

# Jersey Devil Press



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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## **Table of Contents:**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Editor's Note</b>                         | 3  |
| <b>At Stone Harbor</b> , Askold Skalsky      | 4  |
| <b>Night Diner</b> , Nikolaj Volgushev       | 5  |
| <b>Unemployment</b> , DS Maolalai            | 8  |
| <b>Diamond</b> , Felicity L. Rollin          | 9  |
| <b>A Locked Room Mystery</b> , David Stevens | 10 |
| <b>The Mesh</b> , Zackary Sholem Berger      | 19 |

## Editor's Note

Reader, I hope this finds you in an enchanted forest, a marshmallow cloudscape, a bioluminescent cavern, or any place where you feel comfortable and safe. Please enjoy the wonders collected in our eleventy-first issue, including poems from Zackary Sholem Berger, Felicity L. Rollin, DS Maolalai, and Askold Skalsky, and stories from David Stevens and Nikolaj Volgushev.

— Laura Garrison

## At Stone Harbor

Askold Skalsky

Where I first encountered Hokusai's wave  
on the South Jersey shore—first it threw me down,  
then twisted me around, then pushed me headfirst  
through the surf and washed me up, scraping my belly  
and filling sand into my trunks galore. That was my surf-  
surrendered self. How good it was not to resist the walls  
of sea, unstem the waves crashing over me like a cliff  
of transparent jade, and I bobbing like a fusillade  
of stone, like corks of light, not knowing up or down,  
thrashing around in a wet bowl through the silt of stars  
with their wedges of wet light, green fire and ice  
in submerged reservoirs of avalanchine bright,  
the smooth and water-weedy skins of briny meteors  
in my young, and as yet innocent, receptive pores.

Originally from Ukraine, **ASKOLD SKALSKY** is a retired college professor living in Frederick, Maryland, with three cats and many books, and who annually takes at least one trip to his beloved South Jersey.

# Night Diner

Nikolaj Volgushev

You enter the Night Diner and order a coffee.

The pale waitress writes down your order, moving her cracked lips noiselessly as she does. Her fingers are unusually long, her nails painted violet, chipped.

She blinks, asks you to repeat the order.

"A cup of coffee, black, no sugar," you repeat.

The Night Diner isn't always there, but when it is, it serves the best coffee in town, or so you've heard.

You sit down at an empty booth in the back. It's so late that it's almost early. The walls of the Night Diner are the same surreal violet as the pale waitress' nails.

There is a napkin on your table, the same color as the walls. You pick it up and wipe your mouth with it.

Your lips immediately feel parched.

You crumple up the napkin and toss it aside, but when you look down you find it back on the table, neatly folded. You run your tongue across your cracked lips, but that only makes your tongue dry.

Perhaps you ought to leave the napkin alone now. You decide to pass the time by watching the other patrons.

You quickly regret your decision. The other patrons make you feel uneasy. They are not quite what you would expect. They are not the right shape.

You lower your gaze, fix it on your hands.

They are not what you had expected either. Your fingers are unusually long, your nails painted violet, chipped.

There is a pen in your hand, you are writing down an order.

You blink.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" you ask the patron who only just arrived.

"A cup of coffee, black, no sugar," he repeats. His voice is both familiar and strange, like hearing your own voice in a recording. The patron walks to the back of the diner, and takes a seat. You mutter his order back to yourself, and put on a fresh pot of coffee.

It's so late that it's almost early. You can't quite remember when your shift started but it must have been a very long time ago. You wait for the coffee to brew, pick at your nails where the violet polish has cracked.

It's a slow night, but so is every night at the Night Diner.

You pour the coffee into a white mug, chipped on one side, and carry it through the violet stillness.

Your strange, new patron looks up. He has such a familiar face, except his eyes, which are completely empty, void. If it weren't for his eyes, you're sure you would recognize him. But you've never seen eyes like that before.

He takes a sip from his cup, nods to himself. He even closes his eyes, as though to savor the moment.

"It's true what they say," he announces after a brief silence, in a voice that appears to come from no place in particular.

"This is the best coffee in town, the best coffee you've had in years."

He picks up the violet napkin, wipes his lips with it, smiles.



