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Editor's Note

As the steel-wool clouds squeeze gallon after gallon of dishwasher-warm water over everything, we are glad to be typing this from our nice dry cave with a mug of ginger beer, a bowl of soft pretzels, and some cheerful strings of fairy lights. With haiku from Randy Brooks and stories from Peter Hoppock, Robert Tyler, and Allen Seward, issue one-hundred twenty-four is full of quiet wonders and the sorts of small surprises that jolt us fully awake for a moment, like literary espresso shots.

— Laura Garrison

The Kites All Turned to Animals in the Air

Allen Seward

A young boy walks through the bleach white trees, followed close behind by a shaggy dog wagging its tail, trotting almost on the boy's heels, its mouth hanging open almost as if it were smiling.

The sky above is green and the few splotches of clouds present are gray—they look like cotton swabs that have been pulled apart and left on the floor behind the trashcan for too long. They've gone dirty. They've taken on the color of death.

A fish flaps its fins and skates through the air above the boy and his dog, hardly taking notice of them. The boy always found these fish very intriguing. He used to throw rocks at them to try to knock one out of the air. He always missed, and he always knew he would miss, even before he threw. His father would shoot the things, clean them, and bring them home, and then the boy's mother would take them and cook them. The fish always tasted better to the boy than those ugly feathered creatures his father would scoop out of the water.

One of the trees moans as a breeze passes through. The yellowed grass bends. It looks almost like Missy's hair, the boy thought. Missy was a schoolmate of his. The yellowed grass looked like Missy's yellowed hair. If the grass had hazel eyes then it might look just like Missy.

The boy keeps walking.

The dog keeps following.

"We've got a couple hours before supper," the boy tells the dog. "We'll keep walking for a bit."

The dog wags its tail and smiles.

The two of them continue on, out through the trees and up the hill.

The dirty gray cotton clouds move about the sky and the sun shifts. The boy looks at it. It's getting closer to suppertime. Another fish skates overhead, the sun rays catching on its scales and fins.

On some days the clouds in the sky aren't so dirty looking, aren't so pulled cotton looking. Sometimes they're almost white. Sometimes the clouds take on shapes, or rough shapes, and some of the boy's schoolmates will sit outside, or lie on the ground, and stare up at them to see what shapes they can make out. Sometimes a cloud might look like a rabbit, or a dog, a cat, a giraffe... Missy once told the boy that the clouds take on the shapes of animals because of all the kites that get pulled up there. The boy didn't believe it.

"What about the balloons?" asked the boy.

"No," said Missy, "they just float up and stay balloons."

A bit further, maybe? No. Best head back.

The boy pats the dog on the head. Mother will want me to wash up before dinner, he thinks, and I'll need a few minutes for that. Father won't want to be delayed, he'll want his meal and then his aftermeal cigar. He works in the morning, so he might not have his glass of scotch after supper—he likes to save that for the weekends, a true relaxation—but he always has his cigar.

Father's fork will scrape the plate, and his lips will smack, and he will slurp whatever juices there are to slurp. He will have a second plate. He will compliment Mother's cooking. He will have a glass of sweet tea with his meal—perhaps two.

The dog will sit under the table, its head on the boy's knees, and the boy will sneak whatever meaty bits he can to the dog. His parents will pretend they don't notice. He'll feel like the most clever boy in the world.

The boy pats the dog's head again. "We'd better head back," he says.

"Yes," says the dog. "Yes, indeed."

ALLEN SEWARD is a writer from the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. His work has appeared in *Scapegoat Review*, *The Charleston Anvil*, *Bizarrchitecture*, *Skyway Journal*, *Moth Eaten Mag*, and *Eucalyptus Lit*, among others. He currently resides in

WV with his partner and four cats. @AllenSeward1 on Twitter, @allenseward0 on Instagram. Check out more at allenseward.wordpress.com.

Precipitant

Rob Tyler

A few years ago my brother Donny and I inherited some land in upstate New York from our uncle Phil. He passed away after a long illness, which was basically his entire adult life. Phil worked hard and played hard and drank hard and died hard when his heart burst as he crossed his kitchen floor barefoot, in boxers, a bowl of rum raisin ice cream in hand.

I'm not sure why Phil left the property to us rather than to his ex or his kids. Maybe because he knew we loved it as much as he did. Donny and I lived nearby when we were young and for years spent the better part of every summer hanging out with Phil, riding around on his tractor, fishing the stream, shooting tin cans off fence posts. He didn't care if we never brushed our teeth or made our beds or chewed with our mouths closed. Or bathed regularly in his old clawfoot tub. Why bother? We swam every day in that scummy little pond that no one else would set foot in. Especially after the snapping turtle took off Phil's big toe. Good old 9-toe Phil. I miss him.

