemmed beauty like a blow to the throat, death through the eyes. That crushing weight in the chest in the presence of a dead child. The young. Those were the ones that hurt the most. The ones he could still hear crying in the darkness for their lost lives.

The boy bit his lip, digging blindly in his back pocket until he came up with a piece of paper, crumpled, yellow. He shaded his eyes--weariness? embarrassment?--as he handed it to Bob.

Bob glanced at it--Taylor's signature, and something more. "Waste no time." Intrigue fought misgivings; won. "We'll take the back entrance, through my office." Bob unlatched the door while Will took a long and noisy drink and left the glass on the edge of the desk. In the florescent light, dark fingerprints marked its transparent surface.

Three new guests waited, all women. So serene, so full of sorrow. He'd heard their stories, all but the newest one. She lay quietly, as though she were truly asleep. As Bob had watched her in the dimness, waiting for some sign, some word, he'd noticed the faintest movement beneath her eyelids, though her hand had been limp and lifeless as if her fingers were sculpted from snow.

Unerringly, Will walked to her side. Bob held his breath while the boy took her hand like an old friend, smoothing silky black bangs flat over her brow, above fine skin so translucent it glowed silver--delicate trace of nose, small blue lips. Will looked up at Bob, his face still as ashes, save that the eyes burned with life. "It's terribly painful, you know. Lonely. Like having your body squeezed out through a pin." Bob shivered, nodded, remembering tales he'd heard from reliable sources. He held still, watching the girl's blue-paper eyelids.

With sudden tears streaming down his face, Will snapped open a pocketknife and sliced along one wrist, holding his arm above the girl's mouth. A stream of silver flowed from his vein to glisten on her lips. "Come on, Muriel, it's time to wake up. We have to go home now."

The boy swayed. With a sudden rush of compassion, Bob moved to catch him, but someone else was quicker. Smooth as ice, the small limbs rose, arms clasping Will's chest while he buried his sobs in night-shining hair.

Bob's hands shook as he fumbled with the keys. His heart was leaping wildly with a freedom born of pain, born of joy. "Do you need a lift? I think I'd better join you."

Eighth Place
Bridge of No Return
by Randall A. Martin

The morning sun awakened Marci, and instinctively she reached across to the other side of their king-sized bed. Empty and cold. Robert must have slept on the couch again, she thought. The rat. She washed her face, checked her e-mail, and went downstairs. The couch was empty, too. She found the note he'd left on the kitchen table.

Dear Marci:

By the time you read this, I'll be out of your life forever. I know we tried to work things out, but now I realize we weren't meant to be.

Remember that fight we had a couple of months ago? You called me a Luddite because I didn't want to buy little Bobby the latest home computer with all the bells and whistles. I went to the woods to cool off, and to gather my thoughts. I was out hiking along the old fire trail that used to run between here and that old ghost town, Coal Camp. But I told you all that. This is the part you don't know.

That night, I realized you were right—I am old-fashioned. I don't need all the latest and greatest technology to be happy. Walking along, I started fantasizing about a simpler time.

I stayed out later than I'd planned, but the trail was well lit by the full moon. I came around a curve where I thought that dilapidated covered bridge was supposed to be, and it was there—but it was as new as the day it was built. A young woman in gingham stood on the far side of the bridge. She waved to me. "Is it you?" she called. Curious, I started across.

She yelled, "Don't come over!"

"Then you come across!" I replied.

"Meet me halfway," she offered.

So we met in the middle. We talked for hours. I know it sounds trite, but I felt as if we were soul mates. Then she kissed me. I knew I had to see her again.

"Come to me at the next full moon," she said, "but only if you're sincere." I promised her I would.

I went back to the spot again in daylight, and I swear, Marci, that bridge is in ruins. Last month, on the night of the full moon, I went back, and she was waiting—on a newly built bridge that smelled of sawdust. We talked for hours once more, and things were so easy with her, I knew I had to be with her forever. I tried to convince her to come with me, but she said she'd sworn not to cross past the halfway point. I promised to meet her again at the next full moon.

By now I've crossed the bridge to Coal Camp. But don't look for me there. Don't look for me at all. You see, she told me the year was 1908. If you must search, try looking for my headstone in the Coal Camp cemetery.

Sincerely,

Robert

P.S. You might tell little Bobby he probably has older nieces and nephews living across the creek.

Review of G.U.D. Magazine, issue#3 Greatest Uncommon Denominator Magazine (ISSN 1932-8222)

Reviewer: Susie Hawes

I opened my PDF issue of G.U.D., curious to see what Debbie Moorhouse, Kaolin Fire, Julia Berend, Sal Coraccio and Sue Miller had roped me into. The front cover showed some kind of bat-winged contraption, dismembered and displayed like an exhibit at the Smithsonian.

