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Editor's Note

It's December, and we're happier than a chickadee on a peanut-battered pinecone to present the perfect read for the shortest day of the year: an all-poetry-and-flash issue. Some of these pieces invest ordinary settings—a grocery store, a movie theater, a kitchen—with a remarkable sense of place. Others go for striking imagery—a scorched Venetian mask, a spinning pie, a black balloon.

Anyway, there's no reason to ruin a quick but intensely memorable read with a long-winded introduction, so I will conclude by observing that Issue Seventy-Three would pair well with a crackling fire and a warm slice of gingerbread.

— Laura Garrison

A Limp

Grey Wolfe LaJoie

In a moment the little boy
will be surprised by the pop
of the big black balloon.
Hanging from his lips, a limp
flower, which he hands you
without hands.

There are bodies in the air
at all hours of the earth, but
you seem to be sinking into
your dainty dirty garden bed.

How carefully we spin
the bottle, and how soft
it sounds as its wet lips
whistle in motion.

GREY WOLFE LAJOIE is a Creative Writing undergraduate at UNC-Asheville. He is the senior poetry editor at *The Rhapsodist Literature and Arts Journal*, and his work can be found in his chapbook *A Commando in Floral Remembers His Mother*, and in the anthology *Bits of Sugar and Other Stories*, available through Grateful Steps. In his free time, he tries to remember what he used to do when he had free time.

The Dream Before the Frog

Heikki Huotari

Science Daily says if I'm an artificial
atom and I hang out near my mirror
then I'll live ten times as long
so I prioritize my images by wingspan,
size and color in a velvet box. Because
I have no children and have never
been in prison or a foxhole,
I'm still free to disbelieve.
And I have three degrees of freedom.
Nothing rotates quite like pie at night
when I'm invisible in my gorilla mask
and astrally projected and Madonna
and I share an office while we're young,
moonlighting as adjunct professors.

HEIKKI HUOTARI is a retired professor of mathematics. In a past century, he attended a one-room country school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. His poems have appeared in several journals, including *Poetry Northwest* and *Crazyhorse*. A chapbook is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

The Dairy Aisle

Chelsea Ruxer

He was running low on spaghetti. I had just finished my last carton of Stonyfield Farms. This is how we got here.

“You needed spaghetti,” I say, directing his attention to the pasta aisle. It was nothing indicative; he just said “spaghetti,” for whatever it is spaghetti is worth on the marketplace hierarchy. I consider this as he grabs a nondescript green box off the side of a display.

He asks what I eat when I’m not relying on Olive Garden for my pasta intake, and I tell him the green box seems familiar. At least it’s not Ramen noodles. So he must boil water when I’m not there.

The dairy aisle is inevitable now. I ask if he wants to split up and meet in the front of the store in five or ten minutes, and he says no, that he needs cereal. One day, I will look back on this and wonder why I thought having dinner near Kroger was an acceptable reason to come.

As we reach the butters, he asks if I’ve decided whether I’m going home for Thanksgiving. I tell him I’m not sure and reach for a Smart Balance. He pays no mind to the Smart Balance and avoids eye contact with the other butters. He reminds me his mother makes a special sweet potato casserole, and I elect to change the subject to professional football, remind myself the cream cheese section is no place for these kinds of conversations.

He confirms that I want to watch the Sunday lineup with him tomorrow, seems to think our relationship has reached this point,

and tells me about his fantasy football team, which I mistakenly inquired about several weeks ago over coffee. He shows me his phone. His team is called Jamaal Washed Up, a reference to a football player on the white team with red letters. My mother tells me I'm not supposed to judge him for either his fantasy football or his linguistic prowess.

We reach the far left end of the semi-yogurt dairy products, on the other side of the string cheeses. The yogurt section is sharply divided, the far left holding the GoGurts and baby yogurts and some comfort yogurts and yogurt shots. I rush to the string cheeses. The Activia is suspended just underneath, and he picks up a box and studies it, indicates he's seen a commercial on bowel regularity. I take note. It's sure to come up later.