Donny misses him more. Donny and Phil had more in common—both misfits, you know what I mean? Square pegs and all. Donny's ok as long as he stays on his meds, but since he moved down there and started living in the barn I've worried about him. When he stopped answering my calls and texts, I decided it was time for a visit.

The farm—we call it the farm even though it hasn't been properly farmed for about 100 years—is an hour drive south of my

place in Rochester. The last stretch, beyond Bristol Valley, takes you down the high road overlooking Canandaigua Lake. I'm glad I can remember it the way it was last Saturday: brilliant sun in a clear blue sky, boats carving white wakes across the water. Cottages full of happy families on vacation.

In the no-stoplight town of Naples, just south of the lake, I pulled in at Bob and Ruth's for a cup of coffee and a donut to go. I used to know some of the help, but I'd never met the middle-aged woman with dyed hair who took my order at the counter. Naomi, according to her name tag. She fixed the coffee the way I like it—double-double—and offered to warm up the donut.

There were good people in Naples.

You can't see much of the farm from the road, it's so overgrown. Just a couple ruts that pass for a driveway next to a mailbox mounted on top of a rusting crankshaft. That's where I found Donny, taking a razor to the adhesive-backed numbers. I parked under the canopy of old maples and got out of the car.

It was like I wasn't there.

"Earth to Donny, come in Donny."

"Don't let on that you know me," he whispered, glancing at the sky. "It would be safer for you that way."

I knew right away things were bad. I stood and watched, waiting for him to finish what he was doing.

"What are you trying to accomplish?"

"I'm going to ground," he said, his eyes darting side to side.

It wasn't the first time he'd had paranoid delusions. In fact, it was almost comfortingly familiar turf.

"And what are you going to do about Google maps? Single-handedly mount a DOS attack?"

“They don’t have street views of this road yet.”

Why did I bother? When he was in this condition, there was no winning. “Look, I brought your meds.”

“It won’t make any difference,” he said, as he turned and walked stiffly down the drive toward the barn.

“I think it might,” I said. I grabbed the bag from the car and jogged after him.

As we got closer to the barn, I could hear an engine roaring. Like he’d left the tractor running at full throttle.

“What’s that sound, Donny?”

He slid open the big door and we were blasted with a wall of noise and a blue cloud of exhaust.

At first I couldn’t tell what I was looking at. Then my eyes adjusted to the dim light: dozens of rotary lawn mowers, bolted to racks, running full bore.

Donny moved down the rows shutting them off, one by one.

This was a new type of insanity I hadn’t seen from him before.

“Centrifuges are not the big problem they’re made out to be,” he said. “It’s the gimbals that are hard to come by. I got these from a marine supply warehouse—they’re ship compass mounts.”

When the mowers were running I hadn’t noticed the hardware hanging from the ends of each blade.

“Are these beer bottles?”

“Coors long necks. Good quality—heavy glass, consistent weight. I could use some more if you have any empties.”

I moved closer to the nearest mower and peered at a bottle, which was suspended by its neck, swaying slightly. It was half full of clear liquid; at the bottom, a thin layer of brown sediment.

“Are you deconstructing beer? What’s that at the bottom— hops?”

“It’s not beer,” he said. “It’s well water. That stuff at the bottom is plutonium.”

I said some things I shouldn’t have during the ensuing conversation. I unloaded on him, his paranoia and obsessions and anti-social behavior, the way he’d embarrassed the family for years and worried mom and dad into early graves. How he embraced his condition and, when it suited his purposes, defended it as an illness over which he had no control. I blamed him for the state of our relationship and expanded my rant to include my anger at him for taking over the farm, which our dear departed uncle wished us both to enjoy.

Donny remained calm as I flew off the handle. To outward appearances, I’d look like the crazy one.

When I finally tired myself out and collapsed on the ratty couch in the framed-in living space that used to be the hay loft, the sun was low over the hills. Donny handed me a Coors and quietly resumed the explanation of his irrational behavior.

“You’ve heard of West Valley? Major nuclear contamination. They’ve been trying to clean it up for over 40 years. It’s the most toxic site in New York State.”

“So?” I closely examined the contents of the bottle he’d given me before I took a swig.

“West Valley drains into the Upper Cohocton aquifer.”

This just pissed me off all over again. The way he could go from nuts to reasonable without warning. Will the real Donny please stand up?

“You’re telling me our well is contaminated with nuclear waste?”

He smiled for the first time since I’d arrived, and it gave me the creeps. “It’s not waste,” he said, “if you recycle it.”

“What are you talking about, Donny.”

“We have to send a message.”

“What kind of message?”

