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Table of Contents:

| | |
|--|----|
| Editor's Note | 3 |
| Obelisk , Kyle Amato | 4 |
| Two Prose Poems , Shinjini Bhattacharjee | |
| <i>Heteroglossia</i> | 8 |
| <i>How to build a boat from bedroom towels</i> | 9 |
| The Last Breakfast of Corporal Ashton the Blessed , | |
| Filip Wiltgren | 10 |
| A Woman in Tech , Kate Imbach | 15 |
| Jasper's Gone Fishing , Annamarie Davidson | 18 |

Editor's Note

In this month of college graduations, season finale viewing parties, and down comforters being awkwardly stuffed onto linen closet top shelves, we weren't altogether surprised to find endings emerging as a strong theme for issue sixty-six. Kyle Amato's "Obelisk" explores what happens to one partner when the other is ready to ascend to the next plane of existence. In one of Shinjini Bhattacharjee's prose poems, birds stop doing something, and in the other . . . well, we're not sure, but we liked the kitties. Filip Wiltgren explores what happens when a powerful human talisman shatters in "The Last Breakfast of Corporal Ashton the Blessed," and Kate Imbach shows us at what point "A Woman in Tech" decides she's had enough of her literally beastly coworkers. Bringing all the ends to an end is Annamarie Davidson's story of The End, "Jasper's Gone Fishing."

— Laura Garrison

Obelisk

Kyle Amato

George usually stared out the kitchen window each morning, before his brain started working. He usually held his coffee and watched the sun rise over his neighbor's house. It was calming.

Unfortunately for George's routine, something unexpected blocked the sun. As his brain was still powering on, it took him a moment to realize this was peculiar. "Hmm," he muttered to himself. "Hmm."

His wife Lucy came into the kitchen yawning. She poured herself some coffee and joined George at the window. "Good morning, dear," she said.

"Good morning. Say, Lucy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Have we always had a massive stone obelisk in our backyard?"

The obelisk stood at least twenty feet tall and seemed darker than midnight. Its pyramidal top disappeared into the highest branches of their neighbor's oak tree. The rising sun revealed words etched in the stone, but George could not tell if they made sense, or if they were even English.

"Oh, I had it installed last night, just as the last star of the Aeron Nebula took its final breath and blinked out of existence, as we all must do when our time comes," said Lucy. "The girls at the club have all got one now, and who am I to buck trends? Isn't it beautiful?"

George put on his slippers and walked outside. The obelisk looked even taller and menacing from their backyard. It was doing a remarkable job of blocking out the sun. It seemed to be absorbing any light that touched it, like a black hole. The symbols were brightening.

“Why does it sound like it’s breathing?” asked George.

“Because it *is*, silly!” Lucy pulled George’s arm to her chest and laughed. “But it’s not breathing air like you and me, oh no. It’s breathing something much less knowable. Something deep within all of us, though we may never truly know what it is, or what we have lost. At least, that’s what Diana told me at brunch yesterday.”

“I see,” said George. His coffee was cold now. “How much does something like this cost?”

“Certainly not money,” said Lucy.

“That’s good to hear,” said George. “I’m going to take a shower. Holler if it does anything.”

“Of course, dear.” Lucy sat, legs crossed, beneath the obelisk and stared. She had sewn the symbols into her pink bathrobe days earlier in anticipation. Now they were beginning to glow as well.

The shower’s water pressure never failed to disappoint George. Water dripped pathetically from the spout, and he had to press himself against the chilly tiled wall if he ever wanted to be clean.

George wondered what his friends would say about the obelisk. How would this affect his barbecues? Would anything cook in proximity to that chilly pillar of darkness? Was their obelisk as nice as Lucy’s friends’ obelisks?

A low hum reverberated through George’s ears, like he had stood too close to the speakers at a concert. When he turned off the water, he could still hear it. Curious.

The noise had not left him even after he had shaved and gotten dressed. Q-tips did nothing. He looked out the window and saw only the black obelisk.

“Oh, right.” He was embarrassed to think it had taken him this long to consider the obelisk as a culprit. It was almost definitely causing this infernal buzzing.

George stepped into his backyard and found Lucy where he had left her, albeit hovering six inches off the ground. The belt of her bathrobe barely touched the grass.

“Lucy?”

Lucy turned her head, a frozen smile on her face. Had she been wearing that much black eyeliner when they woke up?

