

FIGWORT
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Editors' Note

Hazel Lockey and Edward Hall

The artists here in *Volume 1* are not primitively removed from the conventions of modern storytelling, but feature a psychedelic, often spiritual approach to their work which strays from what you might find being taught in a university creative writing course. For instance, Chong's 'Requiem for the Rat King' is a cavalcade of anaphora and an experience in solitude, one which strikes me as deeply personal to the author without ever infringing upon "cheesy" or "cliché". No analysis, however long, could do this piece justice—just read it for yourself.

Volume 1 is a simple collection of impossibly complex pieces from artists who, in turn, lead incalculably complex lives. For these people, it is not enough to simply exist; they must contain the world—their worlds—within something. These stories contain the world.

Figwort is like a child—not a literary child that wears a flower crown, but an outcast one, one that reeks and prowls the streets, naked. It is an amalgamation of the flesh and blood and bone of ten authors and artists. Figwort is the alien that resembles, as Zvi A. Sesling puts it, 'spoiled egg salad', it is the omnipotent deity that Richard Holinger struggles to contest and to entertain, it buries itself in Paul Attmere's foreign and yet familiar ball of fluff, it is Paul Lewellan's Goddess Sophia that lingers at the other end of the line. Each of these pieces carry the voice of an outsider.

A figwort is unattractive, with two reddish lips that peel and fold away, revealing a phallic, greenish organ sprouting within a gaping mouth. Its name does it no more justice. It thrives in ditches and dirt heaps. If we have done our duty, then this inaugural volume will serve as a refuge for Figwort, the outcast child.

Welcome home.

The Spanking Machine

Josiah Webster

Everybody gets a spanking!

Everybody lined up for a go at the spanking machine, or for it to have a go at them.

The machine was pretty simple: a robotic arm on a motorized hydraulic spinny thing, with a hand at the end of the arm. The hand was large and fleshy, with little fibrous hairs on its knuckles and lines on its palms denoting good omen, if you believe in palms meaning anything about the person they're attached to. Of course, the hand wasn't attached to a person, but in looking so realistic you could forgive folks for mistaking it for a real person's hand. Maybe it was God's hand?

Well, think what you will. The fact is, everyone was due for their spanking. And they were all very excited about it. Which is why they all lined up for it, not just around the block, but all the blocks; the line snaked and spiralled throughout the city, curling around all the office buildings, all the tenement blocks, all the stadiums and Jimmy John's locations. The only people who weren't in line were the guys who control the stoplights, because it's a law that you have to do that. And the guys who pump all the sewage through the sewage pipes with their foot-pedal pumps. Otherwise, everyone was in line. Even the mayor was in line, and she was arguably more excited than most, because she had a lot to get spanked for.

The person in control of the spanking machine was a robot who kicked the machine in its fleshy butt-attachment every time it acted up. And the person in charge of that robot was another robot who said demoralizing things every time the kicking-robot performed at anything less than peak efficiency. No-one knew who kept the last robot in check, but it was widely theorized that that robot had more to be spanked for than anyone, and so it kept things rolling under the threat of someday being spanked wholly into oblivion. Like that, the spanking machine operated.

In line, a lot of people were chattering about how badly they expected to be spanked.

'I've been a naughty Nelly this year,' said Nelly. 'So I'll probably get spanked loads.'

'Not as naughty as me,' said Niles, who had indeed been very naughty. He murdered a homeless man. 'I bet I get spanked at least ten times.'

'Wow, you must be a really bad boy,' someone said.

Niles looked proudly at the camera: 'Yes I am a bad boy, and it's time I get my due!'

A lot of people throughout the country thought that was pretty cool, and his mom, who lived back in Ohio, clapped. 'That's my boy!!'

Further down the line, a couple of guys who showed up late were sweating over whether or not the machine would have time to spank them.

'I bet it cuts off just before we get there,' one of them said. 'We never should have stopped at Jimmy Johns.'

'We can't get spanked on an empty stomach, Brad. Anyway, if we don't make it in time, I'll spank you.'

Brad turned to his pal. 'Gee, thanks Lucas! It wouldn't be the same, but it means a lot to me.' He smiled at his friend.

'Anything for my best bud.'

Then they shared a blunt they had rolled ahead of time. A few other people around them took hits off it, and they all made friends.

Wichita, who had come here all the way from the reservation of his nondescript indigenous tribe, stood in the line a few blocks away wearing a ceremonial outfit. He did not seem very impressed by any of this. Wichita had wanted to have a few words with the spanking machine, but was nervous about getting it right, so he practiced his speech while he waited. When the cameras showed up, he waved them away, but they stuck around dropping in on him from a distance, translating his speech to the public as he mouthed it, unaware as to their spying. The translated speech was garbled and unspecific, but a lot of people saw it, and got a good enough idea of what Wichita had to say. They all voted on their phones and since they liked him so much, he became an instant favourite and got extensive coverage of his personal social media profiles broadcast over the web.

But there was something wrong with the spanking machine. It was spanking people too much. It seemed every person who came along got spanked more and more. Little Johnny, who was only nine years old and had only done one bad thing in his life, got spanked a whopping fifteen times! His parents stood behind him in line, at first excited, then worried, then horrified, as the spanking machine whopped and dropped him. His mom said something to the robot in charge of the machine, but since it was doing its spanking in record time, the robot merely shrugged her off.

When the mother went in, she got spanked twenty-four times. When the father went in, he got spanked thirty times. It's true, he was an adulterer, but did he deserve thirty spanks? The whole family rubbed their sore butts and limped away from the venue, feeling very naughty indeed.

By the time Nelly and Niles had made it to the spanking machine, a lot of the nation was concerned. See, it had, over the hours, portrayed the tendency to spank everyone too many times, and a little too hard, and a lot of people weren't so happy with how they'd been spanked. Nelly mounted herself onto the machine, remembering how she'd announced herself as fairly naughty, and in the instant before the hand clapped her butt, felt oddly remorseful for the bad things she'd done. But she wasn't remorseful because she felt she'd done true wrong, she was remorseful because of the fear of the pain... she thought she must be in store for an awful shock, and that it probably wasn't worth it.

Well, the machine hit Nelly almost fifty times. She remembered crying out after the first few claps, because it was hitting her so hard. This wasn't like any year before. Before, the machine had been far gentler. It understood that people had reasons for things. Those reasons may not always be righteous, but they were reasons, and it understood that. Now, it didn't seem to understand anything aside from pain. When she was done being spanked, Nelly crawled off the platform and wept quietly in a dark corner of the venue. Next in line was Niles, and he was excited because he thought he really ought to be spanked a lot. He was concerned with getting spanked more than Nelly, because he liked her and wanted to prove to her that he could take more pain. Y'know, macho man stuff.