**NIKOLAJ VOLGUSHEV**'s fiction has appeared in journals such as the *Cafe Irreal*, *Hoot*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and *Cease, Cows*. He currently lives in Berlin, Germany, where he writes, programs, and does other things along those lines.

# Unemployment

DS Maolalai

long walks  
each evening.  
and health—eating plenty  
of apples. the reading  
of second-hand novels. books  
you have handy, and have read  
before. no wine—  
just black coffee  
in cafes with free wifi

and glasses of water—really tasting  
glasses of water.

knocking some nights  
at a neighbor  
to borrow her straightener  
and flatten the sleeves  
of your shirt.

**DS MAOLALAI** has been nominated eight times for Best of the Net and five times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016) and *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019).

# Diamond

Felicity L. Rollin

in winter diamonds fade  
superseded by the fireplace's warmth

that never reaches far enough;  
our ever-optimistic Lassie shivers

on nights like this,  
when the old woods that protect us grow thin,  
*forever*

is never so long as  
*tonight*

**FELICITY L. ROLLIN** loves art and the color purple. Besides poetry, her hobbies include learning languages and reading philosophy. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Trouvaille Review*, *Quatrain Fish*, and elsewhere.

# A Locked Room Mystery

David Stevens

## A professor

The Great White Shark is a naturally curious beast, and will test foreign objects by bumping or even biting them. As she fell asleep, the Professor heard a ripple of thumps along the length of the ship's hull, and thought immediately of the flank of a large shark making contact with the vessel as it proceeded past in a slightly serpentine fashion.

If sleep had not been about to claim her, she might have realised her mistake, and wondered that the sound came not from the hull at all, but from within the ship. Instead she drifted away, anatomical charts of increasingly unreal fishes flapping away behind her eye lids.

While horrified, she was not totally surprised the next morning when, as she wheeled herself to an early breakfast, she encountered in the passageway outside her cabin, the mutilated half body of a liveried waiter.

Thinking it was a breakfast menu, the professor bent from her chair to recover a folded card from next to the remnants of the body. She found however that it was a densely packed page of text which, without her glasses, made no sense at all. Fortunately it was not stained with blood.

## A billionaire

Space is at a premium on a liner, and so the secret annex of the owner was not expansive, certainly not as large as his stateroom. One bulkhead was densely packed with ancient tomes. Another was a generous window, concealed by ingenious design, allowing him to view the swimmers in the pool from below, without the need to snatch glances or avert his gaze to avoid detection.

For a long time though, he has had little interest in dangling limbs and clinging swimming costumes. He was more likely to haunt this room in the early hours of the morning, when the pool was emptied of swimmers and the moon was full. Like an alchemist, he would sit in the feeble, thrice filtered — air, water, window — moonlight, and dwell upon his collected sources of arcane knowledge.

Tonight though, he stared aghast. A disaster had struck, beyond the powers of cleaning staff and standard pool filters to repair.

The pool was populated by dozens and dozens of human foetuses, suspended beneath the surface in rows, line upon line of them in some unknown order — surely not Dewey Decimal! - their hearts visibly beating within their chests, their umbilical cords stretching to he knew not where.

And now, perhaps at the command of a dog whistle pitched higher than his old ears could hear, each of them turned in the water to face him, their eyes open and accusing, staring through the façade directly at him.

## **A writer**

The god is spread thinly in the gaps that are left to him. An empty steamer trunk; a void between stateroom walls where some insulation is missing; the room between molecules of water in an evaporating puddle; the pauses between breaths.

The god writes frantically. She has not slept for a very long time. He dares not rest until his story is complete. Left unwatched, its characters may seek to find him again, stalking him until she is left with nothing.

## **A killer(s)**

He indulges his appetites without restraint or discrimination. Everything is food to him, and how he plays with his meal! Big boy makes a terrible mess. The legends of his kills are cave painted eviscerations, the spray from his jowls.

Don't be afraid. His size has trapped him beneath decks. He has swollen so that the bulkheads of the passageways are his clothing, rasping against his sides. He cannot turn. He can progress only at the pace of growing fingernails. He is a monster, but one that has defeated itself by always winning.

