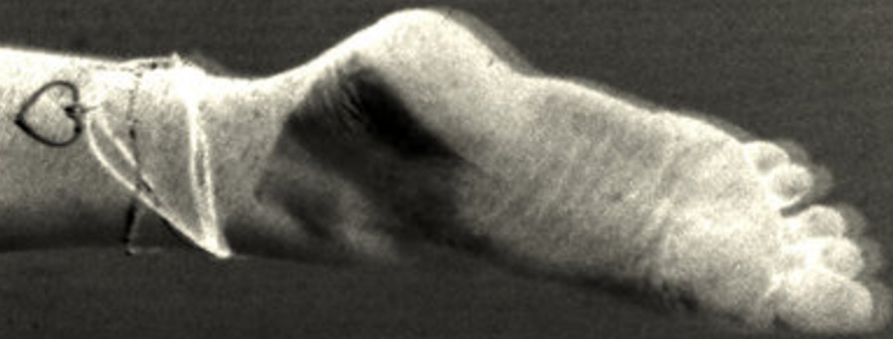


JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



ISSUE 63
FEBRUARY 2015

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

February 2015, Issue 63

ISSN 2152-2162

Online Editor: Laura Garrison
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Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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Editor's Note

Valentine,

We bring you adventure, magic, danger, surrealism, despair, and more adventure. If you want sap, go suck trees in Vermont.

Wuv,

Laura Garrison

The Action Never Stops at Action Park

Michael Mingo

When I get to the front
a man in red trunks
barks out commands: cross
your ankles, fold your arms,
keep your head raised,
don't wait
for your friends
halfway down.

In third grade, hanging on
the jungle gym, we spread rumors
about the descent. We whispered
as if they were ghost stories:

David said his brother said
you come out like a veteran
crash test dummy. Keith heard
they gave hundred-dollar bills
to employees who tested it.

Cannonball Loop
is a Great American Rite-of-Passage.
Damn the safety regulations
and the laws of physics, we build
what shouldn't, but must, exist:
mine cart thrill rides, canyon tightropes,

waterslides with loop-de-loops.
I can't pass that up, despite
the scraped elbows and contusions.
Just think of the stories, the effort
put into this contraption.

Cold water runs past my legs.
I can see the escape hatch from here.

MICHAEL MINGO is an undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, majoring in creative writing. His work has previously appeared in "The [Bergen] Record," and he originally hails from Vernon Township, New Jersey.

The Nature of Johnny's Medicine

Sloan Thomas

I saw Johnny Two Jays hitchhiking last week. He has to be around ninety years old . . . maybe older. His thumbs are so gnarled that when he sticks them out he looks as though he is pointing back at himself. His shoulders are hunched over, the worst case I ever saw. They curl into his torso like a wave building on the ocean. His gaze is firmly centered to the ground. I couldn't tell you if he's ever looked up.

I was driving into the gorge. It's where the river cuts into the slate cliffs full of copper and cobalt veins. A small bit of highway that connects Upriver and Downriver. It's not a road for the nervous. A narrow stretch, only wide enough to be one lane, but somehow manages to be two. There are more potholes than asphalt and what's left could slide out at any moment. No one repairs the gorge and no one claims ownership.

Still, if you're local you've traveled on it. People around here don't think too hard about the danger. We are born with an innate belief that, no matter the condition, eventually we will get to the other side.

I'm a local boy. I trust in my destiny as much as anyone around . . . maybe more. I have fasted for days on nothing but acorn water and danced across the fields praying with my songs. I follow all the rules my grandmother taught me and I step exactly where I am supposed to. I know my medicine is good.

I entered the gorge as I have many times and about halfway through I saw Johnny Two Jays sticking his backwards thumb out. I pulled over and rolled down my window. "Hey, Johnny," I said, with the intimacy of a relationship that wasn't really there. "You need a ride?"

He looked at me with a sideways smile and leaned heavy on his walking stick. His steps weren't slow or fast but fell without sound somewhere in the middle. He walked around the whole car until he was in front of my open window. "You need a ride?" I repeated. For all I knew he could be deaf.

People talk. They have for generations. Our history is compiled of second-hand stories and passed-down gossip. We say Johnny is a shape-shifting mountain lion. He roams around in the dark talking to devils. At sunset, you can smell his medicine stronger than a dead skunk on the road. Inky and dark it curls through the valley forcing doors closed and windows locked. Any missing cats, bizarre accidents or strings of bad luck could be the work of Johnny.