“Oh, hello, George! Off to work?” Her bathrobe was an incandescent blue. The symbols on the obelisk shone like searchlights, projecting themselves on the side of their house. They were definitely not English. Egyptian hieroglyphs, perhaps? Or something older? George could not be sure.

“I was going to pick up Chinese food on the way home. Does that sound good?” George could have sworn something sat beside his wife, but when he blinked the monstrous outline disappeared.

“It sounds wonderful, but I’m not going to need food after this, George. You should treat yourself! I’ll see you on the next level of existence!” Lucy rose higher and higher as she spoke. She would reach the top of the obelisk soon.

George stood at the gate, debating whether or not he wanted to stick around and see what would happen. He decided against it, as he was going to miss his bus at this rate.

KYLE AMATO is a fiction writer attending Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY. His work has been featured in Skidmore's *Folio Literary Magazine*. He did not cry at the end of *Toy Story 3*.

Two Prose Poems

Shinjini Bhattacharjee

Heteroglossia

Night, explain the distance between yes and yes. Thunderclap unhinged, I squint at the sight of branches fractured on the window. Through it, I see the wind peeling inside itself, pulling graveyards of blur out of every invisible branch. They taste of trembling skin, and of questions slipped in without the marks. Lie like a closure, or like hems that empty the thickness of discard. On the top of the hill, the girls always sneeze inside the folds of red silk. It belongs to a woman who hides inside a bear skull, whose earlobes are made of still water, pushing out diamonds. Every week, she teaches the town folk how to disassemble themselves inside their homes. How the left eye must always be placed on the headboard, or how the cheek must be smeared on the floor like a freshly evacuated bouquet. I do not like her, yet she manages to turn the knob on the neck of my shadow to get inside it. Somewhere, the birds stop lending their skins to the sky.

How to build a boat from bedroom towels

In this one, you lived like an elbow wholly untouched. How many hourglasses does one need to break to stretch a desert? The rumors are true: That night wilted around the edges of our fingers and the salted fog. You carried it in your white basket, eager to feed the baby kittens. How many times will we let the leaves blur our whispers, or let the sky break inside the words whenever I say something slippery. The background should have been a totem, but it was mostly brown, with purple abject. That night, there was no land, and yet we stuffed our erosions with apples, goldfish and cotton so that the walls could age faster. You cooked eggs for dinner, yellow like an oak steeling itself against a river. It would have smelled as beautiful as a painting, only if I was not too weary in it. Only if you had not starved their moon crusts in the palm of your hands. A definition makes use of both the object and the dust beneath its flinch. "I love you," for instance. Or solitude drawn too fiercely on the window. When the light shines on it, it's so bright, it is frightening.

SHINJINI BHATTACHARJEE is a writer and the Editor-in-Chief of *Hermeneutic Chaos Literary Journal*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems have been published, or are forthcoming in *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Cimarron Review*, *Gone Lawn*, *Crack the Spine*, *Small Po[r]tions*, *elimae*, *Red Paint Hills Poetry*, *Literary Orphans* and elsewhere.

The Last Breakfast of Corporal Ashton the Blessed

Filip Wiltgren

The commander of the 382nd penal battalion had a firm but genial hold on his men: he had them by the balls and didn't need to squeeze very hard for everyone to jump, and Corporal Ashton was his favorite way to squeeze.

Ashton commanded a regiment, which, as a corporal, he shouldn't. Ashton gave orders to captains, which he shouldn't either. Ashton fired live rounds over the heads of the men to get them moving, but no one really cared. Ashton should have been the most hated man in the service, but he wasn't.

Corporal Ashton was blessed.

Friendly fire never happened to Corporal Ashton. Close air support never landed on Corporal Ashton. The radio link to divisional artillery always worked for Corporal Ashton. Penal always gets the hairiest jobs but the 382nd had the lowest casualty rates in the division. When the commander wanted to squeeze, all he had to do was draft an order transferring corporal Ashton to another battalion and leave it conspicuously unsigned on his monitor. Whatever problem annoyed him disappeared immediately. Ashton was blessed. He was blessed right until the day he died.

I know, I was there. I had just punched out Rolinski and gotten a fifteen minute court martial and another six month stint in penal, which was fine by me since that was the reason I had punched out Rolinski in the first place. He didn't mind; he'd done the same to me two months earlier and for the same reason. We were both in

Ashton's company. When the commander wanted to reward you, he put you in Ashton's company.