He hopped on it and mouthed the words 'do your worst'.

The spanking machine spanked him fifty-three times. By the time it was done, his butt was fully broken. He dragged himself over to where Nelly was crying, and wanted to say something cool, but only managed to curl into the foetal position and weep alongside her.

At this time, it was noted the third robot, the one in charge of the one in charge of the spanking machine had begun to whisper certain things into the second robot's robotic ear. No-one knows what it said, but it is known that after that, the robot in charge of the spanking machine got off its butt and began kicking the spanking machine in *its* butt quite frequently, its eyes astrobe with a strange, fearful glow, as if its full existence depended on kicking the spanking machine. And as the next few people mounted the spanking machine, the machine spanked them harder, faster, more... The third robot whispered more, the second robot kicked more, the spanking machine spanked more.

By the time Brad and Lucas were in view of the spanking machine, it was past midnight, and everybody felt worried about how badly they would get spanked. Although it didn't really matter because by the time the two friends were about ten from the back, the spanking machine whirred and heaved, and on its digital display the words 'Low Battery' appeared. The second and third robot stood up and waved their arms around, announcing that the spanking machine was done for the day, and that everyone should go home.

'Aww gee,' Brad said.

'Yeah...' said Lucas.

'What a waste...'

'Not entirely a waste,' Lucas pointed out. 'We got an experience our own, waiting in line here, didn't we? We made a few friends. And anyway, now we can go home.'

'Do you want to come back to my place for some mac and cheese?' Brad asked.

His buddy grinned. 'I sure would. And maybe while we're there, I can spank you and you can spank me, and then we'll both have got our dues.'

Brad smiled shyly. 'I would like that.'

Both guys went home, rolled another blunt, ate some mac and cheese, and spanked each other friendlily before falling asleep at opposite ends of the couch while Rick and Morty reruns played on TV.

Wichita, who was back in line from the two of them, was shocked and appalled to find the line dispersing before him. He ran up and looked into the venue. Inside, the robots were all packing each other up into a box, for shipment to the next city. He yelled, but they didn't respond. Then he banged on the window, and one of the robots took notice. It came to the window.

'What do you want?' it said.

'I want a word with you!'

'Spanking time is over,' the robot replied, and turned around.

'Wait,' Wichita exclaimed. 'I came all this way, just let me say something!'

The robot ignored him, continuing with its task as if the man didn't even exist. Soon, all three of the machines were safely tucked in the box, and the box closed.

Wichita beat his head against the glass. Then he turned around and sunk onto the ground, holding his head in his hands. He couldn't fathom returning - not without saying his piece first. But if he couldn't even say it, then what?

He fell asleep after a while; he must've been more tired than he imagined. He dreamed of spankings. A dream where everybody gets their turn. Where everybody gets something.

When he awoke, he felt hollow, and the robots were gone, off to the next city, to the next broadcast, and he would never be able to catch up with them.

He sighed, shaking his head. His butt felt sore from sleeping on the pavement.

It's true, he thought, as he walked back to his car. Everybody gets a spanking.

Goddess Sophia Calling

Paul Lewellan

*'[E]ach person recognizes [Her]
in his own way, not all alike.'
—Theodotus*

October 10th, 6:35 pm, just as contestants were solving the opening puzzle on Wheel of Fortune, She called my cell phone. 'Yes?'

'Hello, Mack! This is your Divine Being speaking.' The voice was inviting. Upbeat. Effervescent.

I wasn't in the mood. I hung up. Obviously a sales pitch or a scam. I checked the call log. The number: 000-000-0000. The name: *Goddess Sophia*. WTF.

Two days later, the same name and number. This time I was ready. 'Who is this?'

'This is your Divine Being speaking,' She said firmly and confidently.

'Do I know you?'

'Obviously not.' She hung up.

My Saturday night date was with Dr Celeste Lewis, the new Assistant Superintendent of Schools (freshly minted PhD, early-fifties, divorce decree still drying). It did not go well. My reputation had preceded me. Once her curiosity was satisfied, I'd been sent home early, drunk, and alone. I'd just poured a generous tumbler of twenty-one-year-old Glenfiddich single-malt when the call came.

'This is Mack. I'm listening.'

'This is Goddess Sophia.' Her voice sounded different. Sexy. Almost slutty.

'You sound divine.'

'We need to talk.'

'Talking wasn't my plan for tonight.'

'And how did that work out?' Her tone changed. 'Let's talk when you're sober.' She hung up.

When She called four days later, I feigned contrition, not a state of being I'm comfortable with. 'It's Mack. I'm listening.'

'You'd better be.' The voice was Mother's. 'This is your Divine Being speaking.'

I knew it wasn't Mom; she wasn't buried with her cell phone. 'Divine Being...?'

'Goddess Sophia, Universal Life Force, Holy Spirit, Earth Mother....'

'Right. And I'm George Clooney.' I hung up.

I searched online for *Goddess Sophia*. I found five porn sites under that name. Goddess Sophia also appeared in Gnostic writings and in religious commentary by Pagels and others. Tempting as the porn sites were, I didn't want to go down that road again.

I pressed redial.

'This is your Divine Being Speaking. Are you ready to talk about your anger?'

Good question. 'No.' We hung up simultaneously.

She was right, of course. I was angry. Had been for almost two years. So what?

I turned off my phone, grabbed a bottle of Writer's Tears, and turned on The Learning Channel. I binge watched a Winky Dink retrospective.

As chief legal counsel for the school district, I attend all board meetings. Monday night's was more contentious than most. Chairing the session, Assistant Superintendent Lewis had been solicitous to parents without giving an inch. I'd brushed aside their threats of legal action, implying counter suits, the high cost of litigation, and danger to their community reputation if their complaints came across as mean-spirited, hate-inspired, racist, or libellous.

After the meeting, Celeste suggested a drink at Starbucks, choosing wisely to avoid any venues that served alcohol. 'I'm glad you're on our side,' she told me.

Over decaf skinny lattes, I discovered she was also a Winky Dink fan. I proposed dinner Friday night. 'Give me a second chance.'

I was in my office Friday afternoon when my Divine Being called again. 'Goddess Sophia?'

'Shut up and listen.' It was the voice of my second ex-wife. Brenda was still managing a restaurant in Ghent, indulging in Belgium chocolates and Trappist ales, and gloating over the day she used our Eurorail passes to run off to Greece with the tall blonde salesman from the Diamond Exchange. This couldn't be Brenda. It had to be God.

