

Firefly Magazine

IV



A Journal of Luminous Writing



Spirit Trees | *Judy Wood*

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The Artists

POETRY



Featured Poem

SOMETIMES A GIRL IS A BROKEN WHEEL | *Rebecca Jensen*

She is a splinter resting in the soft space
in the socket of the eye,
staring at herself
in the cracking plastic
of a train window
and trying not to blink.

Dream-cradled,
she is a sparrow, a chestnut, a football, a whisper.
One arm around her waist, the other
webbed in her hair.

She is awake and alive and spinning and
falling.
Her eyes are orbs, thumbtacks
pressed into the window-pane.
Sometimes a girl is a broken wheel.

RESIDUE FROM A PREVIOUS LIFE | *Rebecca Jensen*

You remember
those puckered prints she left
on wasted smokes,
her cigarette butts sizzling and dying
in your bathroom sink.

She sucked on orange rinds
to cover the smell,
the fruit-flesh catching
in her ochre-stained teeth.

You used to watch her
from the doorway,
her lipstick kissing her fingertips clean.

THE TWO OF US ARE MADE OF MATTER | *Rebecca Jensen*

You chipped your front tooth
at the airport, on a metal handrail.
The missing chip is forever lost to you.

I press my fingers into the bruising indents
and trace the circle of saliva you left on my forearm,
throbbing and shining and throbbing.

Your bite remains. Pulsing,
growing in time with the seed
nesting in the pit of the stomach.
Words are dust in my mouth.

FLASH FICTION



Featured Flash

BLEACHED CRAB | *Nod Ghosh*

The weight of my body pressed down on me. A pendulum. A keel.

The gelatinous sacks of my lungs weighted my spine. Unseen rib-bones formed arches that threatened to collapse at the slightest provocation. My legs had become dust overnight, inert beams that extended from a leaden torso, impervious to my commands.

Inert as stone, on the threshold of death, I searched for memories before I forgot who I was.

I've danced on the beaches of Ta'akora. I've led sheep and goats onto the steppe in the summer rain.

I've embraced a rival sibling at the birth of a long awaited brother.

The ghost of a priest has visited me on a train from Kolkata to Dehradun.

I've gazed into the eyes of my new bride and waltzed between tables draped in gauze.

I've been lost in the Atlas Mountains. The summons of jungle fowl has led me to a knife-drop ledge, where the call of a small dog saved me from death's jaws.

I've baked in the sun alongside a bleached crab and stared into its empty carapace, alone, entangled.

I've loved a child who wasn't my own.

And I'll die in the comfort of my own bed. The life ebbs out of me, as my heart pumps blood through the rift in my body, as my heart pumps blood through until it – is – all –

SHORT STORIES



Featured Short

THE SIGN | *Craig Jordan-Baker*

Before they are hanged, they all claim that God has forgiven them. Then, by our laws as well as our pious fear, we are required to halt the execution, for a short time.

The Warden-Chief then has to ask if they are telling the truth. The prisoner always says yes, they have been forgiven by God. If this is so, the Warden-Chief has to say, we require a sign from God that you have been forgiven your crimes. If this sign comes, you will be released with all the blessings we can offer. And so, the Warden-Chief then picks out his silver pocket-watch, and waits.

One man once claimed that he could not cry, and that this was a sign. For how could one not cry at such a terrible predicament as his? Another cried sharp tears and then claimed that this was a sign, for he had never cried before, not since he was first bugged as a boy.

Both of these men hanged.

One man who claimed he had been forgiven was abstractly looking into the yellow sky, when a black-backed Gull shat upon the Warden-Chief's hat. Spires of hope leapt into the prisoner's eyes and he shouted that this was a sign, that he had been forgiven. The Warden-Chief shook his head and snapped his silver watch shut.

One man once said, when the Warden-Chief had closed the watch and was waving the hangman over, that the fact nothing had happened was a sign, a sure sign. All the Wardens laughed then, but the prisoner said this was a sign because he was the first man not to pick out some silly thing as confirmation of God's infinite grace. He had not claimed the fresh wind was a sign, or the fact his stomach was cramped or that the sky was especially bright or dark today, or that

the sand of the prison courtyard coarser or smoother than usual. There was a pause then, for the idea had not occurred to anyone.

Though he still met the scaffold, the trapdoor and the empty space.

There was one man though, that I remember best of all, during my time. A murderer. He had been collecting for a veteran's charity and had killed his wife's brother for refusing to donate. At the trial, he stood, his white-shirted chest stuck out in the mahogany dock and said that he would do the same again for men who had split blood for their country. He admitted, he said, sticking a shiv into the unpatriotic mouth of his brother-in-law, to teach him what split blood meant.

This man had attracted more sympathy than usual and the veteran's charity had even agreed to cover some solicitor's fees. Though, after a battle with the leviathan of precedence, the man was condemned. For our laws tell us that murder is murder.