Greatest Uncommon Denominator. What's that suppose to mean?

Well, apparently, it means quality in writing, regardless of genre.

The stories in G.U.D. are a wondrous mixture of the strange, the chilling, the exciting and the hilarious, all served with a dash of poetic style and a plethora of beautifully rendered illustrations. That's the bottom line, folks; I loved this magazine.

"Caged in my hand, the downy chick sits still—
save for a heartbeat flutter on my palm...."

Wonderful! The first entry in the magazine, a poem by Beverly A. Jackson, whets the appetite. The first illustration, "Dragon and Gear", uses thick, bold lines to wed the sinuous with the stiffly mechanical. Wow.

The first story, "A Song, A Prayer, An Empty Space", by Darja Malcolm-Clarke, whisks us away to a sun-baked land bereft of the abundant touch of God. The people have to set their prayers into coins, and for the poor of the land how is that possible?

This magazine continues to flow through ideas, emotions and landscapes strange and familiar, using words, poetic images and illustrations to carry us along. It chills us, touches us and makes us laugh.

There are a few stories that don't quite jell. Tina Connolly's "Facts of Bone" is strong with emotion and imagery and her characters well developed, but the plot is a bit muddled. Alex Dally MacFarlane's "Chica, Let Me Tell You a Story" has a good voice, but it needs to be a bit longer to really set the tale.

Then you get a story like Chad Brian Henry's "Measurements." The choices faced by these characters will haunt you. "When he leans over it, she can see the vertebrae sticking out of his back like faces on a totem pole. They each look like they have their own expression, but they're all just variations of determination and despair."

Wonderful. Please pick this one up.

Contributors' Biographies

Aaron A. Polson:

Aaron A. Polson is an English teacher and affiliate member of the Horror Writer's Association. Recent examples of his short fiction can be seen in *Reflection's Edge* (March 2008), *Big Pulp* (May 2008), and *Firefox News* (April 2008), with forthcoming publications in several anthologies and magazines.

Joshua Scribner:

Joshua Scribner is the author of four published novels and over thirty published short stories. Up to date information on his work can be found at joshuascribner.com.

Valerie Estelle Frankel:

Though also a literature and writing professor at San Jose State University, Valerie Estelle Frankel has been an avid writer for the last ten years. She was the youngest person ever to receive a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing degree from San Jose State University. Her award-winning novel, *Henry Potty and the Pet Rock: An Unauthorized Harry Potter Parody* is now out in paperback. Meanwhile, Valerie's many short stories have appeared in the anthologies *Legends of the Pendragon*, *Rosebud Magazine*, *The Oklahoma Review*, and seventy other magazines and anthologies.

Ahmed A. Khan:

Ahmed A. Khan is a Canadian writer, originally from India. His works have appeared in *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Anotherrealm*, and many other magazines. He has edited two anthologies: "Fall and Rise" (<http://www.whortleberrypress.com>) and "SF Waxes Philosophical" (<http://www.zcbooks.ca>). He maintains a blog at <http://ahmedakhan.livejournal.com>.

Mari Mitchell:

Mari Mitchell lives in the high deserts of California. Some can be found on *Bewildering Tales*, *Twisted Tongues*, and other on-line zines. Her tale "Alice in Ink" was chosen as Editor's Choice in *Grim Graffiti* of 1/08. She has two stories that will be featured in upcoming podcast on *Drabblecast* and will have a story in *Chimeraworld* #5.

Lyn C.A. Gardner:

With master's degrees in English literature and library science, Lyn C.A. Gardner has been editor at a private maritime museum and cataloger at a public library. Some of Lyn's stories have appeared in *Best of the Rest 2*, *Challenging Destiny*, *The Doom of Camelot*, *Gothic.net*, *Horror Garage*, *The Leading Edge*, and *Legends of the Pendragon*. <http://www.gardnercastle.com>

Randall A. Martin:

Randall A. Martin is current President of District One of the Kansas Authors' Club. His flash fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, and his short stories won Second Place and Honorable Mention in the 1st Annual Kansas Writers' Association's Scene of the Crime Competition in 2006. He has earned both a BA in East Asian Languages and Cultures and an MA in Education from Kansas University. A former adjunct instructor, he taught English as a second language for five years and Japanese for two years. He is working full-time as a technical editor while pursuing a BA in creative writing. He lives in Topeka, Kansas with his wife, Linda and their cat, Rosie.

Whispering Spirits Digital Magazine
<http://klik.to/whisperingspirits>
<http://www.whisperingghosts.com>
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Published by:
DCH Design and Publications
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PO Box 245
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