

JANUARY 2024
ISSUE NO 01

THE STYGIAN ZINE



DO YOU DARE CONFRONT THE DEMONS LURKING IN THE STYGIAN DEPTHS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE?



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curator's notes

Welcome to "The Stygian Zine," where literary rebels find their voice and offbeat tales thrive.

Founded by myself and Pae Veo in 2023, The Stygian Society champions diverse, talent-driven fiction that stands on its own, regardless of social media following or industry cachet.

Our journey began with The Stygian Collection, an anthology funded by 73 backers through Kickstarter, and showcasing 24 fresh voices from the world of "AuthorTube". Now, we aim to establish the Stygian Society as a pillar in indie publishing, carving a path for timeless literature.

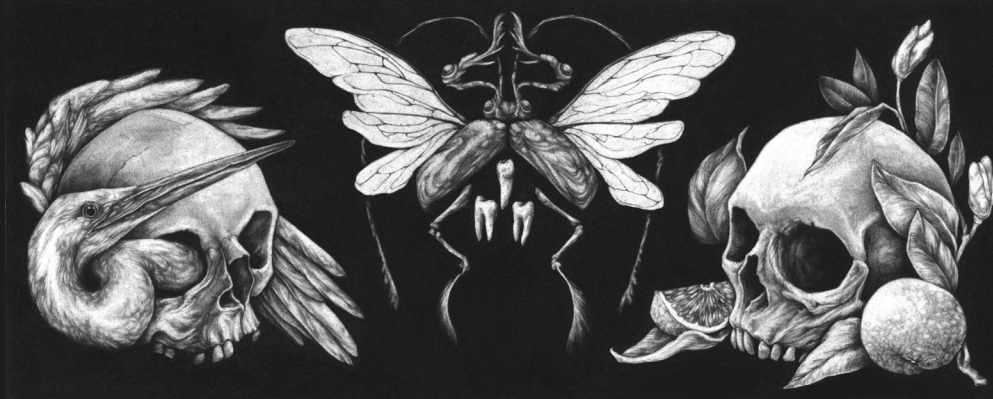
In publishing The Stygian Collection, we had an amazing experience collaborating with so many talented voices, and wanted to keep that energy going. It was this drive which birthed the zine you hold in your hands today (or, gaze at lovingly on your screen).

While we continue to seek out strong individual voices for solo publication, we can consistently unearth and showcase new talent through this bi-annual, smaller publication.

In our first issue, you'll discover works that embody the essence of "Stygian," echoing the spirit of our original anthology prompt. These pieces dig into the depths of human emotions, exploring identity, longing, and much more. Through visual art and storytelling, we aim to create a world where darkness and light converge, offering unconventional narratives that not only make you think, but make you feel as well.

So, climb aboard Charon's vessel and allow the ferryman to weave his tales; each carefully extracted from the creative souls he helped on their journeys down The River Styx. Rest assured, when you're ready to depart, he'll graciously bid you farewell ...

holly rhiannon



"REFLECTION" BY KAIT ROGERS

KAIT ROGERS IS A VISUAL ARTIST WHO LOVES WORKING WITH TRADITIONAL MEDIA. HER MORBID CURIOSITY AND LOVE OF NATURE OFTEN INFLUENCE HER ARTWORK WHICH CAN BE FOUND @KAIT.DRAWSTHINGS

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avIntn



My Epitaph #2

Allen Mahan

*Allen Mahan was educated at Kent State University; University College, Dublin, Ireland; and Arizona State University.
He lives and works in Portland, Oregon. Find him on YouTube @Big Hard Books & Classics*

Seal me up in an air-tight

Aluminum canister & shoot

Me into orbit w an obit'

Written by a famous American

Lesbian playwright

Who never knew me

Bury my shattered bones

Beneath your favorite

Banana tree & comment

(At least once)

Every Summer: "How good

"Ol' Al is tasting

this year."

Monsters on the Lawn

André Narbonne

André Narbonne's stories have won the Atlantic Writing Competition and been anthologized in Best Canadian Stories. Lucien & Olivia (Black Moss Press, 2022) was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.

Half a year ago, I was the subject of a series of X-rays commissioned by my doctor so he could give me the cold, hard facts. Since then, I have waited but the wait is over. The bad days have started. The dream of the fleet-footed monster, the one where you run and run but can't run fast enough, is no longer a dream. The monster has arrived.

The dying die. It's what they do. They are invested in the fearful recognition of our frail and feverish being. All other careers are filler. So it is with me even though, until today, the monster was a silent presence. A dull thud. A pressure, preemptive pinching pain, knife jab. Its eating habits, unaccountable. Blood sausage pizza. Rosemary pancakes. Popsicles.

And then, today, I am walking home from groceries and not throwing myself into the river when the monster speaks:

"You must fall in love."

Has anyone heard?

An inked-up woman stands at the corner. From her eyes, she hasn't heard a thing. She wears the expression of someone who has lost something vital. Her tattoos, which peek out everywhere and broadcast attitudes that would kill a job interview, are faded. The half-smoked cigarette she probably picked off the curb is unlit, the fingers that hold it, broken twigs. No one getting off the bus near where she stands makes eye contact. She might ask for something that poses a moral test.

A gaggle of tots trike past singing in their best Bieber.

You should go and love yourself.

The woman and I share a smile.

* * *

. I have three coats. One for winter. One to wear underneath my winter coat. And one to lie on my desk and hide my papers. I am a writer-slash-anything-that-pays-the-bills. My filler career is filled with fillers: house painter, barista, bookstore employee, sandwich expert, graduate assistant. My mother, with whom I live, is a critic. Everything in plain view is game for assessment.

"I hate that," she whispered recently about a paragraph peeking out from under my desk coat. "It sounds like you."

"How do you know what I sound like?"

The passage was pornographic. It belonged to a story in which two young lovers first express their physical love for each other. I don't recall writing anything so difficult. She was probably right to hate it. My paragraph was neither titillating nor descriptive. I'd been reading a ton of porn, reading stories with swashbuckling protagonists who identify sexually as frat. None of it instructive. I wanted my bodies to "mean." Then there was the issue of genre. Is sex comedy or tragedy? I had just returned from my diagnosis and imagining my story was a stopgap on reality that had the opposite effect. I wondered if my new appreciation for death would drive me as crazy as it had my mother.

The first day of kindergarten, she learned I'd died. Even though it wasn't true, it affected her profoundly. A secretary rang the house. A deep pulse in her voice choked the words. My mother, a large woman not given to exercise, ran down a road she and I first walked when my walk was a toddle; panted past the corner where, two weeks before my birth, a transport struck down my father and sister.