She corrected me. 'I don't use the word, "God," anymore.'

'You used it a week ago when you called me.'

'Who keeps track of these things?' She said, 'Divine Being captures my essence.'

'Fine. What do you want?'

'That's crass, isn't it? No pleasantries. No "How do you do?" No "I feel honoured you've selected me." No "How's the weather up there?"'

'I don't have time for this crap. The curriculum committee wants to meet at 4:00. Parents are up in arms about *Huck Finn* again. And I have a dinner date at 7:00.'

'*This is your Divine Being speaking. You know that?*'

'I believe you.'

'And you're telling *Me* this isn't a good time?'

'That is correct.' I heard a pop. My iPhone began smoking. The curriculum meeting went long. Celeste left a note with the maître d'hôtel that something had come up. Fortunately I'd set the DVR to record the premier episode of NCIS Des Moines. I ordered a pizza, and on Saturday I went to the Apple Store for a new phone.

When the number came up again Tuesday night, I took three deep breathes before answering. 'This is Mack.'

'We need to talk.' She spoke in the voice of Charlotte, my beloved third wife who'd died in a plane crash nineteen months ago.

'I'm listening.' I put the phone on speaker and uncorked a bottle of Delirium Tremens. I poured it into a long-stemmed tulip glass and settled into the La-Z-Boy. I tried to make my voice sound casual. 'What would you like to talk about?'

'You've cut yourself off from me.'

'That is a little hard to do, isn't it? You are omnipresent.'

'You used to invite me into your thoughts. Lately you've shut me out.'

'That was before you allowed Charlotte to die.'

'Mack, it doesn't work that way-' We'd talked about this, but it was a long time ago. 'I'd like to feel welcome again.'

'You sound like a jealous wife.'

'You know *I am a jealous God*. You know the chapter and verse.'

'Exodus 20, verse 5.'

'And you know the context?'

'The Israelites were worshipping graven images. You thought that was bad idea.'

'Exactly!' She said it as though that clarified everything. 'Your friends are worried about you.'

'I'm doing all right.'

‘Have you looked at your office lately? Have you taken a good whiff of the trash? Could Sunny’s litter box get any more soiled? There’s mould in the shower tile grout.’ She had a point on the garbage. ‘It wouldn’t hurt to get a haircut.’

‘Look, while we’re registering complaints, I’ve got one. My knees. You issued me a defective pair.’

‘Maybe you don’t get down on them often enough?’ She had a point. ‘Before Charlotte’s death we talked all the time. Now you binge watch *Blue Bloods*, close me out of your thoughts, and consort with harlots.’

‘Harlots?’ Images of my last seven dates flashed before my eyes. ‘The new Assistant Superintendent isn’t a harlot.’

‘But you treated her like one on your first date.’ She said with an air of triumph.

‘Are we having a lover’s quarrel?’

‘It isn’t our first.’ She said it with a certain smug omniscient satisfaction. ‘It won’t be our last.’

‘So, let’s talk.’

‘Not on the phone. Let’s meet somewhere.’

‘How about the Mad Hatter?’

‘Fine.’ It was a brew pub in a sketchy part of town, walking distance from my riverfront condo. I went there for the craft beer and the classic blues tracks on the jukebox. It was not a place I took dates. ‘Give me an hour. I just opened a fresh beer and want to do it justice.’

She laughed. Laughed! At me.... ‘Trying to control the narrative. Wanting to set the terms. Life doesn’t work that way....’ Before I could reply she added, ‘Tomorrow night. 8:00. Shower. Come sober. Check your attitude at the door. Don’t flirt with the wait staff.’

‘But what about tonight?’

‘I thought I made that clear. You need to clean your condo and make it ready for company. Just in case....’

‘In case of what?’

‘Don’t play dumb. I’m a Goddess, not a nun.’

I cleaned the apartment. The next day I went to Steve’s Barber Shop in Rock Island and got a \$10 haircut, left a \$3 tip. At 7:57 p.m. I walked into the Mad Hatter in clean Levi’s, a pale blue oxford shirt, and a Green Bay Packers ballcap. She was sitting at the bar wearing Torrid jeans and an Aaron Rodgers jersey.

‘Dr. Lewis?’

‘Please call me Celeste. Should we get a table?’

Ballet

Alex Nodopaka



Ballet 1 by Alex Nodopaka



Ballet 2 by Alex Nodopaka



Ballet 3 by Alex Nodopaka

A Bright Idea

Zvi A. Sesling

Melinda walks down the street as I come out of my house.

Hi Melinda, I say, I didn't know you were pregnant again.

I'm not, she says, this is my bulb.

Bulb, What bulb, I ask?

The one the aliens gave me when they kidnapped me, she says matter-of-factly.

Which aliens?

Those blue ones, the ones that look like spoiled egg salad.

Why a bulb, I ask?

So I can see in the dark. All I wanted was a simple 60 or 100 watt job. They gave me this three-way thing.

Makes sense to me, I say, starting the propeller on my head.

Do Not Resuscitate

Michael Fowler

The old man leapt up from his desk and confronted me. ‘You aren’t trying to resuscitate me, are you?’ He demanded. ‘Everyone’s trying to resuscitate me, it seems, including you.’ Eyes turned to me since I was the one he was reaming out. ‘Can’t a man keel over at his desk and fall lifeless to the floor without a bunch of damn do-gooders and screwball Samaritans bothering him?’ He was screaming in my face now. ‘Go back to your work, whoever you are, and let me pass on in peace! Interfere with my death once more and I’ll have the law on you!’

As calmly as I could, I protested that I didn’t realise he was trying to die. I had just moved in at the desk beside his, and was only trying to warn him that the boss was making rounds while he was clearly sound asleep. I thought he would want to know that if he valued his job.

‘Oh, who gives a crumb about that little pustule?’ he snapped. ‘He’s the one who dialled 911 when I died last week, and we all know how that worked out!’ He glared at me with hatred in his eyes. ‘I had done it! Died and passed on painlessly! Now I have to do it all over again, thanks to that interfering ass!’ His face was red and perspiring.

I sheepishly took my seat beside him while he continued to glower at me. ‘Sorry,’ I muttered, and shyly introduced myself as his new co-worker. I didn’t add that next time he lost consciousness in my presence, he could consider himself interred.

