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Editor's Note

This issue is full of bodies. Human bodies, animal bodies, scary bodies, dead bodies, vanishing bodies, body parts. Slip between the tent flaps and behold these dazzling wonders—you will find some body to love.

— Laura Garrison

People Eater

Nicholas Altì

Twinkle toes don't taste good this year,
too much crunch. Pulp. Plus, no rot yet.

My hunch: fiddlesticks *in* our micro-plastic.
This can go one of two ways: tongue or cheek.

You want to go blow for blow? What kind
of sexy threat is that? Don't hurt me! *Harm* me.

I've got a bone to rip from you. Hit you with.
So many wells left to poison, cuts to kiss bitter.

This was probably inevitable. A tough case: sweet,
pitch black plasma, yes, but only light grey plague.

Contamination is a measure of chance. Hypnosis.
We can go delicate. We can make a moment.

I thought you wanted to get smothered
in honey, not insect repellent. Sorry, tombstone.

Now, your vision should be blurring. Nauseous?
The horsemen storm behind you, bearing lances.

I just wanted to befriend. You look yum.
Don't go—I just want to sear you briefly.

From rural Michigan, **NICHOLAS ALTI** is a bartender in Atlanta who holds an MFA from the University of Alabama. He is interested in absurdity, silliness, and surrealism. His poetry is in *Burial Books Blog*, *7th-Circle Pyrite*, *Star*Line*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, and his website is 3bluntzatonce.com.

haiku

Randy Brooks

dishwater hands
fingering out a bridge
on her guitar

RANDY BROOKS is Professor of English Emeritus at Millikin University, where he teaches a haiku course. Randy and Shirley Brooks, are publishers of Brooks Books and co-editors of *Mayfly* haiku magazine. His most recent books include *Walking the Fence: Selected Tanka* and *The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku*.

Zoey Deschanel Was a Professional Killer

Bob DeRosa

Zoey Deschanel killed her first man when she was twenty-two. She was on location in North Carolina filming her indie break-out *All The Real Girls* when her handler called and told her a Russian operative was passing through the state. After filming the crucial bowling alley scene, she drove to the cheap motel where the operative was spending the night. She waited until he came out of his room with an ice bucket and followed him into a shadowy alcove where he began scooping ice from a large bin with a plastic trowel. She shot him twice in the back and he slumped into the open bin, his blood cooling as it leaked onto the mound of ice. Then Zoey drove back to her hotel near Asheville and memorized her lines for the next day's scene.

Zoey's handler paid a film journalist a lot of money to call her a manic pixie dream girl. He felt it would divert people's attention from the qualities that seemed plain as day to him. The blankness of her eyes. The cool demeanor that defused anyone nearby. The sweet, quiet energy that signaled she was no threat. But she was. She'd been recruited in high school after a career aptitude test revealed that her strong work ethic combined with an inherent ability to transform her inner self at a moment's notice meant she was qualified for exactly two careers: actress and assassin. After

years of training, she became a professional killer in manic pixie dream girl's attire. And her handler was the only one who knew.

Zoey killed a billionaire's bodyguards (two men and a woman) while filming *Elf* in New York City. On one of her weekends off, she entered the VIP suite of a nightclub with a message for the billionaire. She shot his two male bodyguards first, but the female was fast, knocking the gun from Zoey's hand. They traded martial arts blows for nearly a minute before the woman said, Wait, aren't you in that movie, and then Zoey crushed her windpipe with a flying elbow. The billionaire shivered in fear as Zoey walked away. He'd received the message Zoey was instructed to give: that he was touchable. The next day during lunch Will Ferrel made a joke about how funny it would be if Zoey was actually a cunning assassin. Everyone laughed. Zoey paused, then laughed, too. That night she asked her handler if she should kill Will Ferrel but he said, no, it was only a joke.

The assassination business slowed for Zoey when she was cast on the TV show *New Girl* as it was harder to cover her tracks if she killed too often in the same city. Luckily, she was in a band that would occasionally tour. It was after a She & Him set at Coachella when she killed another assassin, a German model there to hear the music and maybe shag the lead singer of the rock band Muse. The model had killed several of Zoey's colleagues in the past, so when

she went to a VIP bathroom, Zoey locked her inside and set the whole thing on fire. Afterwards, Zoey had a drink with her *Almost Famous* co-star Kate Hudson. Zoey asked how her Coachella was going, and Kate complained about all the attractive women trying to sleep with her fiancé (who happened to be the lead singer of Muse). One less now, said Zoey, and to this day, Kate has no idea what she meant.