She made the hospital, discovered the mistake — a clerical error at a school still learning my name — and collapsed in a heap, hitting her head on the reception counter. Thus began my mother's journey.

A day later, on the way back home, she discovered that all the places she knew with the intimacy of grief had learned to speak.

The plum tree in the front yard ripe with yellow — a tree that I had tried to climb yearly until I grew old enough to triumph — spoke in leafy tones about the ladder my mother fetched to retrieve me because I could only ascend. The leaves did not genuflect to meaning. They knew the story as a vivid expectation. An undirected urgency.

At odd times in the years that followed, the stories came unbidden. The dewy lawn knew things she had forgotten in her pain: new shoes that pinched, old shoes, open at the toe to the rain and snow. The words sprang fecund. The garden denuded of snapdragons by my two-year-old fingers was the same garden my sister had run through on a muddy morning three springs before as shoots were showing. In a flowery voice that stopped my mother, it told both stories, left her perplexed in a pouring rain, staring into the deeply finite.

I was nine. I stood in the lawn with Mama, who was listening to something I could not hear. I was getting restless when she came back.

"Do you tell your friends I'm crazy?"

"What?"

"In the schoolyard? On this street? Do you tell them about my voices? Say I'm cuckoo?"

It was our secret. I had promised to never tell. She would get electro-convulsive therapy again if anyone found out. She was hopping hurt.

I said, "I don't say that."

"Not to your friends?"

I wondered how she could know. "No one."

"Your father was drunk. Your sister saw what would happen and tried to pull him back, but he didn't understand she was trying to save him. He yanked her into the street. She was the first one hit."

And so my mother paid me back for calling her crazy. She pointed to a green stick assemblage on the wall by the door. A praying mantis. On our lawn, even the insects were testifying confessional monsters.

Home with groceries — capelin roe, sesame snaps, Tang — I tell my mother about the voice. In pictures, Mother was a beautiful woman before the family debacle. After that, she welcomed a monster of her own by being as stationary as possible until it arrived.

She sits on the couch, where she was when I left for the store, her legs raised up on a cushion on the coffee table for better circulation. She might be a statue. A representation of the defeat of the human spirit by modernity. I see no signs whatsoever of her having moved in the half hour I've been gone. The irony is that two years ago I came home to look after her. Tables have turned. Soon, she will have to get up. My monster will insist.

"I just heard a voice."

She whispers, "What?" After the second bout of electro-convulsive therapy she grew suspicious of sound.

"It said to fall in love."

She looks around. Whispers, "Don't tell anyone."

"Maybe it's a Coleridge-thing. Maybe I have to find great beauty in sea serpents."

"Now who's crazy?" she whispers.

Not long after my mother punished me for giving away her secret, I heard a voice that confirmed I'd consorted with stupidity. It called to me from behind a tree but said it was in the garden.

It made static noises. "Cshh. Cshh." It asked, "Can you hear me? It's the pansies calling. Cshh. Cshh."

I skirted around the house. Doubled back. Met my friend Martin's grin with my fist when he turned the corner.

How could I have done that to her?

I wanted to know where they were, my father and my sister. When I asked my mother she said, "With God."

"Is that what the lawn says?"

"It doesn't talk about stuff like that. Just things that happened. It has to have seen it."

From the time the mantis ratted on me, I'd believed all her stories. For once, I wanted her to make one up. Anything. As the lawn is my witness, I was never more hungry for religion than when I was nine years old.

I met an old man on the road one day and I said:

"Mister, are you afraid of dying?"

He looked about — same way my mother does — located me, said: "Nope."

"But aren't you old?"

"Can't destroy energy. Can only convert it into other forms."

"When I die, will I meet my sister?"

My life had seemed a series of should-have-beens. I should have been a younger brother with a playground advocate of an older sister. I should have been a father's son, should have belonged to a happy mother.

"Meet? No! We don't meet nothing. We're just energy. You go to sleep but you don't dream."

That was scarier than anything I'd heard about death before. The good news was that you didn't die. The bad news was you were canceled to yourself. I'd known you can't take it with you. I assumed that meant things you can touch. This death meant losing the things you can and cannot touch.

Death was not real to me like it is now. I knew death in the hazy way that everyone knows sign and symbol ...

the Mona Lisa = a painting

the Taj Mahal = a building

Rhapsody in Blue = a song

spiders' webs, not spiders, catch flies.

The reality of death, its monstrous intimacy, has shed my should-have-beens. I see that now. I don't care where we go when we're dead. I am cancered with riddles, and this is the big one: I want to know where we go when we're alive.

According to the monster, you must fall in love.

Mother stayed home. There were voices that turned the world electric. She stayed home not out of fear but love. She raised me. Read to me. I could divide fractions in kindergarten, was reading chapter books before I set foot in the public school library. She was or pretended to be interested in me. She raised me to be happy. The lawn knows she had no basis in her own experience for happiness. That was her beauty.

If she sided with stasis before, now she walks. Pacing the hall outside my bedroom. Three days I've been here. She has tended me, always fearful to enter, but willing to let this happen here instead of someplace impersonal. ("Go away," I hiss at a dark footstep in the hall inside of my head.) She mothers me. There's no messing with Mother when she's a verb. As an adjective, Mother's a choose-your-own-adventure: mother of the bride, mother of darkness, mother of all wars, mother of symbol, mother of idioms, mother of creation, mother of invention, mother of an unnamed protagonist. (A thick hand on the doorknob of a room that must be mine; a monstrous breath in my ear.) ("Go away," I say, "I'm trying to get to the bottom of things.") Beauty may be abstract, but it cannot be in the abstract. It must be intimate. ("Don't you get it? I WANT to fall in love.")

"Idiot," says the monster, "you must fall in love with me."

To a Pale Angel (for Charmaine)

Pamela Kat Johnson

*Pamela Kat Johnson is a professional freelance editor, cartoonist, and published writer of short stories and children's novels.
Her home is a cat hotel in Montréal, Québec.*

You carry your cross so very high -
Arms straining -
Veins and arteries.
You looked beyond,
And all the puzzle pieces
Fell away
In stained glass shards.

In grace, we walked down basement stairs -
The fear had never really left:
The nameless wires and wetnesses
Creeping away to unknown space.
 The furnace -
 Breathing -
 Heaving -
We set the sacred pentacles
Around its spreading tentacles.

Come, let's play the old games now.
You can be Snow White.
In sets of shuffled fours and twelves
We'll make it turn out right.