He is rake thin, an aesthete who meditates too much upon his hunger. Delaying gratification, his contemplation of communion has transcended his desire beyond the simple spilling of seed into a body, to the demands of true intimacy, requiring the flaying of skin of others, exposing their nerve ends, all the better for the direct transfer of thoughts and feelings, one soul to another. For example.

The thinnest slip of paper, slid beneath jambs, sills and seals, a blade ultra-slender and precise. The most toxic of poison pen letters, the most ancient of criminal histories pushed beneath your door, the profanest of words now made flesh and taking form, rising to its feet and suddenly amongst you. He slices his story in your skin, carves his legend onto your bones.

Attend the entrance hall and check the catalogue for answers: “in their pocket, carried him here, who?”

### **An ancient mariner**

It was not an easy task to launch a lifeboat from a large moving vessel, especially in fog, but they were experienced seamen, and they managed without capsizing. At first they rolled and shuddered, dipped and bounced in the turbulence of the ship’s wake, but soon they disentangled themselves from the energies binding them together.

They seek to escape the horrors. With whatever it was loose on the ship, they had decided to take their chances on the open sea.

They left history, and were filed away.

As they entered yet another cloud, they were surprised when the prow of the boat struck something solid. The patch of fog passed, and they saw that they had hit a wall. The trompe-l’œil was revealed for what it was, the brush strokes less convincing close up, but still it was an effective painting of a ship receding into the distance, the smoke from its chimneys merging with the dissipating fog. Another cloud passed over them, and when it was gone, they saw the artist had been at work again, the ship now further away.

One of the sailors, a born survivor experienced at overcoming obstacles, screamed in a foreign language, and began to strike at the wall with a gaffer pole. Coloured chunks of plaster flew about them, revealing the white beneath.

Gently, sadly, an old hand reached out to the striking arm. Startled, the seaman looked around, and saw an ancient face he did not recognise. Certainly the man was not wearing the company uniform. The elderly man shook his head in regret.

“Don’t,” he said. “Beyond here be monsters.”

The painting, a little worse for wear, showed the ship now very far away, and the sun setting.

Far above, the flip top closed upon them, and dust began to fall. In the darkness, nobody could make out the artist’s signature in the corner.

## **A stoker**

Separated from the search party organised by the detective, a stoker silently sobs into his hands. Searching for clues within the stores of coal, he found secreted there blackened pages of typescript that were never meant to be located. He now mourns his own fate, prematurely revealed to him in those mis-filed papers. He has learned that the god does not always write in sequential order.



## A waiter, re-joined

The waiter is screaming, hanging high in the sky, his arms flailing towards a great expanse of ocean far below him.

There are other people here. Everything is upside down. The people shuffle about, their feet somewhere above them. They do not look up, everything becomes vague up there. Far below their heads, large dim figures move submerged in the ocean. The people do not look down, either.

They seldom speak to him. To learn their tale, he will need to learn to read clay tablets, to trace braille in blown dust. He has time.

He knows that he suffered disaster on the ship. Things feel loose around his mid-section.

He screams some more.

He learns that everyone is always hungry here. Everyone always feels the vertiginous tug, the terror of falling. None of them ever grow used to either of these feelings. It is why they mostly keep their eyes closed.

Occasionally they wish the fear to be gone, to resolve it once and for all, and they seek to leap off and tumble down the miles to crash into the sea. All that happens is that they rock a little, up and down. The sky is no surface to give them grip to push against. When the waiter tries for the first time to end it all, he finds that his upper and lower halves bounce at a slightly different rate, and there is a dissonance about his gut and his hips. Whatever happened to him in the passageway, his re-joining is not complete.

Eyes closed, they shift about.

At some stage, he enquires of a god. He thinks it appropriate. However, they profess ignorance, know nothing of her but his hair. It is about their feet, thick uncut acres of it, great billowing clouds spilled over from somewhere else. It does not tether them, it is just there. Homeless limbs meander about in it, seeking their owners. If a careful eye was to open, it would note thousands and thousands of lost words creeping letter by letter along the lengths of those loose arms and legs, like fleas or lice, awaiting return to their proper repository.

