

# Jersey Devil Press



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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Editor's Note

The stories and poems in this issue all relate to communication—the simple and elaborate ways we share, or avoid sharing, our ideas and feelings. In Joe Scott's "The People of the Pit," two voices rise out of darkness and chaos. Next up is Sheri Vandermolen's "Mandelbrot Chaos," in which abstract art blooms across boundaries of space and sensory perception. Rowdy Geirsson, who made another appearance way back in Issue 24, searches for clues in an odd recorded conversation in "Self-Condemed in the Tunnelbana," and Gloria Heffernan takes a free-verse measure of "Conversational Distance." Finally, Ashley Hutson strums a C-chord on our heartstrings with her short tale of love and stuffed animals, "My Friends Live on My Bed."

— Laura Garrison

# The People of the Pit

Joe Scott

The people of the pit didn't understand why they had to die.

"The black pit," Somebody said.

"Why's it gotta be black," Somebody Else said.

"Because I can't see you," Somebody said.

Nobody could see anybody, but everybody had heard the news loud and clear. It came from above, from crackling old speakers, an old man's voice. It said that death was upon the people of the pit and the lives they knew didn't matter, but the lives that they thought they were going to know, no death could take that away. The voice coughed, the speakers buzzed a moment, and then everything was gone.

Somebody Else said, "Fuck that."

Somebody said, "I'm with ya."

Somebody Else and Somebody pushed through the sea of everybody. Some of the members of the sea would say excuse me or pardon me and some of them would shout an exaggerated ouch, or "fuck you, pal." Some of them wept. After a while of pushing, the sea wouldn't yield, and it didn't feel like people anymore.

"It's mud," Somebody said.

"I'm already climbing it," Somebody Else said.

When they were both up about ten feet, clawing and clinging, finding strength they never knew they had, they stopped. Somebody Else and Somebody felt each other's thought, or they each thought they felt each other's thought.

"Hey," Somebody Else shouted to the sea, "It's a scalable wall."

“Come on,” Somebody shouted. He channeled the great battle cries of movies he’d seen, the energy of Hollywood’s William Wallace, Robin Hood, Leonidas . . . “We climb!”

Uneasy silence.

Then the people of the pit shouted back. They shouted they couldn’t find the wall, they couldn’t grab the wall, they couldn’t shit anywhere, there’s no place to shit!? And they couldn’t see anything, and they couldn’t think. Then they started yelling shut up at Somebody Else and Somebody. Then they were yelling shut up at everybody else.

Somebody Else and Somebody continued climbing by themselves. As they climbed, their muscles became sore and they thought of letting go, and they thought maybe the sea would catch them. They weren’t sure, but maybe if they kept going they could go so high they’d die from the fall. They’d be too tired to climb up or down and they’d be trapped. What did they do? They climbed.

They couldn’t credit courage for this direction. Their bodies had found a mechanical rhythm. As much as their brains fired fear to their chests, the mechanics of their arms and legs pushed, pulled, reset, pushed, pulled, reset.

After a while, they couldn’t hear the sea. Not knowing how far they had climbed and not knowing how far they had to go, they were alone in space, in a whole other reality, in a reality that had nowhere to stand or rest. Above and below them were death and the unknown, and in front of them was mud to cling to, but was it mud? They wondered for a moment what the hell was mud. They wondered for a moment what the word vertical really meant. What bullshit is the difference between vertical and horizontal? The mud

in front of them and the empty space behind them: it was all the same.

Somebody farted.

Somebody Else laughed, and then Somebody laughed with him. They were still real, they both thought.

Sometime between forever and yesterday, they each swung their hands up and missed the wall. There wasn't any more wall to grab. They pulled and pushed themselves up and stumbled into a new reality of flat land—a floor of mud and a pit of mud behind them. About twenty yards out, there was a light post illuminating nothing but itself and the ground around it. They went to it without a thought about what it meant. They just wanted light.

In the first light that they had seen in days, Somebody saw Somebody Else and Somebody Else saw Somebody.