When first you glimpse the other side,
A blinding light comes through the crack:
The hanged man's blindfold disappears; we
tango upside down.

Surprised by joy, you went too far -
You gave the priest your ring -
Then, nun-like, pierced your very womb
Upon a magic wand.

Was it just like this in Munchkinland?
Did Judy Garland lose her mind
While skipping through the poppyfield
With Toto in her arms?
Well, that's how heroines are born.

But I shall live to dance again,
The temple tiles beneath my feet.
So many things are intertwined -
And once I saw you in my dream:

I sat alone, plaiting my hair,
Inch by inch
My fingers worked the braid
Which did not end
Until
It reached your scalp.

So I'll be Glinda, if you like,
And we shall get to Oz.



JaketheBear

Queen of Night

Larry Oakley

Larry Oakley was born in the east end of Toronto and is a retired accountant living in Kingston, Ontario.

He is the author of Inside The Wild and Inside The Wild 2.

That night, the trees surrounding the shoreline of Hidden Lake looked like a giant army of crowned kings, standing with arms interlocked and halted at the water's edge, patiently waiting for a glimpse of a secret and solitary Queen, who was about to pass before them.

We also were there to see her visit, perched high above the treetops on a smooth, rocky bluff overlooking the lake.

As darkness approached, the day sounds gradually faded, reluctantly giving way to the night sounds of the swamps and forest.

A whippoorwill called its name, while lonely tree toads called out for a mate.

The long, wide wings of a great blue heron creaked as it flew below us on the rock, searching for a place to hunt.

In the distance, a chorus of frogs sang out a warning, perhaps to the blue heron, telling him their wetland was "too deep, too deep," while the coarse voice of a lone bullfrog croaked, "Go round, go round."

My friend asked: "When was the last time you looked down and saw a blue heron flying?"

Night in the wilderness does not descend from the sky, as it does in the city.

It creeps out slowly and quietly from under the shadows and from beneath the dark places where it remains hidden, waiting patiently for the sunlight to pass.

As night inched forward around us, along with a soft and sudden glow that flickered and faded on the wings of busy fireflies, thoughts of another long ago night slipped from my memory.

We had been fishing for bullheads, when someone on the pontoon boat pointed to their tiny lights, flashing in the blackness of the nearby wooded shoreline.

I knew he was poor as a boy because he liked to tell us how poor he once was.

He said: "I used to catch fireflies and keep them in a jar to use as a flashlight."

Then she appeared, slowly rising over the treetops directly across the lake, as if ascending from some black and fiery cauldron hidden deep beyond the darkness of the forest.

Perfectly round, timeless, as red as grass is green, enthroned on high, the undisputed Queen of the Night Sky had arrived.

“Shall we howl?” my friend asked.

We only laughed.

Perhaps we had become too civilized to howl at something so powerful and beautiful.

Where the moonlight touched the rippling water below us, both the light and lake came alive.

A glimmering pathway of light danced across the lake from the shoreline beneath us, growing longer and glittering brighter as the moon rose higher.

The mosquitoes tested our resolve to stay and watch from our rock, though they themselves were pursued by snapping dragonflies, which in turn were pursued by hungry bats.

A single loon, black-hooded, white-breasted, and checker-backed, paddled into our view, immersed in that beam of celestial light that penetrated deep into Hidden Lake.

The loon’s melancholy cry, unearthly yet unmistakable, only added to the perfect harmony of the silent spectacle before us.

We spoke few words then, preferring the company of our private thoughts as the moon reached deep into another place untouched by the light of day.

High above us, in a place once known as the heavens and now called space, a satellite sailed past, while the stars – silent worshippers, too – opened their eyes, one by one.

We watched the stars. The twins, Castor and Pollux, were overhead, and the seven sisters, known as the Pleiades, were there too, as was the giant hunter, Orion. In Greek mythology, all seven sisters were once pursued by Orion. To save them, Zeus turned them all into doves and then stars.

According to Indian legend, the Pleiades were seven brothers who were awakened in the night by singing voices that made them dance. As they danced, the voices receded, drawing the brothers little by little into the sky, where the moon transformed them into a group of dancing stars. But one of the dancing brothers, upon hearing the weeping of his mother, looked backward and fell with such force that he was buried in the earth. As his mother mourned over him, a tiny sprout appeared that grew into a great tree that reached for the heavens. And so the pine was born the tallest of trees, the guide of the forest, and the watcher of the skies.

From the rock, we watched something happen that night that I have not seen before. It was something that those who named the stars and created their myths could never have imagined. High in the distance, the silent lights of a jet passed through the night sky leaving a vapour trail in its wake. It spread out behind the jet and looked like a thin ribbon, as long and white as the Milky Way.

Moved by the invisible winds high above us, the vapour trail drifted across the night sky and fell toward the horizon. It gradually faded while slowly descending beneath the shoulders of Orion, across his belt, and down the length of his sword toward his feet. I wondered what the first stargazers would have thought of ships that sail through the sky.

Later, somewhere between space and our rock, out beyond our hearing, the blinking light of a large passenger plane flew by, heading eastward toward the Atlantic Ocean. Strangely, at the end of this long eventful night, I would think back about this plane one more time.

A long time later, we finally left our rock perch, but our adventure that night had not yet ended. We followed our moon shadows through the woods to our bicycles which we had left behind along the old railway bed.

We were grown men, but boyish then, we pedaled a long way back to the car parked near the old cemetery on the Opinicon Road. We loaded the mountain bikes on racks on the roof before driving home to Kingston, Ontario still miles away.

After I arrived but before I fell asleep I thought about the people in the passenger plane that I had seen that night. They were probably crossing the Atlantic Ocean by now, far from the railway bed, the rock bluff, the dark woods, the hidden lake, and the Queen of Night.

NEOISM

Linda Peli

Linda Peli is an Italian poet and horror author.

Her debut short story "Zero Good Things" can be found in The Stygian Collection.

The earth is beneath but, oh, it weighs!
I'm waist-deep in blood, covered in soot
As I crash your car and hear this phrase:
"The shoemaker's children go barefoot"

Remember the red fox that you fed?
We two have much in common
The red fox is now dead
And has been stuffed with cotton

The necklace that you gave me
(A dangly heart of gold)
Glares on my headless body
Just as I foretold

Lose the rod, dear dowser
Let a peek into your soul stain mine
Don't look for me out there
Allow my ghost to break your spine

"Love and demise hide the same thing ..."
sang the chaffinch
From its bird's nest.
Keep filling my grave, it's the last inch!
"...Imploration for rest"

What's the matter, my flamingo?
Why are you standing on one leg?
Put your feet up in this limbo
If you're too spent to beg

Tongue's restrained by a lariat
But words are too spectacular
Forgive me, Karen Eliot
Shall I try your vernacular?