It was a warm morning when we stood with him in the courtyard of gritty sand. The hangman leaned on his little shed by the south wall and smoked a cigarette. As usual, the Warden-Chief turned to the condemned man to ask if he had anything to say. And like them all, the man claimed God had forgiven him and yes, he was telling the truth. The Warden-Chief cleared his throat and as usual, the silver pocket-watch was opened. We waited for the sign.

At first we felt nothing; we let out the occasional cough and sniff, as we were wont to do. We looked to the gritty ground and then to the granite mess hall across the yard.

It came first as a sound from the south, a kind of brassy buzz that could have been a train or a tortured marching band. The sound gradually bloated and then, the movement began. On the ground between our brogues, the sand hopped and jiggered and the warmth in the air, died. Slowly, the prisoner turned his head to the sky. We looked to one another now, to our uniforms, our batons, to the Warden-Chief, looking for a signal to guide our action, a rule to point our way.

In the cacophony, the ground flexed and janked and the prisoner crashed over, his bound hands unable to break his fall. Wardens tumbled down with him and he cried out, not from pain, but in a kind of animal triumph: A wheezing, raw ululation that continued to the end.

Glancing around, I looked to the south wall where the hangman smoked and kept his neat little gallows-shed. He was skipping about the building just as it

collapsed, swallowing him in a wave of dust and brittle lumber. I closed my eyes and held my cheeks then, because there was nothing else left for me to do.

It was only when I realised that the prisoner had become silent, that I opened my eyes again. He was standing up now in the quiet courtyard, his chest stuck out inside his blue overalls. He looked across to the razed shed and then to the Warden-Chief, who, on his knees, was searching for his pocket-watch in the grit.

It was unconventional, the Warden-Chief had said, on the edge of regulation. But we had the law to fulfil and we hanged the man from the roof of the granite mess hall instead.

SUPERHERO IN THE DARK | *Megan Manzano*

Things were bad that night. By bad, I don't mean "my boyfriend broke up with me" bad or "me and my best friend got into a fight" bad. I mean "glass shattering, screaming, about to have a fist launched into my face" bad.

I ran out of my house as fast as my legs could carry me. I ran until my calves were throbbing, my throat was dry, and my heart was beating so fast it echoed against my ears. Only then did I slow my pace and inhale the wintry air. It soothed the burning in my throat and I remember that being the only feeling I was grateful for that evening.

I pulled my worn jean jacket to my chest, though it didn't prevent me from shivering. It was closest to the door when I left and I figured it would be better than nothing.

I had left my phone at home. It was a stupid mistake, one I cursed myself for, though I knew I couldn't go back to get it. I was safer outside; a seventeen year old girl was safer on the streets than within the walls of her own home. I shook my head at the realization and continued to travel towards a destination I did not have.

The roads were dead. I was a shadow among the darkness. In a small town, there was rarely anyone taking a drive at two in the morning. It was why I was surprised to hear the humming of rubber tires against the pavement, fast at first, then slowing.

A fucking pedophile, I thought, because that's what I needed.

I picked up my pace, hugging my jacket as tightly against me as possible. If I heard the door open, I would be gone. Fun fact that was known by my hometown: I, Amy Harrison, could run. I had a lifetime of experience running. I

memorized not only the quickest routes I could use to get out of the house when my father chased me with a liquor bottle, but also alternatives when the front door was not an option. My feet were a necessary escape method.

The car came to a complete stop. The only thing that stopped me from launching into a sprint was a voice.

"Amy?"

I would recognize that voice anywhere, the shrill and chipper tone, how every word seemed equipped with a smile.

"Cody," I responded, turning on my heel to face the boy. His head hung out of the car window and the confusion on his expression, until he confirmed it was me he saw, vanished into a dorky grin.

"Well, well, well, Harrison, wandering the streets at two in the morning. I believe that's illegal somewhere. I think I'm going to have to turn you in."

I laughed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I don't see a badge, police uniform, or flashing lights on your car. Sorry Codes, but whoever told you you were a cop lied."

Cody frowned. "Dammit, Harrison. My parents told me I could grow up to be whoever I wanted to be."

"And a cop was not included in the whoever category," I quipped, a smirk rising on my lips.

"Such bullshit," Cody whined, a hand slamming against the steering wheel in mock anger. It was shortly after that the playfulness eased and his eyes, like blue crystals, stared at me hesitantly. "What are you doing out here anyways, Amy?"

"Take a guess." I drew my bottom lip in between my teeth, gnawing at the flesh. I hadn't realized how often I did that when thinking of my dad. The ripe taste of metal greeted my tongue.

"Daddy dearest, say no more." Cody leaned over and pushed open the passenger side door.

I smiled, making my way to the car and sliding inside. One thing I always liked about Cody was even after learning about the problems I had at home, he never dug too deep. What I told him was up to my discretion.

We knew each other since we were children. We went to the same elementary and middle school, enrolled in the same high school too. It was hard not to notice Cody when he joked more often than he answered a question. He shot spitballs at teachers. He yawned loudly while the teacher was talking. He purposely put the wrong answers on the board when he was called to the front of the classroom.