Later, after the codger had calmed down and fallen asleep—evidently his function here along with losing his temper—Marge, the young lady on the other side of me, told me that he had been sorely disappointed by his first death, and more and more was acting out his frustration with it. Whenever anyone nodded to him, or called his name, or handed him a memo, or inquired as to when he might retire, or made any sound or sudden movement whatsoever, he immediately leaped to the conclusion that he was at death’s door and the troublesome party was pulling him back from his long-desired demise.

It was after he was hauled away on a stretcher the first time, Marge added, that he began to show up in the office not only with his nose out of joint by a mile, but wearing a silver Do Not Resuscitate necklace and a gold Do Not Resuscitate breastpin, neither one sufficient alone, in his mind. He had also placed a wooden placard on his desk, on top of a copy of his living will, that in all caps spelled DNR. I had in fact already taken notice of these totemic warnings.

‘Was being revived the first time so excruciating that he can’t bear the thought of going through it again?’ I asked Marge.

‘Yes,’ she replied, softly so as not to wake him. ‘It would seem so.’

I avoided contact with the old man as much as possible, a difficult task since he began most mornings by fixing me with a baleful look and saying with heavy sarcasm, ‘Not calling any first responders today, now are we? I don’t have to watch the elevator for men with oxygen tanks and defibrillators, now do I? You do agree that a speedy death is every citizen’s right, now don’t you?’

Under this assault I usually bowed my head in silence and got to work. In fairness to him he directed those questions not only to me, but looked around as he spoke to include all those around us who might be listening in. Some of these, I noticed from the corner of my eye, shot him dead with a pretend handgun or moved an imaginary knife across his throat. If anyone looked at me, to see how I, as closest to him, was bearing up, I sometimes mowed him down with a fictive assault rifle, if he wasn’t watching too closely.

Our boss would mention him at the meetings he failed to attend, and explain that he, the boss, was doing all he could to encourage retirement, but couldn't force the issue due to the man's seniority and uncanny ability to do useful work while either at death's door or sound sleep. But he did mention that he felt we were legally in the clear if we let him expire the next time he collapsed, and expressed sincere regret that he had been the one to call the life squad the first time. Marge said she thought of buying him a ticket to one of those European euthanasia spas where they gently assist you to stop your heartbeat, in case he would do that, but she had checked and the price was prohibitive. She told us the price, and it was.

After I'd worked there three weeks, the old boy had what appeared to be another life-threatening incident in the file room. Marge, who was not just young but attractive and single, witnessed it, and said he keeled over right after asking her to accompany him to the Bahamas on his annual weeklong vacation.

'It looks like you might have to cancel those plans,' I ribbed her, but she ignored this. Now Methuselah lay on the floor, calmly gazing around and muttering, 'Nothing to see here, move on, continue as you were, notify no one.'

Soon twenty or thirty people were staring at him as he lay motionless in a corner, several spilled files open on him. Everyone was afraid to move, even to breathe, lest any commotion somehow revive him.

Finally the boss, after standing there shaking his head for ten minutes, said, 'I'm sorry, folks, but I can't just let him die. I'm going to call the medics.' At that the dying man, who had closed his eyes, opened them wide and screamed, 'Not again, you're not!' He jumped five feet in the air and landed squarely on the boss's shoulders. After riding him like a bull for five seconds, the oldster fell to the floor, dying instantly.

His funeral drew an amazing crowd of celebrants, of which I was one of the gladdest.