*Rachitici vaghiamo in quest'effimera quiete
Ciò che siamo è nero su nero
Non abbiamo un Dio e non ci sono mete
Hai mai fatto questo pensiero?*¹

Deride the hemorrhage of stars, darling
Why'd you sleep with balled up fists?
May your heartstrings begin unsnarling
If that nightmare still persists

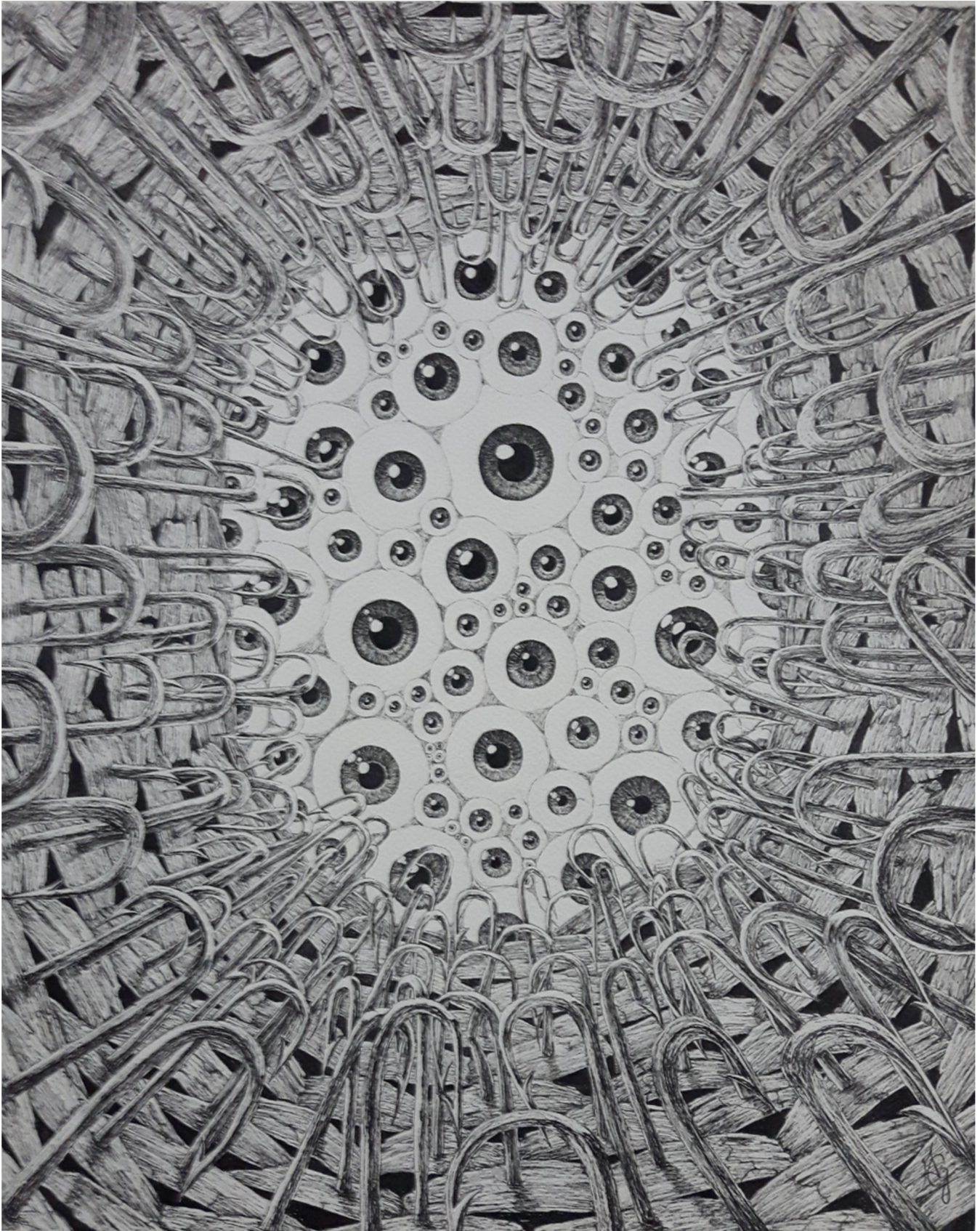
Tonight's moon? Razor-sharp
While the logs burn to the bone
For this coda on tuneless harp
Turns out it's yours and not my own!

How many pills to see you in a dream?
How many more to meet by River Styx?
Dare I wring out our chrisom and scream:
"There is nothing death can't fix"?

Yet if this grief needs me, why would I stray?
The answer: an echo.
Euthanized dogs don't speak, do they?
They can bite, though

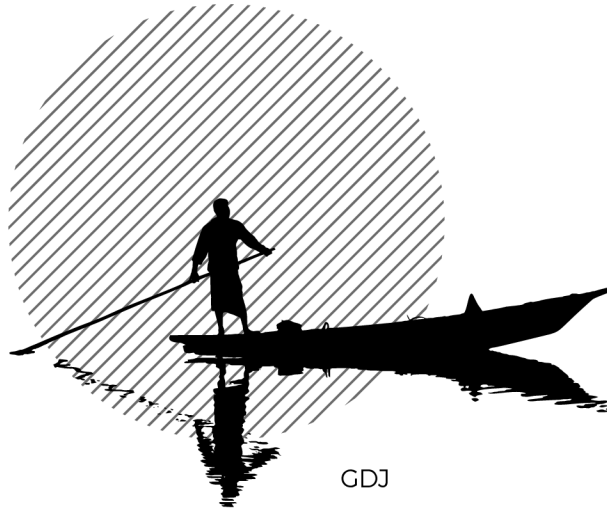
"This is not what I want" I pray
Holding myself by the throat
"But that's how it is" they say
Do you like what I wrote?

*1 Translated from Italian: Stunted, we wander
through ephemeral quietness / What we are is
black on black / We have no God and there's no
destination / Did you ever think about that?*



"VENOM" BY GERROD GENERAL

GERROD CRAIG GENERAL IS A FIRST NATIONS ARTIST WHO HAS BEEN DRAWING ALL HIS LIFE. HE LOVES DARK THOUGHTS AND IMAGERY AND WORKS IN EITHER INK OR ACRYLICS.



A Son Seeing His Father Off to Sea

Nicholas Siu-ting Lee

Nicholas Siu-ting Lee (he/they) is a non-binary Chinese writer based in Vancouver, Canada. They have been published and writing professionally since 2023, and can be found at @SiutingLeePoet online.