I was on Ashton duty that day. Ashton always sat on the third chair at the third table from the door in the mess. He always took two scoops of powdered scrambled eggs with his left hand from a fresh tray. The chefs always put out a new tray when Ashton entered. Once a freshie had taken a scoop right before Ashton. We stomped that shit so badly he got a medical discharge. Ashton didn't mind. The chef whipped up a fresh tray in four minutes flat and Ashton took two scoops with his left hand. Now the chow line emptied the moment Ashton walked into the mess.

Ashton duty wasn't very demanding. You had to keep Ashton's table clear. You had to make sure that there were exactly four pieces of toast on his plate at all times and that his glass was never empty and never more than half full. Ashton wasn't fussy. The toast could be old and hard as long as there were four pieces of it.

I'd just placed another piece of toast on his plate as the mail call rolled by. You always got mail immediately, no matter where, since you could be dead the next hour, but printouts were reserved for death and disgrace. Ashton finished his meal before tearing the seal off his. He put it on the table. Then he smashed his arm over it and I only glimpsed the very beginning and very end. Seniority in line of duty, Congratulations Sergeant Ashton. Ashton turned pale. He didn't move, and I didn't say a thing, but rumor spreads.

That evening we were called out to this no-fire zone the PR-guys had set up. The engineers were widening a track so that the trucks could get through, and they'd taken some rounds from an indig village. Ashton's company was to storm the village and remove the holdup.

The ground was full of shallow ditches going lengthwise between the road and the vill, and there were some trees but no bushes, so it'd be hell to run through, and we wouldn't have any cover when we did it. Penal always got the hairy jobs.

But divisional artillery put down a light barrage in the fields on the other side of the vill to keep the indigs from doing a Houdini exit, and then Ashton stuck his head up and yelled, and we all started running, and the indigs must have been reloading or something because we ended up with eight kills and no vacancies in our rooster even though Morales' suit seized up and Bauman fell into a sinkhole.

We felt pretty good, and some of the guys even joked about Ashton getting command of all the battalion now that he'd been promoted, but Ashton shut them down. When we got to base he didn't take his suit off.

Now, you don't just remove a guy's suit. He had to unlock his faceplate and fastenings or the thing stayed on, and Ashton stood there like a statue painted in active camo while the tech was hovering over his shoulder. Then he removed his helm, flipped it into the air twice and slammed it down on the diagnosis board.

We all smiled and congratulated each other. Ashton was still blessed.

The next day he didn't come for breakfast. Bauman was on Ashton duty, and he just stood outside Ashton's quarters and waited and waited. Then Ashton showed up, and his face looked like a sheet someone had dipped in charcoal and painted lips on. He'd never looked tired before. But he got to the mess and scooped two scoops with his left hand and ate half a toast and drank enough water to fill a tub.

I looked at Rolinski, and he looked as shit scared as I felt.

We got called out again that day. Two in a row was bad but not unheard of, especially not for penal. We were to take a wooded hill with some sort of indig temple on it, so there'd be no artillery and no close air support, and we weren't to shoot at or into the temple at all costs. Cultural liaison mission it was called.

So we went up the hill while indigs with heavy weapons did things to stop us. A 90 mm shell took Morales' head off, and actual blood actually spurted. The battlefield recording became a viral hit, and the commander was not pleased. We got back to base, and Ashton removed his helmet and flipped it.

He missed.

The helmet clattered to the floor. Ashton stood there, hands out, while everyone held their breaths. Then Ashton walked off, suit and all, to his quarters. I looked at Rolinski, and I bet he was thinking how stupid he'd been to punch me out, for I was thinking the same thing about him.

Ashton didn't show up for mess call, and then he didn't show for roll call. Then the call came in that intel had found an indig weapons factory buried in a hillside eighty clicks into the wilds and the 382nd was called out for the third time.

We went out without Ashton. Everything went wrong.

H company got ambushed and lost twenty guys in the first five minutes. G company was sent to relieve them and got chewed up. Then Ashton's company was ordered to relieve them, and we moved up, but the close air support overshot the valley and wiped out most of first platoon. When we finally knocked out the indigs, the 382nd had thirty percent casualties.