He looked inside my car as best as his S-shaped spine would let him. "I know you," he said.

I nodded my head. And waited, because I was raised right.

"You dance?" His hand gripped the edge of the open window.

"Yes." I wanted to pry his fingers off my car. "Since I was nine."

"You hunt and fish?"

"My whole life."

"I saw you down at the river last month catching salmon in your net. All of them sick."

My heart picked up its pace. "I didn't see you."

No one claims Johnny Two Jays as family, but in the cemetery, fourteen gravestones carry his last name. All the dates are seven years apart. I've heard they were his children, even if the math doesn't add up. I've heard they were his brothers, even if the oldest woman in the valley swears he was an only child. My girlfriend's father told me they all belong to Johnny himself, even if people don't want to believe it.

He kept talking to me. "I heard you pray and watched the fish healthy and strong jump from your net. It was good medicine."

I looked at my fingers, strong and straight, gripping the steering wheel. I knew my medicine was good.

"I've seen you, too." I spoke to his hands.

Johnny looked up at the sky as best he could with milky eyes and disfigured shoulders. "There wasn't enough rain this year."

I nodded.

"I made it rain at the dances one year."

I had heard about that too.

"You know how to make it rain during the dances?" he asked me.

"I know it's not supposed to." I thought I might have shouted.

It's a fact that Johnny Two Jays is the last fluent speaker of our tribal language, but no one ever talks to him. I have never seen him miss a ceremonial dance. Not one, but he never participates. Johnny gets served first at any dinner he attends, but always eats alone. And he hitchhikes every day, but nobody ever pulls their car over for him. Except for me.

Johnny looked me in the eyes and laughed. "Sometimes you need to bring the rain even when it shouldn't come."

I took a breath and felt my shoulders begin to curve.

“It sure is dry this year.” He opened my door and I got out. I misplaced my step, stumbling a little, back beginning to ache. Johnny Two Jays gave me his cane.

He slid into the driver’s seat and closed the door. I heard the engine echoing off the cliffs as I stuck my thumb out and felt it start to twist.

SLOAN THOMAS lives on an Indian reservation in Northern California. She likes to listen to stories from elders. They always remind her how little she really knows. She has work published in *Jersey Devil Press*, *Star 82 Review*, and *Revolution John*, as well as *Word Riot* and *SmokeLong Quarterly* under the name R.S. Thomas.

The Girl with Black, Black Hair and The Golden Snake

Jennifer Martelli

The snake is strung with drops of poison, gold
amber rosary beads,
ending with his golden eye.

*

Alabaster day, the town square blurred
by the heat of the fire
under a pot. Dust when they dragged her out.

*

They used my pot to boil the pitch, my knife to slice
the pillows for the eider down feathers, my chair
from the kitchen. My chocolate. My cigarettes.

*

His throat is dry, which means
his whole body is dry, even the venom.
Pitchy pine tar stings both tips of his tongue.

*

The ancient well in the middle of town
keeps the ground shady and damp. Probably there are coins
down at the bottom.

The snake coils next to the cool stones.

*

The newsreel is black and white and captioned
collaborateur. No one in the film notices the snake by the well:
the snake
can barely be seen, doesn't look gold.

*

The snake has cervical eyes that try to close.
That day, there are many round things: the well, the girl's
mouth
when the tar poured down, a sticky mantilla of webs.

*

He can feel the yelling and someone crying so hard
under his white jacob's ladder belly.
The feathers wafting down were not birds.

*

A snake is like a god, exiled.
Its Jacob's Ladder belly is soft and white and feels
everything we fear.

*

What hurt most was the woman
who held my chin up
so the feathers would stick to my face.

JENNIFER MARTELLI was born and raised in Massachusetts, and graduated from Boston University and The Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program for Writers. She's taught high school English as well as women's literature at Emerson College in Boston. Her work has appeared in the following publications: *Tar River Review*, *Bop Dead City*, *burntdistrict*, *Melancholy Hyperbole*. She was a recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant in Poetry and recently received a Pushcart Nomination. Her chapbook, "Apostrophe," was published in 2010 by BigTable Publishing Company. You can read more of her work at jennifermartelli.com. She lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Built To Last

Ryan Dunham

“Samson, what are you *doing*?”

I haven’t even stepped inside the hole, and Bertha is already admonishing me.

“It’s fine, baby.”

“No, it’s not fine.” She’s looking for the shovel. “It’s our backyard.” She’s looking for the wheelbarrow.