Across the River, a father now gone,
Facing a precipice for the Living.
And yet, how can we let you set off sail?
Never showing you the life we had drawn.

Hark, surrounded by family and friends,
Let them cheer and prostrate for tragedy,
Yet lo, there is no cure for loneliness,
Not when your pride in me forever ends.

Susan Dowling

(Originally published by the Invention Journal)

Saige Severin

Saige Severin is a 4th year undergraduate majoring in English. She is a writer, editor, artist, and lover of all things magic. You can find her @igneum_art on Instagram.

Susan Dowling passes into the next life in much the same way that she passed time in the first. Stalwart, in her leather upholstery chair, behind her heavy oak desk, back straight and eyes fixed forward.

Cold feet rest softly on the thick rugs beneath her. Cold hands fall to her lap. Poised, even in death. These hands turned the pages of every book that lines the shelves around her. Every spine caressed, every cover opened, every story witnessed, understood, and slowly forgotten. Dark curls lie still against her glacial shoulder. Dark lips are held apart as cold leaches their colour and leaves them stiff. Her arms and legs and old, tired joints and chest that can no longer rise nor fall sit firmly in that old leather chair, unmoving. A beam of afternoon sunlight tumbles down her shoulder from the windows at her back, lighting up the particles of dust that dance on the air of her final breath.

The rest of her is elsewhere.

The parts of her that cannot remain tethered to the cooling corpse in the leather chair float upwards, buoyed by the last wind of her own lungs. Up through the vaulted roof of her family home, past pristine brickwork and the last traces of smoke from the slowly fading fire in her office grate. Up until she breaks apart, ripped asunder and cast aside by the pull of air and the hot, burning glare of sunlight.

She drifts. Falls. Converges. Diverges.

Susan Dowling stands at the gates of Heaven.

They are exactly as Father Fuoto described them to her more than six decades ago. Herself, a child with little knowledge of the world, watching his fingers trail as he drew shapes in the air and breathed color into them with his words. "The house of God," he called it. "Where all things Good may live in jubilation."

She looks upon the gates and thinks of those fingers. Taut skin over round knuckles, spotted with age and calloused with use. Interlocked, twisting lines and fingernails, tiny hairs like curls of iron on an ancient fire grate, like the sculptures and holy symbols carved into the stone of the church walls. She sees those hands beneath the sickening grace of what waits before her.

Great, vaulting gates wrought in gold, the light of the heavens behind them. Bars that rise to the sky and further, further until her mind can no longer comprehend the glory that her eyes can see. Fog roils behind the gates, reflecting holy brightness back at her like sunlight off a pool of shattered glass. Each piece suspended, shimmering, magnifying every droplet of light that hits it and sending that droplet forth in a terrible wave. It crashes over Susan Dowling's semblance of a body and sends her gasping to her knees.

Earth beneath her grasping hands. Soft, rich soil, wet with morning dew but still dry enough to slip neatly through her fingers as she clings to what little certainty is left to her. She brings a fistful to her forehead and presses into it, a gentle tremor in her hands. It grounds her. Re-centers her. Breath flows into lungs brought low by righteous terror and allows them to fill once more. She lets the soil fall from her palm, steadier now, and sits back on crossed ankles to stare at the gates.

They are just as golden as before. Just as great. But now there is dirt beneath her fingernails and air returned to her lungs. She breathes until the gates are smaller, until it seems she could approach and push them open with one smooth, gentle swing. The holy light dims into something beautiful and soft. It begs her to come forth. It offers its embrace and she thinks, finally, that she is ready. So many long years spent holding together her family. Her crumbling legacy. So much effort poured into keeping her back straight, her head up, her mind focused.

She remembers her father's forefinger trailing along the edges of that old oak desk. Lifting to rub against his thumb, a look of displeasure on his face at imperfections she could not see. Always searching for dust that was not there.

Her mother's hands on the back of her suit after graduation, smoothing away wrinkles only she could see. Turning her to smile for the camera. Grip on her sleeve so tight Susan feared the fabric would tear from the strain of it.

Her elder sister's useless fury. Her younger brother's hollow eyes. Her mother's turned back. The stench of whiskey-sour breath. Empty boardrooms. Echoing hallways.

Susan learns to wear heels because the sound of unknown footsteps on hardwood makes her mother flinch. She learns to sit, and watch, and listen.

There is no need for all that, here. The holy light of heaven burns her memory to ash. After all this time, she is ready.

Her knees take the weight of her body as she rocks forward and lays a palm against the ground. She pushes, bringing one leg up to crouch, then the other. Her toes dig deep into familiar earth that holds her up with ease. She stands.

Susan Dowling stands at the gates of Hades.

A ragged scream trips on its way out of her mouth and falls free as a wounded noise of shock. The soft earth beneath her feet is changed to water and gritty sand. Heaven's light is gone, dimmed to the gentle flicker of candles and the cool, eerie glow that ripples from flowering fields before the gates. Rivulets of water flow over her ankles and she turns, too late, to see the dark end of an ancient ferry slip soundless into fog, carried away from shore by unmanned oars.

These new gates are made from dark stone, shot through with whips of glinting iron. Three figures stand at the foot of them, across a long field of wilting flowers and coiling twists of whispered memory. She shrinks from the field on instinct. Cool waves lap against her calf, higher than before, and she knows. With the clarity of the dead she knows that if she does not step forward she will be pulled beneath the gentle waves, her body floating softly in the wake of a passing ferry, on and on, until the water pulls apart her very being and she disappears into mist.

Fear drives her forward and uncertainty keeps her on her feet, balanced with the memories of skills long lost. She was fast in college. Before her father's expectations locked her dorm room door, before the heavy stare of disapproval shaped her into something flinty and cold, Susan used to run. Over the rocks and uneven paths of the lake, perched on the balls of her feet, limbs tense but mind rocked to peace by the easy slap of old sneakers against packed earth. She did not run, in law school. Family overtook pleasure and she stood still for many, many years.

She runs now. Away from the figures at the dark stone gates. Along the shore of the river of fog, feet pounding against the border of black water and ominous fields. She runs faster in death than she ever did in life, but even here her body tires. Breaths come shorter. A dull ache builds in her legs and blazes into sharp pain that forces her to pause. She stops, one foot in the river, one foot in the flowers beyond, and hunches over with her hands on her knees. Restful minutes pass as she unclenches her jaw and allows her muscles to soften. She stands.

Susan Dowling stands at the gates of Valhalla.

