

Once upon a time



Red Wolf Journal

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Irene Toh and Tawnya Smith,
editors

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ONCE UPON A TIME

Welcome to the Red Wolf Journal Summer 2015 Issue 6.

Poems are stories. As if you didn't already know. But the stories are eclipsed in shadow so you only get half or a quarter of it. The half or quarter carries the weight of the whole. The best poems inscribe a mood through observed, almost incidental, details. The surface details and action delineate feelings. Feelings are the real deal. Stories are steeped in mystery and enchantment as the title of this volume suggests. They prescribe a path, a journey, a quest because stuff happens. Bad stuff. The reader is hooked. Does the story hold out a promise of the happy ending? The human story is ultimately, to me, a quest for identity (Who am I? What is my place in the universe? What is the meaning of this universe?), which is why the reader is vested in the experience of its telling. It seems a grandiose thing to ponder. It, in fact, is an everyday thing. An experiential thing. In a good poem there is transformation by the time you get to the end of it. The mundane can be pretty epic. Anything can be a story. Whether or not life is a fairy tale, I just like to believe that the best poems tell a love story. It's as if we depend on stories to save us. It is love that saves us. It is we who save each other.

So you tell us a story in a poem. Rather than tell the whole story, your poem pivots on a lyrical moment-- let the delicate rendering of a moment tell a story. "Once upon a time" might as well mean "once upon a moment". Sometimes the poem is the story. What does the act of fictionalizing do? It either transcribes a reality that's out there, or it creates a reality that doesn't exist out there. That only you and your reader knows. Now isn't that just fabulous? Now it doesn't have to be clear-cut at all. Fantasy does, in truth, intrude into reality (we all daydream don't we?) and the best poems also play on the idea of rupturing ordinary reality. Story, it turns out, is the reality we create.

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“We’re all stories, in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?”
—The Doctor, Season 5, Episode 13, *Dr Who*

Revealed

by Marilyn Braendeholm

I stood by the waves, they stooped white
with foam, their crest
flecking midday
sun, stars of cool
sea caught on breeze, and not a cloud
specked the sky, not
a gull, nor jib blown.
The day shimmered
brighter than song. And I stood there,
bone-tired, and
to me—nothing
was sorrowful.

Process notes: After a very unpleasant day, I stood at the end of Eastbourne pier, and felt refreshed by the sea breeze. This poem form is a “Minute Poem” – a total of 60 syllables. Sometimes it only takes a minute to find yourself again.

Marilyn ‘Misky’ Braendeholm lives in the UK surrounded by flowers, grapevines, bubbling pots of sourdough starter, and always keeps dog biscuits in her pocket for her blind Springer Spaniel. She never buys clothing without pockets. Her work is published by *Waterways Journal*, *Gnarled Oak*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Curio Poetry*, Mouse Tales Press, three international print anthologies, and placed in the top 5 Writers’ Digest Chapbook Challenge twice. She blogs at The Chalk Hills Journal.

the old man and the parakeet

by Gabrielle Bryden

the parakeet squawks dis-ease
the owner is rusty and the cage old
the door is full and the bowl is open
the newspaper is stale and seed corrupt
the wings are cracked and the beak is clipped

the old man moans his shrinking world
the parakeet is mouldy and the house is deaf
the door is empty and the plate is closed
the phone is loud and the parakeet mute
the pain is not working and the drugs flare

it's time said the parakeet to the old man

A dive so deep

by Gabrielle Bryden

on that unbearably hot day,
humid air visibly simmering,
dark blue water summoning,
summer weariness and nothing to lose.

Who hasn't dreamt of the deep dive,
where we are too deep to resurface,
too deep for unaccustomed lungs –
sinking fast to the bottom,
like a dropped anchor,
trying to make our way back to the top,
toward that world we are supposed to live in,
aching arms pressing though heavy water,
waking in gasps as the air runs out.

The great realisation
on waking from a dream,
you have a second chance.