The Bells

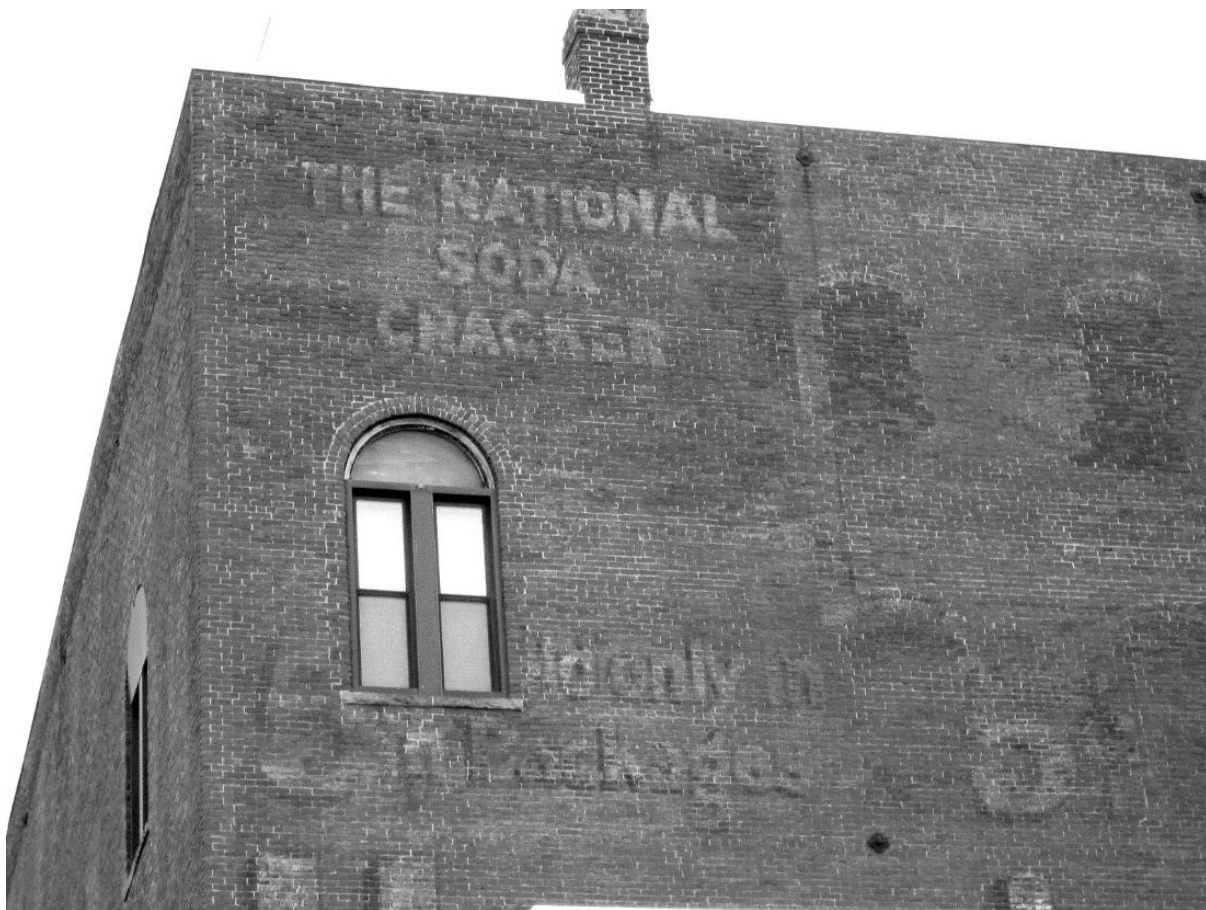
Richard Holinger

In the few years our family went to the Methodist church in our hometown an hour plus change outside Chicago, I liked best the bells played by women who left their pews for the choir loft. They silently collected and lined up in front of two tables where different sized and weighted bells waited for them, two apiece. We don't go anymore. The pastor whom we liked fought the anti-LGBTQ crowd and lost. He left town and died soon thereafter. I stopped tithing, and then we stopped going. Truth be told, we joined for our children to give them a Christian foundation they could later take or leave. I suppose overhearing my wife and me talk, they both eventually gave up any pretence to faith. One night in the bathtub, my son, wearing an inflatable duck on his head, said, 'I don't get this God thing, Mom.' He's now over thirty, more atheist than I, who entertains occasionally the prospect, or maybe the hope, that something greater than anything I can conceive of knows I'm here. It's on mornings like this one that I ruminate on such existential possibilities, when a dawn's rare southern breeze shakes shrivelled cinnamon leaves clinging to a March sycamore like the ringing of tiny bells tinkling *Onward Christian Soldiers* or *Little Town of Bethlehem*, their soft rustle as sweet a tune as heard in any church. I listen, enthralled, with the faith in miracles that may move me to tears.

Old vs New Collection
Phillip Temples



Old vs New by Phillip Temples, featured as the cover



National Soda Cracker by Phillip Temples



Attentive Canine by Phillip Temples

Fluff

Paul Attmere

Below the hotel window, traffic bruises the streets with yellows and other hurting colours. Human grunts and shouts, and distant horns complain. I close my eyes, soothed by the first silver bars of a Christmas song, carried on a swirling current of cold air, drying the sweat and the spurts of Keith's cock blood on my face.

When I met Keith, I'd been sweating a lot. It was essential to my plan. I'd found out where he worked from Lizzie, and with figure-hugging lycra clinging to my skin, ran the three miles to his offices.

I drop my chin to my chest, look down to those man-made, shatter-bone streets. One way out of this mess would be to jump. That would be the problem, with the deed done, what then? Donna turns up, I explain the mess in room 1301, and then we run off into the sunset with Keith's prog?

With my free hand, I check the right pocket. No, not that one. Left pocket. Ah, there it is.
Us.

Belly button. Belly button. Belly button fluff.

I would recite this to Donna as if it were the chorus in some nursery rhyme; she'd giggle, roll over to her side of the bed, and tell me to, 'Stop, Lizzie, you silly.'

She knew what was coming. 'Hold still,' I'd say, and she would stifle laughter as I cleaned her belly button of the day's debris like a Hoover sucking it loudly from her; then she'd suck out mine before lying, her finger in my belly button, mine in hers. Only when she turned from me, in the bed we often shared—her tanned shoulder rising and falling with her sleeping breath—would I roll our fluff between my palms and whisper, 'I love you.'

After she announced she was marrying Keith, and having his baby, I began collecting more than just fluff from our bellies. I combined spirals of blonde hair from her hairbrush with my straight, red, shoulder-length split ends. I added detritus we had shed, peeled and cut from our bodies. From nail clippings and emery board dust to shaved hair gathered under the razor blade. Like my mother, Donna shaved her legs—something I've never done. I would lie next to her, staring at our love ball of hair and fluff, and other body stuff, and wonder why Donna had betrayed me.

A rat-a-tat-tat on the hotel door.

Before doing it, I'd made dear Keith phone Donna to tell her he was waiting for her in room 1301 with champagne on ice and his cock hard. After he ended the call, he turned his brown eyes to me and asked me to put the knife away.

I didn't.

Leg out the hotel window, holding tight to a metal rail attached to the windowsill, I haul myself onto the ledge and look up into the blue sky. I press my back to the wall of the building. How did I ever imagine this would end well? The porous sandstone absorbs the sweat from my palms and butt. The Christmas music stops, replaced by an excited, gabbling voice advertising aftershave for men.

I've left the hotel room window open, and from the ledge, I hear Donna whispering Keith's name on the other side of the door.

Up till now, the plan had come together: Keith standing before me, Y-fronts around his ankles, playing along, following my instructions, on the verge of getting hard, but as it was, a pretty pathetic-looking cock, like an old sock on the washing line after a hot wash. Would cutting through that shrivelled thing be an awkward operation, even with my father's fishing knife? This was my only concern.

When I produced the knife, he turned as if to skedaddle—forgetting he had a pair of Y-fronts wrapped around his ankles—and crashed to the red-carpeted floor, hitting his head on the bedside table. He was out for a few precious seconds. I pinched his cock between my finger and thumb and remembered Dad absent-mindedly gutting trout. Keith came round screaming like a starving baby.

I hear the hotel door open. Donna's gonna see him spread-eagled next to his penis. Then, I hear her voice moaning, 'Baby,' and repeating it over and over like a record stuck on the most sentimental part of an otherwise great song. 'Don't do it to yourself, Donna,' I murmur.

One step away from ending up as Christmas lunch for the city pigeons, I inch my way back along the ledge, slip one foot back through the window. My trembly voice exits my mouth. Similar to my father's voice after the strychnine took effect, in the last stages when all he could do was moan my name. That's what he got for crawling into my bed and doing what he did. Mum, if you had survived beyond the ten years they gave you for murdering him, you'd be proud of me.

Donna looks up at me, face all made up and dolled up in a red dress. I put my hand into my pocket and roll our fluff and other 'us' stuff between my fingers. So soft, our love. If only she could understand. Merry Christmas, I want to say. I smile. If she would smile back, then we could start again. Clean up this mess together like Saturday mornings at the flat. Her wearing yellow marigolds gloves, mopping the bathroom floor, and me in the kitchen scrubbing pans singing louder whenever she tells me to 'shut up you tuneless wench'.

'You?' Donna's hands are bloody from touching the bedsheets, and she's backing away from the bed. When she sees my father's knife, she grabs it.

'I did it for *you*. For *us*,' I say. 'He was going to screw me, Donna, behind your back. I've done you a—'

'Screw? You?'

I tell Donna how I'd waited thirty minutes before he turned up, late for work, sipping a Frappuccino as the lift doors shut. How he took a slow sip of coffee, undressing me with his eyes.

'Do you mind if I—?' I said.

'I'll have to press the alarm between floors if you strip.'