Four years ago I built a scarecrow. It was a cross-dressing clown. Bertha didn’t get it. My clown e-lude-ed her. Maybe she didn’t understand that it was a clown. Maybe she didn’t understand that it was cross-dressing. I never painted its face. I never gave it sexually distinguishing anatomical parts. It looked potato-faced. It looked androgynous.

“Yeah,” I told her.

Bertha stands on the hole’s precipice and looks for China (or is it Australia?). She doesn’t wave. She doesn’t bridge the cultural gap with a small gift or token. She just gazes deep into the hole I’ve dug. It’s so deep she can’t see the bottom. It’s so deep it piques her mind with existential questions like Why? and Who? and How Much?

Three years ago I built a statue. It was a monkey selling cotton candy at a minor league baseball game. I had to annex the neighbor’s yard to build it.

“Why did you buy Casey’s house?” she asked.

“I need the *space*.”

A more pertinent question would have been, "Do you really need to build the diamond and the dugout and the parking lot and the highway and the oceans and the Earth and the solar system and the universe and Time and God Himself?" not, "Why did you build this?"

"It completes the picture, baby," I would have told her. "Yeah."

Bertha sits on the ledge and kicks her heels. She digs her own holes inadvertently, two tiny eyes of darkness, the debris falling into my abyss. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't hum a song. She's silent.

I sit down next to her but she ignores me. She's looking for the backhoe. I try to embrace her but she slides out of reach. She's looking for the excavator.

Two years ago I built a shopping mall. No one came because I refused to build a food court.

Bertha would yell at me, "Why would you build a mall without a food court?"

And I would tell her, "Bertha, baby, we have a Macy's *and* a Sears."

But she wouldn't hear of it. She needed her cheeseburgers. She needed her free samples of Asian cuisine so she could call herself "cultured."

Bertha's on the other side. She's three hundred and sixty degrees away. I beckon for her to come back but she's motionless. She's looking for the thousand years of wind. I wave and hope an incandescent smile can be seen from where she is but she's stone as a rock. She's looking for the meteorite.

Last year I built a pyramid. Unlike the Romans, or whoever it was that built the originals, I built mine by myself. I used

limestone, marble, claystone, dolomite, ironstone, and quartz, and Bertha yelled at me. Told me I blundered worse than the Greeks (I guess I was wrong).

“You should have used gneiss. And only gneiss,” she said.

She was right. God weathered my creation in only a few weeks’ time. I should have called Greekland.

Bertha raises her hand like she’s in class.

“Yes?” I say/ask.

“Um, Mr. Weir?”

She doesn’t say anything else, but I know what she’s thinking. She’s thinking, “How did you do it? How did you create something that can’t fade away? How did you prove your awesomeness?”

So I tell her, “It’s a *hole*, baby. An *idea*. It can’t go anywhere if it doesn’t *exist*.”

And she dives in.

No thud. No clunk.

Nothing.

Bertha’s rockin’ out in China. She’s groovin’ in Australia.

I feel like I should dive in after her, but I don’t. I feel like I’d be better off if I did, but I stand up and step back. I feel like I should start filling the hole, but I can’t seem to remember what I did with all that dirt.

RYAN DUNHAM is currently a PhD student at Ohio University in the Media Arts and Studies department. He also has a B.A. and an M.A. in English: Creative Writing from Binghamton University. Ryan is a huge deadhead, but Phish keeps trying to convert him. He would only eat Chicken McNuggets and Sour Patch Kids as a child. Things have pretty much stayed the same.

Death At Burger King

B.A. Varghese

The Whopper box, like a tomb,
had a picture of one neat green lettuce lying
on one slice of succulent red tomato, probably
grown in the sea side of Sicily, resting
upon browned meat enclosed in a bun of wheat
and sesame seeds. I opened the box, took a hold
of my palatable poison, and bit down. I didn't chew
much and I swallowed chunks whole. Any
other way of going would have been too messy
or at least require more on my part. This
was slow and painless. This would take years.
Methodical. Mouth-watering.
After the stake fries and Coke, that went
down like embalming fluid, I smiled
and just waited and waited for the end.

B. A. VARGHESE graduated from Polytechnic University (New York) in 1993 and has been working in the Information Technology field ever since. Inspired to explore his artistic side, he has earned a B.A. in English from the University of South Florida and is currently in the process of working toward an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. His works have appeared in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Apalachee Review*, *Rose Red Review*, and other literary journals. (www.bavarghese.com)

The Life and Strange Surprising Adventure

Christopher DeWan

14 February

I've finally done it! After years of wanting to escape the bounds of civilization, I've sold my house and everything in it, traded the bourgeois trappings of luxury for a small cutter sailboat and a dream—and now I'm ready to leave this old, cluttered, tedious life, and trade it for one of adventure.