Somebody Else was a big black guy. Somebody was a big white guy. They were men that worked out hard and often. They felt instantly the camaraderie of muscled men. They shook hands.

“Jonathan,” Somebody Else said.

“Well shit,” Somebody said, “That’s my name, too.”

They smiled at each other for a while. They looked back toward the pit, but it was hidden in the darkness. It was all flat land it seemed now, but the sound of the pit, the crowd with nowhere to shit, came to them like a whisper. Did they care? They weren't sure, yet. They looked back at each other, still smiling.

“We’re free,” Jonathan said.

“Should we save them?” Jonathan said.

“How?”

“Why?”



“Fuck! Because they’re people, because you have a chance to be heroes, because you’re not even free yet!”

They both looked up and saw the crackling speaker wired to the light post.

“I’ll go by Jon,” the black guy said. “You go by Jonathan.”

“Right,” the white guy said. “Now let’s do this.”

“Shit,” the somebody in the speaker said.

**JOE SCOTT** is from Wichita, KS. He currently lives in Seattle, WA. His fiction has appeared in *Arcadia*, *Midwest Literary Magazine*, and *Short, Fast & Deadly*. He is also a prep cook.

# Mandelbrot Chaos

Sheri Vandermolen

Pollock's geometry  
splashes off its canvases,  
onto the open-minded walls  
of my otherwise quiet gallery —  
creation perpetuating its relevance,  
with dilating drops of India ink,  
to fill once-blank spaces.

**SHERI VANDERMOLEN** has served, for fifteen years, as editor in chief of Time Being Books, based in St. Louis, Missouri. Her projects have included overseeing compilation of *The Complete Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky* and managing four collected-works editions. She has also facilitated the publication of dozens of individual poetry and short-fiction volumes. She graduated summa cum laude in 1990 and relocated to India in 2008. Her verse has been published in various international literary journals and anthologies, including *Contemporary Literary Review India*, *Earthen Lamp Journal*, *Muse India*, *Papercuts*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Veils*, *Halos and Shackles*, and *Verse-Virtual*.

# Self-Condemned in the Tunnelbana

Rowdy Geirsson

I was standing on a desolate Stockholm street corner in the pouring rain and wondering to myself, “What the fuck just happened?”

Only moments earlier I had been comfortably seated in Ingrid Törnblom’s sleek, modern, and—most significantly—dry office, discussing the story of her unusual life. An entrepreneurial businesswoman, she had been the founder of a short-lived but exclusive sisterhood of warriors that had harried settlements up and down the Baltic coast one summer shortly after the turn of the new millennium. This achievement had made her one of the most prominent figures to raise a sword during the outbreak of twenty-first century medieval violence that had spewed forth from the normally peaceful and passive Scandinavian countries.

The phenomenon had started when a group of Norwegian whalers-turned-Vikings had sacked the Holy Island of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumbria, looting the local castle’s gift shop before razing it to the ground and returning to their ships. With that single act of Scandinavian aggression, these men had unwittingly set in motion a bizarre sequence of events that upon first glance seemed to be totally out of place in our socially networked, media-sensationalized, and politically bankrupt modern times. Despite spreading rapidly, the phenomenon nonetheless remained localized to Scandinavia, and, in a sense, it actually seemed befitting that citizens from the most progressive nations in the world would also be the first to recognize the hopeless futility inherent in the future of humanity and thus

regress to a behavior type and ethics code not seen since the days of Erik Blood-Axe and Egil Skallagrimsson. All in all, the whole thing felt like a Nordic tribute to the film *Fight Club*, only set to the visual imagery of Middle-Earth and a death-metal soundtrack.