When we got back to base, the door to Ashton's quarters had been breached. An MP was bagging Ashton's personals and a piece of rope hung from the crossbeam. Ashton was gone, the morale was gone, and the commander started putting guys before the firing squad.

The 382nd was no longer blessed and nobody punched anybody out to stay in it.

At age ten, **FILIP WILTGREN** realized that he wanted to be a writer. His magnum opus, "Ragnar as a policeman," was produced a few days later, rapidly followed by its sequels, "Ragnar goes underwater" and "Ragnar in space." He then made the mistake of comparing Ragnar to Frodo & Co. and spent the next thirty years in mortal terror of actually writing until realizing that he would die no matter what, so he might as well let his creativity roam before it happened.

A Woman in Tech

Kate Imbach

I'm the only female swan in the office of a very successful start-up. *Vanity Fair* and *Fortune* have profiled our CEO, a handsome teenage grizzly bear. He has no idea what he's doing. He lumbers around, throwing fish from the \$100,000 custom aquarium (we still aren't even profitable!) into his mouth, talking about how great salmon is for his fur while the rest of us fill out spreadsheets and make him rich. Only in San Francisco could you have a CEO who hibernates for six months a year.

The bear has a temper. If something displeases him during a meeting he roars and growls like a madman. During these outbursts I roll my eyes at the golden retrievers from sales while the bear's assistant, an aggrieved sparrow, tries to feed him whichever cold-pressed juice *BuzzFeed* says is best for nerves. Watching a bird try to feed a bear an \$8 bottle of juice is enough to keep a draft of my resignation letter in a secret folder, believe me.

The worm asks me to lunch almost every day, and occasionally out of professional decorum I feel obliged to eat with him. Last week as we waited for our orders in a café, he sank back into his sticky tube of a body, looked me up and down and asked, "Hey now, so how do you keep so fit?"

I told him through a pursed beak that I fly to work. He's a worm who eats roast beef sandwiches for lunch, and he has the nerve to ask me questions about *my* body? Do you see what I have to deal with here?

Recently I went to a business dinner in Los Angeles with the

bear. He drank too much in front of customers. He was an embarrassment aside from being a bear, which is saying something. When we got back to the hotel he said, "Bears mate for life too, you know." He turned over his paw to display his room key, to ask me up without saying a word. I honked a terse goodnight and he went inside alone.

Once at a sales meeting I sat with ten males in the conference room listening to the retrievers explain why they weren't making progress with a customer.

"We have tried everything," one of them said, his tail stupidly thumping on the carpet. "We might need to consider lowering our price point."

You would've thought someone just opened the car door at the vet! I was worried the bear might kill us all.

"All right, buddy," he said. "Maybe we should try sending in the swan to sweeten the pot." He winked and patted me on the tail feathers, right there in the meeting! Relieved to not have been killed and eaten, everyone laughed riotously. What could I do? I laughed along with them all, hating myself.

Today we are at the largest technology conference of the year in Las Vegas. We are press darlings. We are the brightest new menagerie of innovators from Silicon Valley according to everyone from *Cat Fancy* to *The Verge*. The bear, the worm and the retrievers are feeling like kings and want to celebrate at a strip club, which sounds about as appealing to me as being plucked for a pillow. But I am part of the team. I don't have a choice.

Inside the club the bear puts his arm around me and surveys a

lineup of strippers.

“What type of woman do you like?” he asks me.

Do I need this? Do I *need* to be sexually harassed, groped and have my life threatened on an almost daily basis by a horny five-year-old grizzly bear with an anger disorder and a habit of commenting on every single one of Rihanna’s Instagrams with the kissy face emoji? No. No, I do not.

I reach my breaking point. I lean in. I raise my wings and hiss, charging through the hallways and champagne rooms. Turns out an angry swan can create great hysteria around naked women and sad little boners. The women scream and the men hold up fists, like they have a chance of landing a punch on a swan in the dark! All eyes are on me and the room is deadly quiet aside from the song “Bring Me to Life” by Evanescence, which lends a certain measure of gravitas to the situation. I spot the bear, the worm and the dogs in the swirling purple spotlights. They are staring at me with their tails between their legs. They are terrified wild animals. I think the worm is scared of me too but—as you can imagine—it is hard to say.

I have said my piece. I waddle elegantly towards the exit where a stunned bouncer stands with his back against the wall.

“Excuse me, sir? You should really think about calling animal control,” I say.