Wide, oaken doors fill her field of vision. Brass rivets and carvings of monsters whirl through the breadth of them, two huge knockers at the center in the shape of boar's heads. The low beat of drums echoes from inside. Gone is the river, gone the flowering fields and lilting light. The air here is thinner and Susan's quick, panicked breaths do nothing to ease the pressure burning in her chest.

This is nothing like what Father Fuoto described to her. There are no wise old hands in these doors. No angel's choir in this heavy drumbeat.

Her father told her to keep her head down. His calloused palm on the back of her neck, keeping her gaze forward. Her mother told her to listen, quietly, and obey the words of God as strictly as she obeyed her country's laws. And she did. She planted her feet on the ground, looked straight ahead, and obeyed.

This land in which she stands is lawless. The words of God have no meaning here. She turns from the great oak doors and steps down the rocky path at her feet, eyes fixed to the horizon line. Down cobbled roads and winding lanes she walks, until the drumbeats fade behind her and the thin mountain air is still in silence. She walks until the path drops off into nothingness, and there she stands.

Susan Dowling stands at the gates of Gehenna.

She falls to her knees and screams.

It echoes off the walls of a space that cannot be enclosed. It bounces from surface to surface, off souls and the edges of mountains, disassembling and reassembling as it tumbles past gate after gate after gate. The sound tapers off before it can reach living ears and collapses into quiet.

Jonathan Dowling stands at the threshold of his mother's office.

In all the years since he last set foot in this room, little has changed. Old family portraits still hang on solemn walls. A half-empty bottle of ink sits on a table, its sides carefully wiped clean so as not to stain the wood beneath it. His mother's desk is sharp and clear as in all his memories, every paper, pen, and notebook tucked neatly into its proper drawer.

The stately space is emptier without her. They told him she died here, in the office, one foot in the grave but still with her eyes turned down on her work. Her shelves have collected dust in the weeks it took him to arrive from his flat in Sussex. A burgeoning cobweb connects two corners of an alcove in the wall and Jonathan brushes it casually away. Someone must have expected him, however, because a small fire crackles in the grate and any traces of unpleasantness have been cleared from the air with a hefty dose of freshener. The floral tinges of it cling to his jacket as he makes his way towards her desk.

He waited to face this until all the other work was done. There was a will to execute, calls to be made. Jonathan saw to her body and arranged a rather unremarkable funeral. A plain wooden casket, a small service, and a body lowered into the ground with few words and fewer theatrics.

Jonathan stops at the edge of that old oak desk and runs his fingers along the edge of it. They trail on, down the smooth lines that his mother must have traced a thousand times, feet moving softly on the carpet as his hand turns a corner and he follows it around. Jonathan sits where his mother once sat, nestled in the creases of her old leather chair. Back straight, eyes trained down at where his own shaking hands hold the edge of her desk like a lifeline. The windows at his back vault high and wide and golden as the gates of heaven as Jonathan sits, and breathes, a gentle sunbeam tumbling down his shoulder.

Emerald Dress Enthea

Kimōra Seidra

Kimōra Seidra is a poet and prose writer whose themes span dark romanticism, archetypal psychology and occultism.

She is the founder of Open Medicine, a community open mic event in downtown Toronto.

She can be found online @kimora.seidra.

I was made for Devil 'L' Lucy dresses
And dreaming
In half-mortal maiden meadows.

Freshly dipped
In river Styx
Persephone picked
A pretty pinch
Of pink, plutonian peonies.
And ever since,
The roots and seeds
Slithered in her helices;
Curing her of all mortal things
For the Prince of Darkness season.

Serpent-physician to the gods
Sent the nymph, Paeonia
To cure twenty diseases
One of which, is the snake's own kiss
Which she can now drink freely
By Morning Star
And Evening.

Look now,
Her lip is seething.

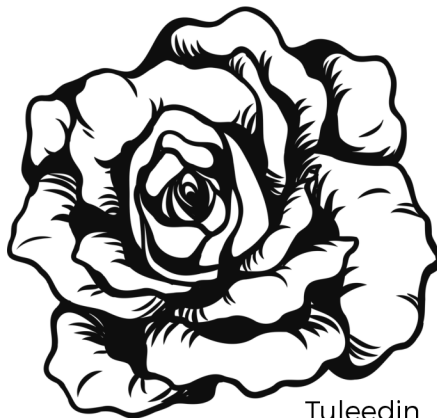
Mora, Imora, Imorta –
The elixed mix of
Marrow and forevermore.

The Eighth Blackbird sings
Of promise rings
Reclaimed by the soil.

See now,
On hills with seven cloths
She never toils.

Magicians illicit alchemy
To turn ash
Back into gold,
Whilst all the younger lovers
Know eternal life is hidden
In the pricking petal
Of a freely-given rose.

See how she bleeds, and bleeds
But back to black she never goes.



Tuleedin

Oil Painting

Holly Rhiannon

Holly Rhiannon has been writing dark fiction, fantasy, and poetry professionally since 2020. She is a novelist, publisher, and literary contributor, and can be found online @stygianpen.

When I was a child I wanted to feel the edges of an oil painting — the ridges that gave it texture and dimension.

My Mother would take me to art galleries and we'd stare at passion hidden behind a layer of glass. She taught me to understand its importance and the need to protect it, but I still longed to run my fingers along those ridges.

As I grew older, I spoke with other children until I found their ridges. I thought that once I uncovered that passion and brought it out from behind the glass that our paintings could become a collaborative work. But soon I found that some ridges are better kept behind glass — that they were not formed from sable brush but angled knife as I ran home from school to avoid the harsh colours of their undeveloped palette.

High school brought about a period in which my sole focus was on shades of black and grey. I found comfort in their dreary countenance and even connected with others who wanted to paint with the same brush. Yet in the end, I would only be the turpentine to their Pollock, my own canvas secured behind plate glass sitting silent on a gallery wall.

Still, I chose to carry my palette of shades with me through University when on rare occasion inspiration would align and our oils would pour out in an explosion of rainbow fireworks until I felt like I could — —

Rule the world.

But sometimes we apply too many layers of paint to a canvas. Worse yet, we allow others to join in on this process, not as collaborator but as new master of the work, building and building in layers until the canvas is thick and heavy and not a trace of the original painting remains.

The overladen canvas will fall from a wall.

I fell from the wall, colours bleeding out, filling the cracks of the hardwood gallery floor. Stuck, as the layers I had allowed to be built — my ridges — cemented me to the lowest point.

The only thing worse than being frozen behind glass on a white wall is being face down in the dirt.