At first his behavior irritated me because I liked to learn. I groaned every time he interrupted the teacher, every time he told a joke. When we were paired up for an art project by Mrs. Feinberg in Kindergarten, who thought I would be able to demonstrate to Cody what a well behaved student was like, I started crying. I didn't think I would survive, let alone become friends with Cody.

We bonded over cartoons. He told me that I cried like Bubbles from the PowerPuff Girls. I laughed. He did too. Our art project wound up being about the PowerPuff Girls.

After that, we were inseparable. We sat next to each other in the cafeteria at school. We rode our bikes together. We slid down the slides and climbed the monkey bars at the park. We played hop scotch and tag outside our houses. Cody's parents were used to me showing up for sleepovers at least three times a

week and my parents were also used to Cody showing up for sleepovers. Our hangouts however, were interrupted when I was ten.

My parents started fighting a lot. It was the kind of fighting that if one spoke, they felt like they would shatter the world around them. They had developed a sudden hatred for each other and their way of expelling this hatred was to take it out on me. I wasn't allowed to go out unless it was to school. Cody resorted to climbing in through my bedroom window in order to see me for more than forty five minutes during our lunch period. He kept up the routine for years. It was hard not to tell him what was happening when he heard the screaming from downstairs. Once I got past the weeks where I told Cody I didn't want to talk about it, or it wasn't any of his business, I broke. Everything that was building up inside of me came out in rickety sobs. Cody stayed with me through it all. He promised me it would be alright and if it wasn't, he'd make his parents adopt me. We were children then. I believed in the hope Cody offered.

My mother's and father's hearts broke the more they fought. My father turned to the bottle. My mother turned to working long hours at the local diner. Fast forward seven years and neither of their habits have changed. The only reason they didn't divorce was because my father was too drunk to care and my mother didn't want to put me through a divorce. As I grew up, I wasn't certain as to what was stopping my mom. The house would forever smell like alcohol and decomposed love.

"Do you always pick up random women on the side of the road?" I teased, pushing the thoughts of my parents to the back of my mind.

Cody stroked his chin, as if waiting for a thoughtful answer to come. "Well... now that you mention it."

I smacked his arm. "Don't elaborate. I don't want to know about your late night rendezvous."

"Rendezvous?" Both of his eyebrows lifted in unison. "Is that a fancy word for fuck?"

"No, it's a fancy word for you should probably close your damn window. It's freezing in here."

Cody chuckled, pressing a button to his right, the window slamming shut. He didn't drive right away. He instead reached for my hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. "Screw it, Amy, you're better than your dad ever will be."

"That's not my concern, Cody. What if one day... I can't do it anymore?"

"You will be able to."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you're fucking Amy Harrison! You're like superwoman. Smart, what was that big word you used before... rendah something. You don't give a shit about what anyone says about you. You could tell off anyone under your breath without thinking about it. You know what you're doing Amy."

I had been glancing down at my lap since Cody closed the window. I couldn't hold my gaze there for much longer however. My eyes traveled to meet his and with the straightest face I could manage, I asked. "Do I get a cape?"

"All superheroes get a cape. What do you think makes them super?"

That evening was one of the rare evenings that I forgot about everything: about school, about my family, about broken bottles, raised fists, and death threats. It was all thanks to Cody Johnson.

The following summer, Cody jumped from the roof of a local warehouse. I got a call from his mom at one in the morning. I didn't cry. I didn't say I was sorry. I just hung up and stared absently at the wall. I still don't know to this day what caused

him to jump because he was always so cheerful, always looking out for me, and always finding humor in the grimmest of situations.

I think now that his persona was all a front. I think that Cody had problems he never told me because he cared about me to the point where he didn't want me to worry about him. I wish he hadn't been so selfless. I wish he realized that I thought of him as my best friend and though I graduated high school, got accepted into New York University, and convinced my mom to finally kick my dad to the curb, I wanted him there beside me.

But maybe he knew I would be able to make it on my own and that's why I couldn't stop him from jumping.

The Artists

Nod Ghosh

Nod Ghosh lives in Christchurch, New Zealand. Penduline Press, TheGayUK, The Citron Review, JAAM and Landfall have accepted Nod's work. Writers are like humans, but they watch less television. <http://www.nodghosh.com/>

Rebecca Jensen

Rebecca Jensen is an MFA student at Florida Atlantic University. Her poetry appears in Eunoia Review, FishFood Magazine, and her nonfiction is nominated for the 2016 AWP Intro Journals Project.

Craig Jordan-Baker

Craig is a writer and academic who rants on about cliché destroying our ability to think. He teaches creative writing at UCA Farnham in the UK.

Megan Manzano

Megan Manzano is working to achieve a Bachelor's degree in English. She recently became an editor for Fantasy Works Publishing. Her hobbies include reading, traveling, and expressing herself through writing.

Judy Wood

Judy Wood is a mixed media artist and poet, who lives in the Arizona desert. Poetry is an extension of her art; painting pictures with words. Follow her journey @aztreasures.