## **A detective**

The detective is still wearing her pirate outfit from the night of the Costumed Ball, the night of the first death. The peg leg is real, the eye patch unnecessary. Still, she finds it a comfort. Its presence on her face is soothing like a tiny blanket, and it serves to block from sight one half of that world she has grown to find distasteful. There is a secret inscribed on the inward side, but it is too close and there is insufficient light for her to read it.

Everyone had assumed that the initial victim, being a man, was engaged in a clumsy dance, and had looked away to spare him embarrassment. When the ship's surgeon performed an autopsy and found that his lungs were full of seawater and that he had drowned in the ballroom, the detective knew that she faced a wily adversary.

She has examined the corpses and sent out parties to search for clues. She has read the ship's manifest and log, taken those records apart as though that would make them more sensical. Now she is at

the centre of the huddled survivors gathered at the bridge. She draws herself up, gathers her notes and prepares to speak. The people look on expectantly.

“The murderer—the murderer *is*.”

But of course! They marvel at her perspicacity, and record her utterance for posterity. As soon as it is written down, the page is torn from the pad and folded into a cylinder, then thrust into a pneumatic tube, which bears it away.

The passengers shrink towards each other, packing in tight around the detective. Wheels squeak as the professor joins them in huddling closer and closer, retreating from the edges as though they fear that even the furniture in the room conspires against them. They ignore the obscenity hung behind them.

They stare through the bridge window that has been tilted to remove all internal reflection. Below, in unison, the pool of foetuses join in a silent scream. Above, a mountainous wave storms towards them, vast and black, and full of stars.

## **A writer redux**

The god seldom has the luxury of editing. He has however taken a few units of Planck time to robe herself in a velvet smoking jacket, to recline in a leather armchair, and draw deeply of the fug of tobacco, brine, book mould, ancient wood, gondwanan spices and million year old whisky.

It is not happy with the final image. The alert attention of the rows of silently shrill gaping foetuses, yes. The massive solid

darkness about to embrace them, indeed. But those who face it, head on . . .

She begins to draw with her fingers using the materials available. A drop of port, ash from the trays, pork fat from a chop remnant, some unsucked bone marrow. Loose strands of his hair drag remnants of the killer's work across the page, suggesting noise and grain. The professor, grizzled, always angry, hair short and sharp. leans forward out of her wheelchair, gripping a walking cane like a staff, staring oblivion down. The detective's eyepatch is replaced by steampunk goggles, her pegleg hidden by a long trench coat. A hint of satisfaction plays across her face. A straight-backed naval officer adds authority to the scene. In the corner of his eye, a reflection of the window; within that, the swimming pool; and in its depths, the face of the billionaire, pressed against his own window. And behind them all, the stoker can be just made out, nailed to the wall, his skin hanging in flecked strips, his mouth open in a scream of lungs and bowels and heart that is not silent at all ...

Then the god is gone. Before the neighbours arrive with their hotpot; before the onslaught of villagers armed with torches and pitchforks; before Krakatoa explodes. The only movement is the cylinders hurtling along the pneumatic highway. The pages are left with all of the others, on the many, many shelves receding towards the far-distant vanishing point that is big boy's wide open mouth.

**DAVID STEVENS** (usually) lives in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and those of his children who have not yet figured out the locks. His fiction has appeared amongst other places in *Crossed Genres*, *Aurealis*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Pseudopod*, *Cafe Irreal*, *Not One of Us*, and most recently in *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine* and *Vastarien*.

## The Mesh

Zackary Sholem Berger

Every day ties another knot  
In the net, and I haven't got  
An instruction book, or a thought

Which coaxes to loosening.  
Time will unbind. Or the ending  
Of time might mean unwinding.

The night angles shut like a lid.  
The day collapses, is elided  
Into a mesh of what I did

Or did not. Tangled up and closed,  
I watch the dipping sun lose  
Itself in the basin of *chatzos*.

*(Chatzos: Midnight according to the definitions of Jewish law. [Hebrew/Yiddish])*

A poet and translator in Baltimore, **ZACKARY SHOLEM BERGER** is a physician by day.





## On the cover:

“Untitled (cave)”

**CAROCTA** is an artist and designer working in England.

Their work is available on Pixabay at [pixabay.com/users/carocta-15410707](https://pixabay.com/users/carocta-15410707).