Motivated by my own quarter-life crisis and the associated downward spiral it had inflicted upon my personal well-being, I had taken the only reasonable act of recourse there was: I blew my life savings on a one-way plane ticket to Norway and proceeded to hobo my way across Scandinavia in an effort to interview the individuals who had played the most pivotal roles in this under-reported movement of social upheaval. I had already met with a handful of swarthy characters, and now I was pleased to check Ingrid off my list. Unfortunately, I could not recall whatever details she had confided in me, because much to my own increasingly pervasive chagrin, I had not been paying any attention to what she had said. Instead, I had been distracted by her amazing physique like a dog in heat.

Her hair had shone with the natural blond hue as properly befit her northern nationality, and her eyes had sparkled with a shade of blue so intense that they had pierced my anxiety-ridden heart and reduced me to a lump of general imbecility at first sight. In retrospect, my immediate surrendering of social aptitude, not to mention proper brain functionality, was so complete that I now actually considered it something of a minor personal victory that I'd somehow remembered to record the conversation.

But what contentment I did feel didn't last long, because I hadn't brought an umbrella, or better yet, a raincoat, and now the rain was pelting me with all the ferocity of a Bofors 40 millimeter anti-aircraft cannon. It soaked through my clothes and my spirits,

and my mood grew as depressingly dark as the Scandinavian sky above.

Lightning flashed and the sonic boom of another giant falling victim to Thor's wrath jarred me into motion. I began to run down the eerily desolate, pedestrian thoroughfare of Drottninggatan towards Sergels Torg and the underground tunnelbana station located beneath it. I dashed down the stairs and pulled my phone out from the drenched folds of my clothing, hitting the rewind and play buttons on its audio-recording app.

Ingrid's subtle but perkily accented voice streamed out:

“ . . . so we took those guys as slaves. We figured they could keep the fortress clean and cook for us while we worked on improving our shield wall formations and ship maneuvering skills . . . ”

She was referencing the booty that she and her loyal followers had acquired through the threat of physical violence against a group of mid-summer male revelers on the Baltic island of Gotland. Having stormed the beach like a medieval-weaponry-equipped version of the Swedish bikini team, the women had left the dudes in a state of speechless incapacitation. The stunned men were subsequently shackled and led onboard the women's longship and into a life of contemporary thralldom.

But that is neither here nor there, because what I wanted to know now was why Ingrid had suddenly tossed me out on the street like most employers that I've known. I'm used to dealing with dejection and being asked to leave, but I also usually operate under a heightened state of self-awareness that borders on paranoia, so when a boss or human female tells me to get lost, I know full well why, and really, I can't blame them. With Ingrid,

though, it was different. I had no idea why she had told me to suddenly leave, but I knew I hadn't hit on her with an atrocious pick-up line from a cheesy 80s movie or repeatedly fucked up a simple task such as making a stack of photocopies for her.

But the norns were on my side at this particular moment! My phone had somehow not been ruined in the torrential downpour. Try as they might, the combined forces of Loki and climate change could not destroy my precious electronic gadget.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and made my way towards the wall where I stopped beside a map of the train system. Two Swedes approached the map and gave me furtive, disapproving glances while quietly determining the route of their upcoming underground journey.

I moved further away from the map, feeling highly self-conscious about drawing undue attention from the locals. In a land where conformity rules, you don't want to be the dripping-wet weirdo in the underground station slouched against the wall next to the system map giving off a sickening odor while listening to a bizarre audio track. Even though—and I believe this to the deepest core of my soul, despite certain plausible theories to the contrary—I didn't stink, neither did I face any nearby competition in the contest to win the title of freakiest underground loiterer of the day.

On the recording Ingrid's voice stopped speaking and a short, awkward pause came next, followed by the sound of myself making some sort of incomprehensible gurgle indicative of positive concurrence. I began to hit the fast-forward and play buttons in the hopes of finding the section of interest by trial and error.