My 20s were a blur. I felt that my paint had dried. Though I righted myself, my canvas was a melding of mismatched colours, frozen in place for the world to see. If a reviewer had taken a real look they would have panned me and I would not have blamed them. But I owned my dappled colours. The spatter of red that illuminated the black. I ran fingers over the imperfections and learned to love them.

And, by the age of 30 I learned that turpentine was not something to be ashamed of. That one can start over with a fresh canvas, no matter how dry our layers of paint have become. How rough our ridges appear.

One day, you will find others who have left behind an armour of dried oils to reveal their blank canvas, somewhat worse for wear, and you can build new ridges together. Ridges that do not need to be hidden behind glass but which you can run your fingers over until you understand every stroke that went into their creation.

Phosphenes

Anna Quercia-Thomas

*Anna Quercia-Thomas is a Hispanic American writer and academic based in Western Australia.
She writes poetry and speculative fiction about found family, queer romance, and connection in dark times.*

Phosphenes, or a meditation on darkness

Fireworks him, a hand reached through darkness
And for once you thought it might be shadows

To you, mountains on the skyline were bruises that faded with sunset
Sparked alight again each time he called your name
and the sun rose to do the whole fucking dance over again

The grass crunched beneath your boots a thousand times
And the light always turned, shook its head at your transgression
With a gentle reminder not to touch the wildflowers along the path
No matter how rough the journey got

Fireworks him with stars overhead
And a thousand kaleidoscope pinpricks in your eyes
You wished for a free hand to shield your face
As you scrambled blindly over hills that rumbled with voices

Gently now, in the warmth of the sun
With the river lapping at the sides of its bank,
Reaching up to you with little arms in a quiet sort of warning

Sparks above you now, hunker down for nightfall
With your legs soaked to the shins
And the nips of fish scales against cold fabric

Don't forget to hold your breath
Until the thunder passes by
And you can think once again of safety

Fireworks him, a hand reached through darkness,
and you, you turned away again.

Midnight Scars

(Originally published by Myth & Lore Spun Stories)

Carella Keil

Carella is a Pushcart Prize nominated writer and digital artist who splits her time between the ethereal world of dreams, and Toronto, Canada, depending on the weather.

"I want to turn your face into poetry," he says.

The raven at the writing desk offers its quill. Sixteen staples to the back of the head and a paper-weight for your heart.

The page is blank until you begin reading it. The pitcher empty until you turn it upside-down. Pour me a glass, I want to be filled to the brim with you.

"Can you help me," asks Love, "I've lost Desire." Her blue eyes like wishing-wells you've thrown sparkling coins at beneath the stillborn sun.

The girl with clipped wings, the snake with forked tongue; these are all creatures you expect to meet. But here in the garden are untread paths, barely a foot-print deep.

A girl who prays for one eye to see the past, the other eye to see the future. A boy who longs to hear only a siren's song.

Dip the pen. Spill my ink.

"You can't, because I'm not a poem."

She is born blind to the present, he with a mouth unable to respond to his lover's voice. Between cliffs of shoulder-blades, the waterfall down her back never stops flowing.

Take a sip. Others will.

You might as well have erasers for eyes, if you expect to get out of here intact.

Not that you came in that way.

"It's ok, I'm a poet," he says, and this makes you hate him a little more.



"A HEAD FULL OF FLOWERS" BY CARELLA KEIL

Milk

By an anonymous contributor

There are hammers on the horizon.
There are razors.
There are cliffs.
There are walls.
There are pills.
There are flames.
There are accidents.
There are ways.

“How are you feeling?”
doctors ask mothers.

And mothers hold their newborns,
“Fine. Just a little tired.”

They give her
a few baby carrots,
plain noodles for lunch.
Then they send her home,
when the stitches are young.

In the end
they wonder why
the milk disappeared.

Heading West

A Dream

Olivia Van Guinn

Olivia Van Guinn (they/them) is a Vietnamese-Canadian writer living in Calgary, with many short stories and poems published and forthcoming in Canadian journals. Their Instagram is @reeling_and_writhing.

— For Emmerly

I. HEADING WEST

From your moment of death,
The sun perpetually sets —
From the specter of the East
To the Saturn-ringed West

Blink.

Wipe the mist from your eyes.

This moans like October.

pours like liquor.

tastes like pollen.

hurts like religion.

Blink your eyes.

And cry if you need;

The breeze will join you in sympathy,

Whispering its pale scent of ash.

Downhill is the bank of the river

Where you stand, staring down, is the bed.

West — glued to the soles of your feet —

Unfurls wherever you tread

Wind grinds your cheek turning backwards,

Strokes your ear when you're facing ahead.

The murmuring floe.

The clouds are drawn.

Skin's orange-stained in the sun,

Step-by-step,

(one-by-one)

On a trail of

Cobblestone

Step-by-step,

(one-by-one)

To meet your mom.

The weight of a whole life lived

Sealed in amber

Repels you

On.

II. MOM

Taught me how to die

From the rocking chair.

Mom.

So that 3 times 2 is 6

4 times 3 is 12

but 3 times 5 reminds me of death

Mom.

Left life after only a third of what she earned

And taught me the hurt by which *I know* hurt.

Lady Death

Mom

Her mottled legs and leaking breath

It's quieter than dimming lights

twisting a leaky

faucet tight

Once the exhale drops

Like a fistful of coins

The rattle stops

The stops

No

Stops.

There's lots I'm doing when I die,

But not one of them is waiting.

III. THE RIVERBANK

The presidents are here.
Ballet dancers and rocketeers
kings and queens

Standing fast against the breeze
(Swaying like trees)

Toes planted in the sand
Anchored on the bank.

They —

Brush your cheek as you march past.
Pinch your chin and curl their lips.

— say:

The cold is written on your face.

Your lips are dry; your nose is peach

Your eyes are made of outer space.

You will not see the gate for days.

They're Tantalus for lack of drink.

Into the East they fade away.

They do not change

And do not think.

I think

The dead are more afraid to die
Than when they were alive.

IV. ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

The

lovers on this bank.

Ivory

lovers on this bank.

Mist

lovers on this bank.

Doubled by their reflections in the Styx.

Rooted against the stones,

They never turn north or south alone.

But when one trips West

Toward the great Westbound sunset

The other inches forward to join them

(toofar)

And together this way,
They die hand in hand
A little death every hour
For the lovers on this bank.

V. COLD

Horizon's jagged like an oyster shell.

The sun is but a pear —

She rests on the lips of the skyline

When she's not much longer for the world.

Her petals have withered and curled.

When the night eats this world

I believe

That grief

Is not the wasting of love but the withering of it.