I've never forgotten those uncharted archipelagos where we anchored during my days in the Merchant Marines; I have every confidence I'll be able to find them within a few hours of departing port in Princeville.

Goodbye, old world! Welcome, unknown!

26 February

The winds blustery and the waves unpredictable, but how good it feels to be tested against the unmerciful ocean, one man versus the brute force of Nature! Swells thrice the height of my boat's mast, tossing the craft aloft and every which way, the sting of salt water in my eyes, reminding me I'm alive—so alive! Tomorrow I'll anchor in port to purchase the supplies and rations that are to last me throughout the rest of my day, and then I disappear from civilization forever.

1 March

An hour before dawn and under cover of darkness, I hoisted my sail and slipped back onto the open ocean. Everything was still and calm and quiet; the sea was wondrous, alive with dancing porpoises and phosphorescent jellies; and the moon beckoned me on.

True to my memory, I found the islands! I found them, right where I'd left them, all those years ago: a small and secreted paradise. For now I've anchored in a lagoon: I'll spend my next days scouting the terrain from my boat, because what's the investment of a few more days cooped up, if the reward afterward is beautiful serene isolation, no noise but my own pulse and the murmur of the tides?

2 March

My luck is better than I'd hoped: there's a clean, airy cave a hundred yards from the beach that will offer me shelter; a spring of fresh drinking water; a cove blessed with bountiful fish; and the whole island lush with a feast of edible vegetation—berries and nuts and coconut, and bamboo of all sizes, from which I can fashion any array of useful objects.

How many men, stranded on such a deserted island, would waste their days dreaming of an escape from it? But here, now—this is my dream: to be stranded on this island, like Adam's son, and never to leave.

3 March

I've committed a decisive act that many would call rash, but which for me is simply a ritual affirmation of the rightness of my course of action: I've burned my boat. There is no going back.

4 March

Today I lived purely, like the savages of old: I caught fish with my own hands, hung them to smoke over a fire, swam naked in the warm sea, and even began carving an old log into a sort of decorative totem pole, upon which I intend to sculpt frightening visages, such as would scare off any passersby, though of course the possibility of a passerby is remote bordering on ridiculous here in this Paradise.

5 March

Fate is cruel.

Earlier today washed ashore a wounded fishing vessel with a great gaping hole in its hull, and its crew of survivors is now cluttering up my perfectly serene island.

For now I'll maintain my presence in secret, and hope they quickly find enough competence to fetch themselves off of my island.

8 March

The insufferable buffoons are still here. If they'd landed anywhere else on Earth, they'd surely have perished by now, fodder for whatever indigenous predator; or perhaps poisoned themselves on local flora; or simply lit themselves on fire from their sheer incompetence, then drowned while trying to put out the

flames. But such is the hospitality of my island paradise: they seem able to blunder on forever without any consequence.

They're led by a pompous captain and puerile man-child, the two of them together incapable of a single competent act—and thanks to this guileless leadership, the wretched castaways are no closer to rescuing themselves than the day they arrived.

Tonight, I will dress as a cannibal and sneak into their camp, to repair their radio and survey the damage to their boat. These infelicitous folk must go, even if I have to mend their vessel myself.

9 March

Woe is me: their craft, *The Minnow*, is damaged beyond repair. It seems these hapless stock characters are to be my mates here in Eden, till my hand or Fate's conceives of another alternative. One can only hope that their incessant scheming, or mine, will soon arrive them at a happy escape. How long can this go on?

CHRISTOPHER DEWAN is author of the book *Work and Other Essays*, and has published numerous short stories in journals recently including *Bartleby Snopes*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *Grey Sparrow*, *JMWW*, and *wigleaf*. His fiction has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Learn more at christopherdewan.com.

ON THE COVER:



"I AM A SKIN AND A LOTION SOAKING UP MYSELF"

Radka Bartůsková

RADKA BARTŮSKOVÁ is a Czech native currently living in Prague and finishing her studies. She spends her own time making soldered jewelry, drawing, and painting. Up to now all her efforts to create "art" were only for her own pleasure, but now her artwork and jewelry can be found on her Deviant Art profile (rbsketch.deviantart.com) and on tumblr (rbsketch.tumblr.com).