They can take that as my resignation.

KATE IMBACH is a writer and documentary filmmaker. For now she lives in Park City, Utah. She has a Master’s in Public Administration from Suffolk University, which is only one letter away from an M.F.A.

Jasper's Gone Fishing

Annamarie Davidson

Jasper hadn't known what to do, so he'd gone fishing. He sat on a dock, surrounded by a blur of green forest. The sky was pale. The wind had whipped the clouds into frothy, floating egg whites above him. It was like a goddamn Bob Ross painting, he thought.

Jasper's hands smelled like bait. The fishy smell of freeze-dried death. Every time he scratched his nose or combed his long hair back with his fingers, he smelled it. It evoked the memory of an aquarium he had visited when he was a kid. One whiff, and he was transported back there. He remembered being given a tiny paper cup with chopped up fish parts for a quarter. He remembered the seals, the way they howled. The tank that was too small for their blubbery bodies. Their barks weren't full of life. The yelping was just to remind themselves that they weren't dead. It had made him sick back then, the smell of fish, the imprisoned creatures. He hadn't wanted to dangle the fish pieces over the side like his brothers had done. Instead, he'd chucked the whole cup into the water so the seals wouldn't have reason to jump up and bite off his digits. They may look cute, but those fuckers have teeth.

Hanging his feet off the dock, he thought about those seals. He wondered how the seals felt about themselves, being hand-fed pre-cut fish when all they wanted was the thrill of gliding through the ocean and chomping on a real, live, swimming fish. Probably not great for the old self-worth, he concluded. That's why Jasper liked to fish. It made him feel he'd done something.

Birds weren't even chirping. Where were the birds? There's nothing scary about being alone, he thought, unless you're boring. Then it's fucking terrifying. Jasper always had the sneaking suspicion that everyone else found him boring. I guess I'll never know if I was right, he thought.

He considered reeling in and recasting. No fish were biting. Where were all the fish? At 3 pm the sky turned orange. Not with the sunset, but with the radiation. It tinted everything the color of goldfish. A titian dust rustled through the trees. It hadn't reached him yet. But it would.

Still, no bites.

Jasper was hungry, really hungry. His sandwich was sitting beside him on wax paper that crinkled in the wind. He wanted to eat it, but knew the melting mayonnaise and drying roast beef and sloppy pepper jack would be ruined by the fishy odor on his hands, so he didn't.

He readjusted his legs and held the pole half-heartedly with his left hand. He had an impulse to look at his phone, an act indicative of his age during moments of silence and little stimulation. Then he remembered: his phone was dead. They were all dead. He had had 112 missed calls before the phones died. Hours ago, his girlfriend Amy had called him, frantic, screaming, crying. She was safe, well in relation to everyone else in Missoula, because everyone else was dead. She'd asked him, right before the cell towers exploded, why he was heading up to the lake, and if "heading up to the lake," was a euphemism for suicide, and what the fuck, and why didn't he love her, and why why why why why?

He'd replied, "I don't know how to do anything about the fucking apocalypse, Amy. I *do* know how to go fishing. So, I'm going to go fishing."

Another bomb went off, this time closer. It shook the dock. Orange-tinted grey ash rained down on the mountains and the trees and Jasper and his lunch, like flour being sifted into a bowl. I should have eaten my fucking sandwich, Jasper thought, shaking the ash from his hair, not daring to guess what or who the ash was before it was ash.

It seemed to matter less and less about his bait-stained hands. He grabbed the sandwich, unwrapped it, enjoying each action, each tiny crinkling of the waxy paper, the layers of meat and condiments, the little falling shredded lettuce. He took a bite of it, taking in each flavor in a way one only could with the certainness of finality. Even the fishy taste seemed like a sublime addition to the meal.

ANNAMARIE DAVIDSON is a writer with a background in stand-up comedy and a future in science fiction. Her first play, *Seven Decembers*, is debuting in Los Angeles this fall. When not writing about time travel and talking lobsters, she proofreads friends' resumes in exchange for candy. www.annamariedaavidson.com

On the cover:

“NEW YORK NOIR #9, INK AND WASH, 2013”

Allen Forrest

Graphic artist and painter **ALLEN FORREST** was born in Canada and bred in the U.S. He has created cover art and illustrations for literary publications and books. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State

University's Reed Magazine and his Bel Red painting series is part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection.

Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