Gabrielle Bryden is an Australian poet published in a range of anthologies; print and online journals; and on Local and National ABC Radio. She has been published in Australia, the USA and the UK. In 1999 she won first prize in the Ripple's Magazine poetry competition. Blogs at <https://gabriellebryden.wordpress.com/>

Small Bird

By Dah

Snow scatters the ground
In a field of ice
a small bird's frozen corpse

What else can be said about
a dead bird
I love you and I am sorry?

In this cold
hands are useless

In this cold
death's precise exhale

Make a note of this on a yellow Post-it
stick it to a mirror

then look away

you are gone

Chair

By Dah

Sunlight swells into buildings
rolls over my feet
gets trapped under my soles
and at this moment
there is nothing more to say

When you rose to leave
your skirt
made the sound of a bird
caught in my hands

In the distance your silhouette
dark, then gray, then
birds landing on a statue
make the sound of your skirt leaving

Overhead a low jet noise
I say something
but cannot hear myself
and across the table
your chair
is the emptiness left behind

Misdirection

By Dah

Sometimes the gray sun
is like dry rain
other times an old bone

Sometimes there is a whisper
from the inner-ear, a drag
of words announcing a profusion
of discontent

There are times I wear sadness
like deep sleep
so rising into the day
creates a storm that places its mouth
over my ears
and blows cold wind
to produce a melodramatic silence

Some days I hold tightly
to the quiet that surrounds me
and listen to the dead
for they have much to say
about unfinished lives

Beneath the fog's tarp
the moisture is a wet parachute
undulating in the air
and the light's eye
has rolled back into its skull

Sometimes I ask out loud
What is the point?

but my thoughts are
discombobulated, misdirected
and I wait for a voice to answer
but there are so many
that I cannot separate them
yet, somebody inside knows who I am
and keeps laughing and laughing

Dah is the author of three books of poetry from Stillpoint Books. His fourth book, *The Translator*, will be published by Transcendent Zero Press in the summer of 2015. Dah lives in Berkeley, California, and is working on the manuscripts for his fifth and sixth poetry collections. He blogs at Words Of Dahlusion.

Before We Left For California

by Christopher Hileman

The sounds of your hands
on the pots, on the wide pans
tell me supper's near
and that's a good thing
I think, and so does the dog.
The cat's as always
aloof and even
haughty as if she cares not
at all but the bird
count is up lately.
We know she will dine with us.

So I grab your ass,
slide up to the small
of your back with my right hand,
fingers widely spread,
and with my left, take
you to me, whirling as if
we cannot collide
with the rest of it,
all the financials that suck
the life out of us.

Wooden Head

by Christopher Hileman

I wanted to be
a real boy way back then
and got my damn wish.
I fell for you hard,
skinned in seventeen places
scabbed and sore, torn up.
Had I stayed in wood
there would have been bashed edges
and splintered corners
but no bloody skin –
you ran from me just the same.
You grabbed my heart, tore
it out of my chest
and it shattered as if wood
into twelve pieces.

Christopher Hileman moved to Oregon in 1973. He has retired to live on the volcanic bluff overlooking Willamette Falls in Oregon City, Oregon. He ascends the stairs from his basement digs to improvise on his Yamaha keyboard or the house Playel grand when the calico cat releases him from below. The part-Irish Wolfhound here likes him.

Graduation

by Annette Ozolins

No one gets out alive
On and on and on and on
Moving into adulthood, in his own right, attached to a screen, in love—the third of
her kind—pretty and funny and not so bright
Their bodies into orbit at every close encounter
They are a tribe now
Touching one another, languid and confident
gossip of who banged who, who did who
I wish to impart some sort of something
To him, to them—subtle or overt—but age and indifference and criticism and
misunderstanding get in the way

My breast hurts

A reminder that Life with a capital L is not forever
There's only one space and time continuum and I am on it
So are you
He is too, all of us, whether we like or not, know it or not, we are involved

There was a season to listen to voices other than our own
But that season has gone
We can no longer pretend the Mother of all mothers is invincible
We can no longer pretend

What if? How? I can't. I will. One day.