The Charioteer must have pitied my misfortune enough to take a break from his thunderous giant-slaying expedition and help me

in my current pathetic endeavor, because I succeeded in finding the relevant bit of recording in short order. A phone rang on the playback and Ingrid answered in her native tongue:

*“Hej . . . nej . . . vad fan?! Hans kropp ligger var!?! Ursäkta, bara en minut . . . I’m sorry, but I have to take this call, it’s sort of an emergency. But thank you very much for coming. I’m looking forward to seeing what happens with your work. I’d appreciate it if you could show yourself out . . . vad har du gjort med kroppen? . . . om myndigheterna ta reda på . . . den upptäcktes i en grovsopscontainer? . . . ”*

And then there was the sound of a door opening and closing, and the recording ended. It was yet another encounter that had come to an awkward, premature conclusion and as usual I had done as the lady bid, showing myself out, this time straight into the shit show of weather that was now raging outside.

I count proficiency in the Swedish language as one of my numerous shortcomings, so on first pass I was more clueless than a berserker at a peace conference regarding whatever it was that she had said. I cranked up the volume and replayed the section, straining my ears to grasp the fragments of her hastily spoken comments.

And then I realized that she was saying, “What the fuck?!” followed by something obscure about a corpse. The “what the fuck” part sounded kind of sexy, but the dead body part was off-putting. Why would she be talking about a dead body? To my knowledge she and her cohorts had only enslaved their victims, not killed them. I didn’t remember much of our conversation together, but I seriously thought that the closest topic to slaughter that she had discussed with me was about the time when she had sacrificed

her dog to Odin. And even then it was only after the dog had already died of old age.

I still hadn't fully comprehended Ingrid's comments, so I replayed the recording again. After a few more listens I emerged triumphant over my previous failings and recognized the Swedish words for "authorities" and "dumpster." So a body had been found in a dumpster?

Just then something flashed, and it wasn't lightning from Thor's hammer. Instead, it was a smart phone possessed by a passerby who had just snapped a photo of me from less than ten feet away. Consumed by my internal bewilderment, I hadn't seen him approach.

It was an awkward moment, and I lacked the mental capacity to react in any manner other than by staring straight back at him, mouth slightly agape, drool forming at my lips while he took another photo. I had increased the volume more than I probably should have during my rapture of attempted translation and had completely disregarded the potential side effects that could arise from the world outside of my own preoccupation. Most likely, he had overheard all of the incriminating-sounding elements of the recording.

Then the station's lights flickered—ominously, just to add to the atmosphere of defeat—and the man backed away, dialing several numbers and raising the phone to his ear as he did so. "*Hallå, polis? Ja, jag har en sak att rapportera . . .*"

But it didn't take a genius or a native speaker to recognize the word "*polis*" in the man's clearly articulated but otherwise indecipherable accusation and the next thing I knew the phone was being stuffed back in my pocket, and I was back out in the rain,



running down the bleak streets of Stockholm towards the inevitability of my fate.

**ROWDY GEIRSSON's** investigative journalism has previously appeared online at *Jersey Devil Press* and *Word Riot* and he currently serves as *McSweeney's* Norse History for Bostonians correspondent. A long time resident of New England, he is presently skulking among the ancient rock carvings and abandoned factory buildings of Eastern Geatland. Hail him online at [www.scandinavianaggression.com](http://www.scandinavianaggression.com).

# Conversational Distance

Gloria Heffernan

I concentrate on the cigarettes you flicked  
out the window  
when you refused the dish I handed you  
in lieu of an ashtray.  
You seemed to think I would prefer  
the blast of cold night air  
to the possibility of simply washing the dish,  
just as you thought I would prefer  
the truth to lovely illusion.

I imagine the cigarette butts landing on a stack of  
discarded newspapers  
in the alleyway six stories below,  
the glowing orange tips  
boring holes through yesterday's news,  
and smoldering for hours before bursting  
into a blaze that seems more bearable  
than the resentment I see smoldering  
at the corners of your eyes.

“Next time,” I promise,  
“I’ll have a real ashtray waiting for you,  
the kind with little round indentations  
to cradle the cigarettes securely  
while the smoke curls up like  
a cobra emerging from a snake charmer’s basket.”  
You nod appreciatively  
and we catch each other in the lie,  
knowing there won’t be a next time,  
and it’s high time you quit smoking anyway.