Zoey retired from professional killing when Property Brother Jonathan Scott asked her to marry him. Her handler understood the decision and thanked her for her years of service. Zoey knew what that meant, so on her next solo trip out of town she went to her handler's summer house in New Hampshire. She waited until his family left for the grocery store, then forced him into her car at gunpoint and made him drive deep into the White Mountain National Forest. He knew it was over when she had him stop the car near a large hole that she'd dug earlier. When she asked him if he had any last words, he said the proudest moment of his career was convincing the world she was a manic pixie dream girl. If only they knew, he began, before Zoey killed him quickly with a single shot to the heart. He was the last person she would ever kill.

Zoey flew back home and made dinner for her fiancé. Over orecchiette with tomatoes and olives, he asked how her trip was.

She said it was fine. He said he missed her, and she said she missed him, too. And she meant it. She really did.

Where **BOB DeROSA** comes from, nice guys finish first. His screenwriting credits include *Classified*, *Killers*, and *White Collar*. Along with frequent collaborator Ben Rock, Bob co-wrote the Audible Original *Catchers* and SHUDDER's *Video Palace*. His short fiction has appeared in *Escape Pod*, *Every Day Fiction*, and the Simon & Schuster horror anthology *Video Palace: In Search of the Eyeless Man*. When he's not writing, Bob studies Kenpo karate and keeps his Little Free Library filled with good stuff. Come say hi at bobderosa.com

Slummer of Love

Simon MacCulloch

Welcome to Orangedale Park.
Here is the lightning-burnt oak.
There is the brook, with its dark
Chuckles the crumpled cans choke.
Watch for the dogs without leads
Roaming the razor-edged grass;
Watch for the prowler who bleeds
Rainbows from eyes of cut glass.
Somewhere a radio plays
Songs made of chocolate ice cream,
Melting the minds of these strays,
Slurping them up in its dream.
What are you looking for here?
Nothing; you wait to be found,
Blown into bubbles of fear,
Blobbed like old gum on the ground.

SIMON MACCULLOCH lives in London and contributes poetry to a variety of publications, including *Spectral Realms*, *Aphelion*, *Altered Reality*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Reach Poetry*, *Black Petals*, *The Horror Zine* and others.

A Pumice Stone

Kate Maxlow

"I'm afraid you're disappearing," the doctor says. He is about 50 years old with distinguished gray sideburns that I ache to scrub off with a pumice stone. But that would require me to get a pumice stone. I add it to the mental list: get a pumice stone.

He smiles sadly and waves his perfectly visible arm toward the door, indicating that his allotted three minutes for me have also disappeared. "There are lollipops at the front desk," he whispers and then winks.

I ask if they are medicinal lollipops.

"Heavens, no," he responds. "They're not even good for you. But that shouldn't matter for you. Much. Anymore." He clicks his pen six times and I try to decrypt his message, but remember I never learned Morse Code. I steal his pen and write down on my arm: Learn Morse Code. He shrieks, because my right arm was the first thing to disappear, so to him, his pen is just floating of its own accord. He has already forgotten that I am in the room with him.

I tell him he shrieks like a little girl. Then I sweep out of the small exam room as regally as possible for someone missing a right hand, a left cheekbone, and both buttocks.

As I glide past the young receptionist, she calls out, "Do you need a follow-up...?"

Without looking back, I yell at her to learn Morse Code before it's too late.

Several crepe myrtle trees loiter outside the doctor's office, each with blossoms the deep burgundy of the first scraped knee. Two of

the smaller crepe myrtles snigger at me, but the larger simply holds out her branches. I crawl into them and hug her tightly. She tells me how every season, men come and prune her down to nubs, and then she grows back bigger and fuller and more burgundy than anyone thought possible.

I tell her that's a nice story, but I am not being pruned to nubs because someone wants me to be more than my current self—I am disappearing, one body part a day, and per the medical establishment, there is nothing to be done. She calls the wind to come brush my hair, which it does while cooing gently as my tears fall past my missing left cheekbone.

Several people walk past. The wind and I catalogue them: a twenty-something young man wearing earbuds and chanting, "Bruh, bruh, bruh." A pregnant woman in her thirties whose hands cradle her belly. A harried mother in her forties, clutching the hand of a wiggling, pigtailed preschooler. The only one who sees me is the preschooler.

"That woman has no butt!" the child yells, pointing at me with her one free arm, flapping it as if she might fly up into the tree with me, where she will learn the secrets to not having a butt. Alas, her mother drags her along without even acknowledging the preschooler's cries, and I choke back a sob that this poor young girl will never know the secrets to disappearing, at least, not until her own doctor's appointment when she is 51.

In a sudden flurry of inspiration, I call my own child, a son who had never worn pigtails but did scream about strangers' butts in his youth. At 34, he now designs eco-friendly packaging for mass-produced products and sometimes remembers to answer his

phone. I taught him all the geometry, but he taught himself the benefits of cardboard versus plastic.

Today is one of those lottery-winning days. When he answers, I tell him that I am disappearing.

“Mom? What?” he asks. “I can barely hear you!”