It went from there, flirting as the lift smoothly ascended the thirteen floors to his offices.

'I offered to fuck your future husband—father of your child, Donna. After work, in the hotel across the road. This hotel.' I drop my gaze from her to Keith. Blood has stopped oozing from his groin.

'You'll not get away with this, Lizzie.' Donna sits down on the corner of the bed.

I lift my head, but keep my gaze fixed on Keith. Finish with a slow roll of the eyes to her. 'I love you.'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

I told her I loved her, once before. A long silence followed then as now. She rolled off the bed, put her nightdress back on, and asked if I'd go back to my room.

'My heart is yours,' I say.

'Why were you out the window?'

I wanted the warm, rushing wind as I plummeted through the fume choked, freezing London air, I thought. 'Got scared, didn't I.' Eyes fixed on Donna, I dig into my pocket and bring out the ball of fluff.

She's got that face on her, that one she uses when she's disgusted.

When I pull it apart, the ball is a little bigger than a tennis ball. ‘This is us—*our*—fluff and hair and—’ I toss it in the air, but before letting it go, I imagine it hanging in the air, defying the laws of gravity, until it drops and lands on the bed next to Keith's bare foot.

Donna rolls Keith's grey penis between her bloodied fingers as if it were the butt end of a smouldering cigar. She picks up the ball of fluff made up of moments of laughter and shared stories about our day, gathered as we mucked about between sips of wine and drags on a shared cigarette.

‘Donna?’ More a groan of her name. Keith reaches out with a shaky hand.

She withdraws before he can grab any part of her, and stands up from the bed. Our fluff ball in one hand and his penis in the other.

‘How'd you know he'd fall for your strip in the lift,’ she says. ‘You'd never even met him.’

I remember Dad's warm body next to me, a little sweaty. I liked that because it was Daddy's smell. Then his hands slipped between my legs, and my world ended. ‘Men like me.’

‘Dearest Keith.’ Donna's teary voice has gone all girlie. He probably liked that submissive voice. ‘I did love you, Keith. But you flicked the switch and now I'm off you.’

His lips spasm and his hands blindly search the bed perhaps searching for his severed manhood. Her voice deepens, ‘Lizzie, where's the knife?’

‘You're holding it?’ I say.

She squeezes her lips together, just like she'd do before I playfully put my mouth to her belly button to suck the fluff. I copy her, but then Keith gasps for air—a pitiful, weepy sound—pulling her from laughter, back to the job at hand.

‘Looking for this?’ She holds the woeful-looking penis above Keith and then, as if throwing out a ball of paper, tosses his cock out the window.

I've heard if you drop a pea from a skyscraper, you could kill someone. We're only thirteen floors up, but I wonder what would happen if his penis hit someone. Could a lifeless cock still fuck someone up?

‘I never thought you could be—’

‘Such a bitch,’ Donna finished. ‘Nor me.’

I hand the knife to Donna and take our little fluff planet in the palm of my left hand.

‘Did anyone see you come up?’ she says.

‘Room's in his name,’ I say. ‘I slipped through reception. Used the stairs.’

‘Camera's would have—’

‘Hat, dark glasses. They'll never identify me.’

‘Sure about that?’

‘I don't know. What about you?’

‘Shit, shouldn't have chucked that cock—’

‘It's fine just—I'm sorry, Donna. I'll never get away with this.’

‘You will... We will. I'll stay. Pretend I found him.’

‘We?’

‘I'll say I was horrified. Panicked when I saw his hacked off willy—’

‘Threw it out the window,’ I add.

Donna takes my hand. ‘That's the truth, isn't it?’

Keith has stopped reaching for Donna. He's staring at us as my father stared at my mother and me in those final agonising moments. I remember all I wanted back was the man who'd patiently taught me how to fish and hugged and kissed me every opportunity he got. I loved him so much. Just like then, there was no going back. Ever.

Outside, the sun escapes a cloud and sends a sunbeam into the centre of the tangle of fluff and hair. Our united particles twinkle.

Love is Love, No Money Down

Brian Quinn

It's a giant, threatening, black-speckled, greasy Banana; smacking, flailing, and pounding. Reed lying on the floor, inert, is getting pummelled, beaten senseless. He's been slammed into bookcases, thrown through windows, bashed against the fridge. He's whimpering and crying for his mommy.

It's about time.

He's spent years berating interns, embarrassing production assistants, and threatening publicists, he's finally getting his.

The intruder from *The Velvet Underground* has finally materialized, formed, wraithlike, leering, and scoffing; this six-foot tall, greasy, soft, overripe, smacking and pounding Banana.

Port Authority benches are no joke. They're narrow, uncomfortable, designed to be that way, it keeps the homeless at bay, prevents them from settling. The PA, people suffer here, funnelling in and out, jostling, screaming, crying.

The county local runs three minutes after the hour, on the hour.

1:06AM. No more. Nada. The place is empty. Time to stretch out on the designed-to-be hellish bench, twist, turn, flip: struggle to find a comfortable position.

Close my eyes. Time to relive the dust up in Studio 8H.

Best to scrunch up, sleep it off. Make it all go away.

The luncheonette's red pedestal stools are so short feet touch the floor. Depp, in his battered fedora with the frayed gaping hole in the peak is talking with his mouth full, swinging his tattooed arms above his head for emphasis, shovelling heaping forkfuls of scrambled eggs into his open gob.

Thompson, lanky, frenetic, sits beside him, unhinged, murderous, a long grey cattle prod held tight in his left hand, a yellow taser in his right. He is obsessed with Jesuits.

'Love them!' he screams, jumping outta his seat, straddling the stool, 'Love them! Love them!' until, forced, suddenly, a moment later, to drop the taser when the waitress appears, drops a tuna-melt on the counter.

'They're smart, and *mean*,' Thompson says, returning his skinny buttocks to the peeling red Naugahyde stool, flecks of tuna flying from the corners of his frothing lips. 'Nothing like talking to a smart, *mean*, Jesuit for Christ's sake!'

Everything in this dream is ass backward.

Depp is impersonating Thompson with his mumbled, quick, cadence. His sweeping gaze never makes eye contact.

Thompson's Depp is all Capt'n Jack Sparrow, clattering shells and light-hearted sight gags.

Thompson is beating the table with a corn dog telling the waiters to get 'out of my way you bastards!', and then, inexplicably, sotto voce: 'meet me in the command post, I've got a supply of nitroglycerin! You're gonna love it!'

Studio 8H is a cramped bit of history. Comic Genius. Belushi, Radner, Chase. Ghosts of *SNL* comedies past. Looks bigger on TV than it does in person. In person it's a warren of dark runways, amphitheatre style seating, and a big swinging boom crane arcing overhead.