We pass the string cheeses and reach the primary yogurt section, which is more telling. The emotional stability continuum runs left to right, Yoplait to Fages, with political affiliation determining altitude. Conservatives hit eye level big brands, with liberals reaching for lower-level organics and the occasionally stocked local suppliers. I have no idea who shops on the top shelves. I think there might be cottage cheese up there.

People tend to gravitate to one end or the other, the same shelf or two in the same general quadrant. My boyfriend is gravitating towards the bagels, and I have a sudden compulsion to know. So I face him towards the yogurts and hope for the best.

"Do you eat yogurt?"

"Yeah," he says, like he told his cousin on the phone before dinner when she asked if he was seeing someone, before we even considered the matter of groceries. We should have met on eHarmony, and not in line at the BMW. The idea that these things

can just happen makes me want to gorge on kefir.

I ask for clarification on “yeah.” I’m a far-to-mid-right, mid-to-lower-shelves grazer, organics, dye-frees, and originals. My weekly consumption is dominated by industrial-sized Stonyfield Farm and packable Kroger’s Simple Truth Organic, but the snobbery inherent to Noosa: World’s Finest Yogurt is my guilty pleasure.

“Yogurt,” he says. I should have had the guts to look in his fridge last weekend when I was over.

“What kind?” I ask again, deeply regretting my decision to eat the lava brownie at Olive Garden. He considers this for a moment as I reconsider the prospect of online dating. “Strawberry,” he says.

“Strawberry.” He nods. He’s serious. I had him settled in my head as a Fruit on the Bottom kind of guy but wasn’t ready to ask. He nods at a Noosa I realize I’m now holding.

“That looks good,” he says.

“This is raspberry.”

“That’s okay.” He says it like I might share. “I think I’d eat the blueberry, too,” he adds, in case I was considering the blueberry. I turn away and reach for a grouping of acai Fages, which he takes from me and deposits in the basket. I guess now we’re sharing the basket, too.

I didn’t tell him I came here for Stonyfield. There are Monday mornings I devote to digging to the back of the Stonyfield shelf for the last strawberry nestled amongst the plains, discarding it when I see its expiration date has passed, and starting the process over again.

“Do you mind if I get some cereal?” he asks.

“Go ahead.” I consider following him, but he probably eats Froot Loops. I can’t see any strawberries in the first two rows. He

shifts the basket to the other hand.

“It’s okay.” I think this is part of his football mentality, that he thinks we’re in this together as some sort of a team. I kneel and consider the masses of plain cartons as he waits.

“I wanted to get some pizza, too,” he says. There’s a strawberry carton all the way at the back, on its side, and I’m hopeful. “Is that okay?”

I reach for it, because we’ve made it this far.

CHELSEA RUXER is a current MFA student at the Bluegrass Writers Studio. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hermeneutic Chaos*, *5x5*, *New Pop Lit*, and others.

Something About Nudity in the Kitchen

William Greenfield

The contrast of stainless steel to ample breasts
far out trumps a sheer negligee and fluffy pillows.
The marriage of derrière to cherry wood
is an unexpected pleasure, like finding
Ben Franklin in a pair of worn and fading Wranglers.
No violins.
No scented oils.
The hum of the dishwasher
is pornographic foreplay.
I have got to find a new place
for this fucking spice rack.
Counter space is at such a premium.

Winner of Storyteller Magazine's People's Choice Award in 2012, **WILLIAM GREENFIELD** has had poems published in numerous literary journals, including *The Westchester Review*, *Carve Magazine*, *The East Coast Literary Review*, and others. After a long career in federal service, he is semi-retired and resides in Liberty, NY.

The 4 Star Theatre

Janna Layton

The lucky cat figurine
wears a faded "I voted" sticker
and beckons the audience into the small lobby,
which smells of popcorn,
as any cinema should.