I repeat, louder, that I am disappearing, that the doctor says there’s nothing to be done about it, that his father hasn’t even noticed and doesn’t think I need a cheekbone implant because he doesn’t want to dip into our retirement savings, which I swear he measures in asymptotes because we can never quite reach whatever mythical goal he has set for us—

“What?” my son yells again. “Are you in a wind tunnel?”

I hang up. The crepe myrtle sighs in understanding. She starts to tell me about her own reproductive issues and the difficulty with root suckers.

I climb down from the tree, carefully. I’m already missing one hand and can’t hold anyone else’s problems, not today. The wind tousles my hair and reassures me that I can forgo trying to figure out how to style it curly because it will also disappear soon.

The next day, I wake up and find every other toenail missing. In confirmation, I wander into a nail salon and sit in a chair, but no one sees me. I eventually get up and steal a lollipop from the front desk on my way out.

The next day: Earlobes.

One thigh.

Left ankle.

I try to do my own research on the mysterious ailment of disappearing one body part at a time, but discover that no research

exists. All I find are copious ads for pills to combat disappearing erections.

Single nostril.

My friends go to Cabo, where they laugh when the waiters flirt with them. I stay home; I know anyone who flirts with a woman missing a thigh and a nostril is only in it for the tips, and I have a retirement fund to think about.

I think about the crepe myrtle being pruned, and I learn Morse Code in defiance. I list this new skill at my yearly evaluation meeting, but my boss forgets to come. I ask myself some questions, pretend to think about the answers, and award myself an Exceeds Expectations in Existential Despair. Then I set a goal for myself: get a pumice stone.

One day in June, my husband compliments my dress. He says it's his favorite, even though it is brand new and droops oddly because I am missing a shoulder. When I lament the shoulder, he nods and says, "I see," but he doesn't. I buy him reading glasses so he can stop holding his menus at an arm's length and therefore not risk hyper-extending his working shoulders.

I plant crepe myrtle seeds but they don't grow. Should have gone with the root suckers.

My son comes over for dinner every Sunday, wolfs down rotisserie chicken, and shows me a picture of his yoga instructor. I raise the one eyebrow I have left.

They get married.

I sew some sequins on a burlap sack and dip my head in red wine for that effortlessly flushed look.

As we dance the mother-son dance, my son looks at his new husband, which means he does not see my tears spell out, in dots and dashes: I was once your everything.

I suck on a lollipop at the reception while my husband does the chicken dance. His toast, the one that I wrote, earns a standing ovation.

I pay the caterer, who doesn't question a check simply floating his way.

When everyone goes outside to wave goodbye to my son and his new husband, I stand near the back of the crowd, next to a crepe myrtle tree. I fiddle with and stare at the sequins on my burlap sack, so it comes as a shock when the wind rushes from my one remaining lung and giant arms encircle me. Then he runs back to the limo and drives off to his new life.

On the ground, at the foot of the crepe myrtle tree, I see a rock and pick it up. It looks just like a pumice stone.

Tomorrow, I will plant root suckers.

KATE MAXLOW is a recovering school district administrator who writes across multiple genres because she is easily bored. Her work appears in or is forthcoming from *Maudlin House*, *BULL*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, and more. She lives in Virginia with her family and writes curriculum by day and fiction by night. She can be found at <https://katemaxlowauthor.com/kate-maxlow> or on BlueSky at @katemaxlow.bsky.social.

Road Signs In The Country

Jim Tilley

Many carry the image of a deer lifting off
from hind legs, forelegs bent at the knee,
head held upright, antlers worn like a crown.

Drivers forewarned they may encounter
these bounding creatures trying to get from
one side of the road to the other, lives likely

to be cut short in traffic, especially at night,
not to mention the serious damage to the striking
vehicle, both parties better off for never having

met. A designated crossing might be in order,
but that would entail much rounding up
and detailed instructions on when to wait, when

to proceed, learning to recognize red and green.
At spots where the road passes through denser
forest, signs feature both the deer and a moose,

his head not held high, shoulders sagging,
the beast dragging himself onto the pavement
from the woods, looking as if he's just waiting

to be struck down, things not going well in his life
or at least in his day, as if he's just heard that
he and his whole family will soon be deported

to god-knows-where for lack of proper documents
to cross the highway without a fuss, perhaps
a timely death seeming a more desirable outcome

in a land like this. What does the moose know
that the deer doesn't, and what did the sign-maker
understand that he's trying to communicate?

JIM TILLEY has published four full-length collections of poetry and a novel with Red Hen Press. His short memoir, *The Elegant Solution*, was published as a Ploughshares Solo. Five of his poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His most recent poetry collection, *Ripples in the Fabric of the Universe: New & Selected Poems*, was published in June 2024. His forthcoming collection, *When Godot Arrived*, will be published in the fall of 2026.

On the cover:

“Halloween”

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