The Hollywood Vampires performed on the 30th anniversary special. Alice Cooper front man, Johnny Depp on slide and lead guitar. There was a mix up. Lou Reed was scheduled to perform after the first commercial break, but I fouled up. *The Vampires* performed in Reed's time slot. Reed blew a gasket. Cut my head off. Eviscerated me, right in front of Depp and his bandmates.

'You little bastard!' Reed screamed, 'I'm supposed to perform within the first thirty minutes of the open. It's in my contract! You violated me and the contract! YOU! You little fucker! I'm going to sue you, *Saturday Night Live*, Lauren Michaels *and* the Network! And when it's all over I'm gonna circle back around and sue you *again* just to show you what a lowlife worthless piece of shit you really are!'

I stammered. Begged for mercy. Babbled incoherently. Fell to my knees, swabbed the gritty stage with my forehead in a feeble attempt to quell the evil beast that threatened to rip my head off, shit down my neck, and put an immediate end to what had been a promising career.

Reed huffed. Stormed off. Disappeared.

His publicist grabbed me, helped me up, tried to brush the grit off my shirt. 'Your forehead is bleeding,' she said, 'but don't worry, he pulls this shit all the time.'

Depp was devouring a Banana cream pie, not a *slice*... the whole damn pie, ladling it up into his chomping maw with a massive serving fork.

The sugar was taking its toll. The pupils of his eyes were expanding and contracting at an astonishing rate.

'How do I handle him?' I asked, seated on a stool of my own, head on the counter, eyes following, close up, the serving fork digging into the pie, my mind a blur. I was sick to my stomach, suffering, replaying my backstage dressing-down at the hands of Reed; caressing the painful, still bloody furrows the stage grit had gouged into my forehead.

'Well...Bananas of course!' Thompson said. No, actually it's Depp, impersonating Thompson, flailing in his seat, a big bandage covering his wagging index and middle fingers.

'I told you particularly. It's Bananas. Giant gob-smacking Bananas!'

'Yes, clearly, gobsmacking!' Thompson, impersonating Depp, wails, 'Warhol! *The Underground!* The man knows his herbaceous plants. Genius! A big greasy self-flagellating Banana! Do the trick every time!'

'Let loose the Banana!' Depp blurts out, waving the serving fork, raising the yellow taser, sighting down the barrel, firing on the pie, meringue flying, screaming; 'Chase him down! Beat him senseless!'

'The slinking rat-hole-fuck won't know what hit him!' Depp, as Thomson, yells. Then, with the corndog again: 'Out of my way you bastards!'

The Banana follows Reed home on the six train, slams, headfirst, into his village lair on Waverley Place.

I follow, floating, all knowing, above the front door; watch the Banana charge slam, rattle its very hinges, again, and again.

Gleeful, I spy him. Reed. He's cowering, inside, visible through the window.

He knows the Banana is outside. How could he not? All that noise, the head-long banging...the door rattling like the Devil himself.

I relished his torment, cheer the Banana on!

‘Go! Go!’ I scream.

The front door bursts asunder! The Banana charges through the breach, ruthless, menacing, finds Reed babbling incoherently, something about dromedaries and candlestick bowling.

The Banana strikes him, mercilessly, drags his shrill, inert body across the dining room floor, slams him against the kitchen sink, the armoire, the credenza, corners him in the lavatory.

Reed, the shifty bastard, squeezes through the tiny frosted privacy window, careens down the block.

We follow, the Banana and me, race, in hot pursuit; down the block, around the corner, into an all-night deli, bash him. Expose him when he tries to buy weed in Washington Square Park, dog him at his next gig, stand leering and threatening in the wings, trip him when he steps on stage. He tries to sing. Who could perform with a giant self-flagellating Banana threatening their very existence?

Triumphant, I return to Studio 8H, high-five Belushi, down a celebratory shot or two with Aykroyd, spark up a fat-boy with Chevy, knowing, all the time, I’ll have to return to the bus depot when the sun comes up, catch that first commuter bus back to our little house in the burbs, but now, I am *content!* content knowing the giant, greezy-soft, gob-smacking, libidinous Banana is still out there doggin’ Reed’s every step, teaching Reed a lesson, pounding him senseless, takin’ a *Walk on the Wild Side*.

has vanished beyond my
control not of my doing it
has vanished and thus now
that the lights are out the play
may begin.

i take it in my blighted paw i
grasp it.
i take it in my blighted paw i
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The lights go out.

The play begins.

The world is born from the bellies of the rat-king in the form of the fish, Leviathan. It is a large fish, stretching to the edge of infinity, with crooked eyes and sharpened teeth. It splashes into the pool of the Void and makes its home there, swimming in lazy circles. The rat-king stalks at the edge of the pool, occasionally sticking its head into the Void, snapping at the fish. The whole of history takes place, on the back of Leviathan. As this occurs, the rat-king will often stick one of its paws into the Void, attempting to grab the fish. With each attempt, it speaks.

We

 Take

 It

 In

Our

Blighted
 Paw
 We
 Grasp
 It.
 Grasp it
 Grasp it
 Grasp it
 Our
 Paw
 Blighted
 Are
 We
 Grasping
 Gasping
 We
 Take
 It
 Before
 Void
 Before
 Fish
 Fish
 Fish
 In
 Our
 Paw
 Gasping
 Grasping

AND THE RAT-KING BIRTHED THE VOID AND THE VOID TOOK THE SHAPE OF NO-SHAPE AND IN IT SWAM THE WORLD, LEVIATHAN LEVIATHAN LEVIATHAN. WE TAKE IT IN OUR BLIGHTED PAW WE GRASP IT BUT WE GRASP THE VOID SO IT ELUDES OUR GRASP AND THIS IS THE STORY OF THE WORLD. ONCE THERE WAS A BUNDLE OF LITTLE RATS WHOSE TAILS GOT CROSSED AND THE RAT-KING WAS BORN AND THIS IS THE STORY OF THE END OF THE WORLD. AND IN THE SPACE BETWEEN THE RAT-KING AND THE VOID WAS SOMETHING UNSPEAKABLE, UNNAMEABLE AND THUS UNTHINKABLE FOR THOSE WHO NAME. BUT THE RAT-KING DOES NOT NAME, THAT IS THE MACHINATION OF HISTORY, WHICH PLAYS OUT ON THE BACK OF LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN. THE RAT-KING SIMPLY GRASPS WITH A HUNGER MATCHED BY NONE BECAUSE IT HAS A MULTIPLICITY OF BELLIES TO FILL. ITS PAWS, BLIGHTED AND TWISTED, REACH FOR THAT WHICH IT CANNOT HAVE BECAUSE IT IS A RAT OR SEVERAL RATS AND NOT A FISH OR SEVERAL FISHES. THERE IS NO FISHING ONLY LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN AND THE WHOLE OF HISTORY TAKES PLACE ON ITS BACK AS IT SWIMS CIRCLES IN THE VOID INTO WHICH IT WAS BIRTHED FROM THE STOMACH OF THE RAT-KING. WE TAKE IT IN OUR BLIGHTED PAW WE GRASP IT AND THIS IS THE STORY OF THE RAT-KING.