By the napkins,
a bubbling countertop fountain presents
a horse and dragon
in carnival-prize ceramic.

Hot tea,
cold mints,
old carpet.

The doorway leads to a shoebox diorama:
battered floorboards,
empty seats,
walls and ceiling a shade of burgundy
that warms the darkness,
the screen blank and waiting
and framed in gold.

All these will hold you
until the kung-fu kick or Appalachian rifle ends the fight,
until the credits roll over a desert or blackness
and you wander out onto Clement Street,
the fog lit by neon.

JANNA LAYTON lives in San Francisco. Her poetry and fiction have been published or are upcoming in various literary journals, including *Mythic Delirium*, *Apex*, *Goblin Fruit*, *The Golden Key*, and *Star*Line*. She blogs at readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com.

Inventory of the World

Corin Reyburn

Aurora takes inventory of the world, each thing one by one. Everything she catalogs, from silk scarves to rocket launchers, from heat-seeking missiles to wooden porch swings, holds an invisible tag she places there—Aurora's thumbprint, scannable only by unscanned technology long outdated.

It began with the animals. Pigs, horses, cows and sheep. Birds and fish, flies and swallows and sharks, wolves and dragons and kind little microbes, the infinitesimally small to the uncategorical, the common to the fantastical, the meek and kind to the ferocious and cruel. She touched each of them, one by one, and they spoke. Touched them again and they were simply dumb beasts, roaming the wilds in search of food and other bodies that looked like them.

When Aurora places her thumb against her mark she smiles, beautiful but forgettable. If you are lucky enough to see her you know that no one's face will ever match hers, but you will fail to remember any specific features—were her eyes sepia or turquoise, her hair gold or ebony? She smiles only to shield you from what she knows and you never will. She is the dream you have every night but don't know it, a Venetian mask burned in a forest fire. She is the image in the quiet water that disappears when touched, a shimmering hologram that tells you a riddle you will never solve.

It's been years since Aurora tagged the species, or fruits or flowers or the blue waters flowing above the cliffs. She tags only cold things now. Microchip processors and portable fans, mass manufactured glassware and artificial granite stones you can plop

into the bottom of your glass to keep your drink cool. Lampshades made of polyethylene, women's boyfriends—streamlined and angular and cool to the touch, kept the perfect height and weight as they cycle on steel equipment until they're acceptable. Then Aurora tags them and sends them on their way. They don't see her, they don't say thank you. They are simply dumb beasts, roaming the streets in search of food and other bodies that look like them.

She tags them night and day now, wearing a staunch blue apron, and barely has time to sleep.

At home she pulls out her records of all the things she's catalogued, and after such long-hour days, finds they all look the same.

Aurora takes her thumbprint against an uneven stone and scrubs it till it's raw and bleeding. She slips into bed and touches the sleeping figure lying beside her, running her thumb along his spine.

At last, it leaves a mark.

CORIN REYBURN lives in the unincorporated forest lands of Topanga, California, mere miles from Los Angeles, where sunsets take place indoors on 4.4 trillion-color screens, and works as a freelance web designer in order to earn a little bacon. She enjoys single malt scotch and the use of unconventional instruments in rock n' roll music, and is working on a speculative fiction novel about passive warfare by means of digital commerce infiltration. Corin's work has appeared in *The Subtopian*, *MBRANE-SF*, and *The Molotov Cocktail*. Check out more of her work at infrastratos.com.

On the cover:

"Nun and Whore" Deanne Richards

DEANNE RICHARDS is a digital/photographer/collagist/flash fiction writer who resides in Santa Fe, NM. She uses photographs that have been taken digitally and then collages the images in Photoshop. She attempts to use archetypal symbols to create a story. Her painting background attempts to integrate her work in a way that gives the images a depth of expression, color, form and metaphor. If you are interested in purchasing one of her images please contact her at deanne117@hotmail.com.