It putrefies when it cannot be applied or given

Or touched to the skin.

And

What's welcome to all and wanted by none?

Cold prickles the skin and numbs the soles

A chill flurries up from the floe.

The heartbeat hastens, then slows.

It frosts on the lashes and blackens the toes.

Oyster flesh.

Don't go.

VI. FOG

The clouds tuck in the earth to bed

Swaddle you in white

Like the hospital.

You amble 'cross the bridge of death

All in white

But dawdle

To watch the leaves float down the stream

You say that life is but a dream

Your mom

Would swaddle you in sheets —

She'd hold your chest through sheets of fleece

—

And sigh that dreams are only dreams.

Eyes chase the leaves that float downstream

And let them go.

They swirl 'round rocks and disappear.
And through the lonesome latter years,
You'd dream of death –
Through all your nights –
A distant conquest to be made.
But this is death, the great surrender
Which falls from the sky
Like fog.
Funerals are for the living.

The dead float downstream
Like leaves.

VII. LETTERS

A writing desk before the gates
Hands you a pen and paper.

*Here, a letter can be written
For family or friends still living.*

You stare up at the desk, shivering.
"Will the letters be delivered?"
*When your close one's end is near,
They'll drift downstream and find it here.*

You hold the pen
Pinch paper.
Bleed dry.

When done, you lift the letter high.

The writing desk inclines

And

Hands

you

a letter from the pile

Which shines.

"Are you saying now this one is mine?"

It's mine.

It's mine.

It's all the thanks Mom could not give
While moms were teaching other kids
To add and write and be polite;
Mom only taught you to surrender
With nothing but her dust in an urn as reward
Here it is.

It's from your mom.

Your earnings from her lessons in your hands.

VIII. THE ARCHWAY

A looming archway and its shadow are a ring
At the end of all things
Where you stand.

(Full and empty,
Not hungry, not heavy,
Dead and newborn,
And by being all things,
Being none.)

An outstretched hand

And golden eyes

Inside

A slightly familiar face

(So this is where the sun has gone).

*Come, sire. Let me touch your lips and take the life
you've stowed away. Your memories will dissipate,
rejoin the world, and be again sorrow and joy and
anxiety and abandon and coldness and warmth,
and those who know to recognize it will see you in
light rain on a windshield under lamplight in
Spring.*

"What will become of me? The part of me that's
more than memory?"

*The primordial and eternal shall remain. How
need not be your concern. Are you ready,
sire?*

You're ready, sire.

Dark river through the strait

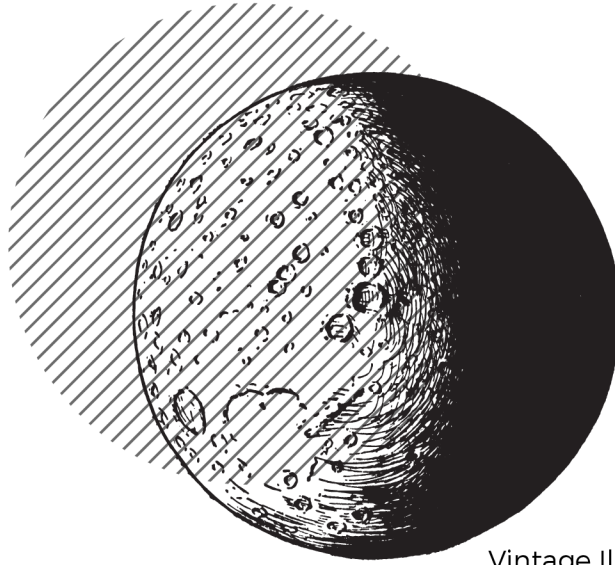
Holds the starlight, loves the shade.

Clouds are high

And blackish-blue.

The moon is halved by an eclipse.

A kiss flattens the bow of your lips.



Vintage Illustrations

Lunar

J. Oughton

John Oughton is a retired college teacher in Toronto who has been publishing poetry, fiction and nonfiction since 1973.
His latest poetry collection is *The Universe and All That* (Ekstasis Editions).

Every night, cloud-rapt
or chrome-dazzling,
these places pass our eyes
an atlas of scars and bruises
marsh of epidemics
sea of humours
marginal seas
ocean of storms

painting the way home
for the lightless traveler
the stumbling drunk
the unhomed of all kinds
until they waver along the path
to the sea of eternity
marsh of sleep
lake of dreamers
sea of clouds

like the horseman's cold eye, riding by
lovers lost in themselves
or lost to each other
the shining prospect opens horizons for the
bay of heats
sea of crises
sea of nectar
bay of rainbows

each of us has a moon-path set
in our coded fate, yet the
unknown places sail on
as we reach at last
that sea of waves
bay of dews
sea of vapours
lake of death



Founded in 2023, The Stygian Society publishes beautiful books
that make you think.

Stygian Publications are edited by Pamela Kat Johnson

The Zine is curated by Holly Rhiannon.

The light variant is designed by Holly Rhiannon.

To find out more about our publications or submit your work for
consideration, please visit us at www.stygiansociety.com

ART FOR ART'S SAKE



Do you dare confront the demons lurking in the Stygian depths of the human psyche?

Step into the shadows with 24 fresh voices, each offering their own unique twist on the meaning of "Stygian". In this debut publication, you'll find yourself immersed in a diverse range of tales that explore the depths of human emotion. From dark horror and murder mysteries to surreal poetry and philosophical musings, each story is a unique journey into the unknown.

Experience the vengeful poem that unleashes Dante's wild spirit, the melancholy memory of railway tracks, and the young witch who discovers the true power of flames. From the ancient past to the dystopian future, The Stygian Collection promises to take you down a dark and winding path.

Where it leads?

That's up to you to find out.



The Stygian Zine is a publication featuring works of short fiction, essays, photography, poetry, and visual artwork.

Issue 1 features the creative works of 16 creators from around the world, focusing on their own connection to the word "Stygian".

Praise for The Stygian Collection

This collection took me into a realm I don't usually explore and I enjoyed the experience. A wide range of stories and authors make for rewarding reading.

-Clear Thinker

Very interesting read. Thought provoking yet not in an overbearing way. In addition, the collection of short stories is great when you have only a short time to read. You can complete the story and not be left hanging.

Overall, very enjoyable. I highly recommend it.

-Paul Mandry

I'm not usually an anthology person, but I think this collection might have changed my mind. Great variety in stories within each section, with 3-4 that really stood out and resonated with me. Will be keeping an eye out for future releases!

-Kayla

The Stygian Zine