**GLORIA HEFFERNAN** is a proud native of Jersey City, New Jersey. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Icarus*, *Pleiades*, *Radiance Magazine*, *The Comstock Review*, *Stone Canoe*, *The Healing Muse*, *Parody*, *Grey Sparrow Journal* and the *New York Times Metropolitan Diary*. She has also had articles and essays published in numerous magazines and journals including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Eugene O’Neill Review*, *Dramatist’s Guild Quarterly*, and *The Syracuse Post-Standard*. She holds a Master’s Degree in English from New York University and teaches critical writing at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York.

## My Friends Live on My Bed

Ashley Hutson

Since I've gotten sick, Pete has started talking to me via stuffed animal. A menagerie left over from my childhood sits on our bed, a collection of elaborate fictions I never gave up. The oldest is Toby Benson, a sleazy German shepherd whose police dog experience turned into a real cocaine problem. He teaches Krav Maga classes. He is able to do this, he tells me, because he has lethal beanbag paws. He allows people to join for "friend prices," which always start at two hundred forty dollars.

Toby is married to Jack McPherson, a small bear Pete's mom gave him for Valentine's Day a few years ago. Drunk Irish, Pete says. Loves to jig. Thinks Obama is spelled O'Bama. Big liberal.

"Liberal? How do you know?" I asked Pete once.

"Come on," Pete said. "It's a bear and dog love story. Think of their civil rights."

When we have company over, we shut the bedroom door. Stuffed animals on an adult bed are hard to explain. People have either too little or too much imagination.

We used to have people drop in pretty regularly. But more and more I find myself not answering the door. This afternoon we were sitting on the couch when someone knocked. Pete and I remained very still and waited for them to go away. We both knew it wasn't happening.

I turn to Pete after the knocking stopped. "Let's visit the animals," I say.

"Don't you want to go out?" Pete says. "See the sights?"

“Nah,” I say. “I’d rather be among friends.”

“You got it.”

He leads me into the bedroom and shows me Calliope Sam who farts uncontrollably and talks like Johnny Cash. Sam’s face is frozen in a perpetual neigh. He tells me that he misses the carousel life, but he sure as hell does not miss being impaled on a striped pole.

Then Calliope Sam puts his front hooves on my leg and looks up at me.

“Hey, darlin’,” he whinnies. “I’m so happy I came to live with you.”

He seems to choke up for a minute. It gets quiet. I pet his mane and tell him to not be sad. I’m pretty happy he unimpaled his ass and came here, too.

He gives me a weak neigh and we both titter awkwardly.

It goes quiet again.

I look Pete in the eyes. “Does this make us weird?” I ask.

“Um, yeah,” he says.

“Will you keep on doing this, you know, after it’s over?” I say.

He picks up Prospector Jones. The prairie dog and retired gold miner jumps up to sit on my shoulder. He clears his throat, and declares in a strong, whistling voice, “Whoa, there, pardner. Don’t dig that hole too soon.”

**ASHLEY HUTSON** has work published or forthcoming in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *theNewerYork*, *The Heavy Contortionists*, *The Lascaux Review*, and others. She was also named the short fiction finalist for the Orlando Prize in 2014. She lives in Sharpsburg, MD. Find her on the web at [www.aahutson.com](http://www.aahutson.com).





On the cover:

## “SACRIFICIAL LAMB”

Aimee Flom

Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, **AIMEE FLOM** is a graduate from the Pacific Northwest College of Art with a degree in illustration. Working with a mix of traditional and digital she combines brushwork, pens, and Photoshop to create iconic images exploring her various obsessions with mythology, monsters, and all things that are beautifully strange. When not drawing, listening to podcasts, or keeping her head in the clouds she can be found in the kitchen making a cup of earl grey tea. Her work is online at [flomdrawn.tumblr.com](http://flomdrawn.tumblr.com) and [flomdrawn.com](http://flomdrawn.com).