None of that exists

It is time to fly or drop to our knees and never arise
Either way there is no time for anything else

Annette's Process notes: "Graduation" is a piece about time and aging and mothering and letting go. While attending graduations, from high school, college, even middle school, one begins to use these passages as a time for reflection. The

poem came out of one such moment. While watching high school students at their graduation party, huddled in the corner, completely self-contained, gossiping and enjoying each other's company, it was clear that the adults, me included, were left out of these exchanges. Perhaps this is rightly so, each generation leaves the next generation behind, but it did illustrate the divide which happens over time between children and parents. It also illustrates what happens with time in general: Time moves on. It waits for no one. There is only now to do and be what we dream of.

Annette Ozolins is a filmmaker and actress with an education in Women's Studies and Philosophy from Duke University. She was a founding member of The Downtown Playhouse in Los Angeles and has worked with activists, writers and directors such as Mike White (Enlightened, School of Rock), Luis Alfaro (Bitter Homes & Gardens, Black Butterfly) and Miguel Arteta (Star Maps, Six Feet Under). She produced the award-winning indie movie (www.perfectionthemovie.com) which highlights the contradictions between self-injury (a mostly hidden and shameful activity) and plastic surgery (a socially acceptable form of cutting and disfigurement). The movie was awarded the Adrienne Shelly Award for Female Filmmakers.

140,000,000 Miles Away

by Alan Toltzis

Towards the summit a thousand times taller
than anything it climbed before,
Spirit trudged upward

hurtling data home for sals on end
where it assembled into landscapes—
postcards from a world I'll never enter.

It shifts into reverse
converting its stuck wheel
from anchor to harrow.

A track becomes a furrow
revealing a stripe of white and yellow crystals
gleaming a few inches below red dirt.

Once upon a time
they dissolved
in water that overflowed lakebeds
or meandered through
banked and deep river valleys.
Water ran swiftly etching the bedrock.

Here the task is harder:
look deeply and learn
the true nature of trees,
judge the strength
and weakness of people,
feel the promise of the land,

while squinting into the glare
of proximity
just beyond the horizon.

Process note: Sometimes it's easier to explore dispassionately without bringing your self in. The poem compares the experience of the Mars Rover, Spirit to our own experience closer to home. The word "sol" (pronounced "soul") is a Martian day, which is little longer than a day on Earth.

Noah

by Alan Toltzis

It was a sublime deal
sealed with a rainbow
flexed across the sky and through the clouds.
No pressure, but what's next?
Noah got drunk.

Because, how do you get up,
scratch yourself, piss,
make coffee, kiss
the wife and kids and
just get on with it?

While nature continues, nonplussed,
we are left with just
the ordinary,
unrelenting, pick-up-a-loaf-of-bread,
grind-it-out, and don't-forget-the-milk kind of stuff.

As sure as that 6:52
sunrise
bestows the tragedy of another everyday sorrow
upon us,
we brace ourselves,
ready again to be heroes.

Process note: The ancient Greeks knew audiences needed a release after the intensity of drama and their playwrights wrote plays as a 4-part series: a dramatic trilogy and then a fourth play—the tragic-comic satyr play. But that need for release after heroic and tragic events can be traced much earlier, to the story of Noah. My poem looks at the Biblical event that happens immediately after the flood and how that connects with modern day life.

Alan Toltzis lives and writes in Bucks County, PA where he is working on a book of poems that are modern expressions of our relationship with God and the world around us. His poems have been published in print and online publications including *Focus Midwest*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Jewish Literary Journal*, *Soul-Lit*, and the upcoming issue of *Poetica*.

mantle

by Richard Walker

I'd be strong,
I'd save people,

But there would be times
when I'd fly just to be alone

My cape flapping gently
in the stratosphere

Above the clouds
above the noise

Quiet and stillness
just for me

So I could go back
and continue to be strong

Process notes: This poem was inspired by a prompt from Poetic Bloomings: “and sometimes I wear a cape.” This is my take on what introversion might look like in a super hero.

Richard Walker is a teacher in a public elementary school in the San Francisco Bay Area; this is his calling and vocation. He writes poems and novels; that also is a calling, his avocation. He blogs at [Sadly Waiting for Recess](#).