A court. The King sits on a throne, mannequin-like, frozen in laughter. The rat-king is in the corner, in the shadows, in the dust and the memories.

There is no gutter low enough for my screams

No king base enough for my company.

The Jester enters, and performs a routine. He slips on the floor. He farts. He juggles. The King screams in agony and claps. The Jester gives the King a poisoned sword. The King stabs the Jester, spittle and foam flying from his mouth as he chants in wordless delight. They freeze.

There is no gutter low enough for my screams

No king base enough for my company.

A Doctor enters, moaning and sobbing. He is followed by a train of his dead Patients, all of whom have rat tails. They circle the King and the Jester. After circling them three to four times, the Doctor and his patients collapse in a pile. A white flag is raised from within the pile, and is waved plaintively. It freezes.

There is no gutter low enough for my screams

No king base enough for my company.

An Accountant enters, growling and barking into a corded telephone. He walks in a zig-zag pattern, eventually tripping on the cord and falling. His growls turn to yaks and yips as he rolls on the floor, getting more and more tangled in the cord. He freezes.

There is no gutter low enough for my screams

No king base enough for my company.

A mother enters, accompanied by two Children who cough and sneeze at abandon. The Mother occasionally shushes them, but they return to coughing and sneezing a moment later. As she leads the Children around the room, they coo at the various frozen moments, approaching each to touch, to lick, to devour. The Mother swats them away, again and again. One of the Children goes to bite the Jester. The Mother pulls them back, and raises her hand as if to strike the Child. The other Child begins to wail. They freeze.

There is no gutter low enough for my screams

No king base enough for my company.

The frozen moments become rats and scatter into the darkness.

i take it in my blighted paw i grasp it.

The rats hang from nooses made of their tails. They twitch, they jerk, they groan. The rat-king enters. It sits in the center of the hanging rats. The rats begin to chatter their teeth in unison as the rat-king stands and dances. Its dance is at one moment fluid and graceful, at another jerky and unstable. The rat-king sits. The chattering ceases and the twitching, jerking, and groaning resumes.

i we I we grasp

A blighted paw, i we I take it

We we

i

Take it we are blighted

Blighted i we

We

grasp

I take

A paw a paw a paw
I n our blighted heart.

The rat-king sits in the void, eating the fish, Leviathan. The pool of the Void slowly drains as the rat-king devours all of History. The king and the jester burst through the bellies of the rat-king. They sit in the draining pool of the Void, watching the rat-king. The process is repeated for the Doctor and his Patients, the Accountant, the Mother and her Children. They gather in the pool of the Void as it empties. The rat-king speaks, with its mouths full.

And if there was

A king,

So base

So *wretched*

For my company.

Blighted.

He would be a Jester.

There would be a Jester and a King so base so wretched so blighted for my crown that he would slay the fish, Leviathan, Leviathan. And he would end the machine of history that infects its scales and return it to the pool of the void which i will drink and will nourish me, rat-king. I take him in my blighted paw i grasp him and this is the story of the king become jester become doctor become accountant become mother become child become saint become nothing become become become become become light that i must grasp in my paw my wretched paw.

And now that the lights are on the play must stop.

The lights turn on.

The play is over.

About the Authors

Josiah Webster's favourite place to dwell is the uncanny gulch between the real and the perceived. He also dwells in Portland, Oregon. Check him out on Twitter and/or Instagram (@byzantine_dream) for more.

Paul Lewellan lives and gardens on the banks of the Mississippi River in Davenport, Iowa, USA. His muse is his wife of forty years Pamela, aided by their seventeen-year-old Shih Tzu and their ginger tabby. He has retired after five decades of teaching and so has a lot more time to write. Although he doesn't believe life begins at 70, it does get more interesting.

Zvi A. Sesling, Brookline, MA Poet Laureate (2017-2020), has published numerous poems and flash/micro fiction and won international prizes. A five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he has published four volumes and three chapbooks of poetry. His flash fiction book is *Secret Behind the Gate*. He lives in Brookline, MA. with his wife Susan J. Dechter.

Michael Fowler is a science fiction writer treading a literary road.

Richard Holinger's books include *Kangaroo Rabbits* and *Galvanized Fences*, humorous essays, and *North of Crivitz*, poetry of the rural Upper Midwest. His prose and verse have appeared in *Southern Review*, *Witness*, *ACM*, *Cimarron Review*, *Boulevard* and garnered four Pushcart Prize nominations. *Not Everybody's Nice* won the 2012 Split Oak Press Flash Prose Contest, and his Thread essay was designated a Notable in Best American Essays, 2018. Degrees include a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from UIC. Holinger lives west of Chicago far enough to see woods and foxes out his desk window.

Paul Attmere is an actor and writer. Originally from the UK, he now lives with his family in Krakus, a small town in Lithuania. He's been published in *Spread the Word—Flight Journal*, *Running Wild Press Short Story Anthology*, *The Disappointed Housewife*, *Sixfold Anthology*, and *Litro Magazine*.

Brian Quinn is an Emmy Award Winning TV news journalist living in Manhattan who has spent the last thirty years covering news in New York City and overseas. Much of his work is rooted in those experiences.

Indigo Chong (they/she) is a scholar and playwright currently based out of Chicago. Her work focuses on postdramatic theatre, as well as French feminist philosophy. She can be found on Twitter at @maamletmachine.

About the Artists

Alex Nodopaka was born last century in Kyiv, Ukraine. He speaks, reads, and writes San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan and Muscovite. He mumbles in English and sings in tongues after vodka. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. He is presently a full-time author and visual artist in the USA, but considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations.

Phillip Temples is a product of the Midwest but he currently lives in Watertown, Massachusetts. He likes to dabble in mobile photography. He's published several mystery-thriller novels, a novella, and two short story anthologies in addition to over 180 short stories. You can learn more about Phil at <https://temples.com>.

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COMING SOON