“The kind that makes a big impression.” He brought his fists together in front of his face, then splayed his fingers wide and moved his hands apart in slow, symmetrical arcs.

Finally, it all made sense! With lawnmowers and beer bottles, he would build a weapon that engineers with the resources of entire nations at their disposal required decades to develop. A great DIY project, except for certain death from carbon monoxide poisoning, amputation by mower blade, or perhaps total conflagration of the barn. Whatever he was doing with that sludge—whether it was plutonium or hops or most likely the iron that stained the bathroom fixtures—the message I was getting was *a danger to himself or others*. As Donny’s power of attorney and health care proxy, I could arrange to have him committed. No one wants to play that card, not against someone they love, but this was beyond worry and embarrassment. This called for intervention.

I finished the beer and shifted to small talk and safe subjects, told him I’d be back soon with a few cases of Coors empties. I said I’d buy him a Geiger counter at the Army Surplus store so he could measure his yield.

“You know,” he said, “they track every one of those ever made. Every one.”

His smile was gone. There was something in the grim cast of his face, his leaden gaze, that told me he hadn't fallen for my insouciant act. He saw right through me.

"Of course," I said.

As I walked to my car, I noticed the new padlock on the door of the old stone smokehouse. There were areas in the barn I hadn't seen either. I wondered how much I was missing. Part of me felt I should stay and help him, however I might. But a greater part of me wanted to flee his madness, his contaminating craziness. I couldn't wait to get home to my normal existence. A hot shower, a few hours of Netflix, maybe some Chinese takeout. And definitely better beer.

He watched, expressionless, as I backed out into the road. His hand rose slightly and fluttered in a feeble imitation of a wave. I waved back, and drove off.

I stopped again at Bob and Ruth's. There's a good cell signal there. As I stood outside the entrance, scrolling through my contacts, Naomi slid open the service window above the outdoor counter.

"You want ice cream?" she said.

"No thanks."

"A lot of people do, in the evening, this time of year, especially if it's hot. They sit at those picnic tables over there under the trees or walk around the Pioneer Cemetery and read the headstones while they eat their ice cream cones. You think that's disrespectful?"

An older couple walked up to the window.

"We'll have some ice cream," the guy said. "You have butterscotch?"

“Just what’s on the board,” Naomi said, pointing up.

I turned my attention back to my phone, found the number of my lawyer, and pressed send. As I waited for an answer, I heard the old woman say, “What a lovely sunset!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the old man start. His head swiveled away from the hand-painted list of ice cream flavors to the dark sky west of town, and with a growing look of alarm, to the green and ochre glow blossoming above the hills to the south.

I should have said something then, alerted the police, sounded the alarm. But I didn’t. It was too late. I jumped in my car, shut the windows, and drove like hell north, through the garishly lit landscape, and wondered where I—where any of us—would go next.

ROB TYLER lives in a barn with a cat on thirty acres of scrubland in Upstate New York—land of the Finger Lakes, grape pie, and disease-bearing ticks. He wrote his first story in fourth grade. It was well received and he rested on his laurels for twenty years. He eventually found his way back to writing for fun (short stories, flash fiction, prose poems) and profit (a career in marketing and technical writing). The profit part is over, but the fun continues. When he isn’t writing, he can be found running hills, piling rocks, or pulling up knotweed.

haiku

Randy Brooks

no corners
in the goldfish bowl
we circle back home

slipping out of its skin
a perfectly tan
roasted marshmallow

yellow belly catfish
zombie
turtles nibble on

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*.

Familiar Territory

Peter Hoppock

You are running down the middle of a street. Blacktop. Gently sloping curbs with adjacent sidewalks. You are inside your body; you are not watching yourself. The trees you are passing are full and green. There are dogs and people who don't notice you. Slow-moving cars, bicycles passing them.

The air is thick, but breathable. Your arms and legs push through it like water. You are fully aware of this anomaly—air cannot be this gelatinous and be breathable. Colors mix, then separate to reveal the magical nature of light. Thick brushstrokes of deep orange and purple extend across the entire sky, a thin ribbon of scarlet sandwiched between them. Higher is the hint of pitch-black, an inky line in a coloring book, a sliver of the past. You pass by houses, familiar rectangles. Sloping, tar-shingled roofs. Chimneys of rust-colored brick.

You are wearing jeans and T-shirt. Your sneakers grip the pavement with each footfall, until you dive forward like a swimmer off the blocks. You begin the breaststroke as your chest falls towards the pavement, and you pull yourself parallel to the road. Your arms push in wide arcs, breast-stroking against the air. Your chest scrapes the blacktop—then rises. Stroke. Legs hanging slack, you arc skyward, slowly. Stroke. The air ahead of you. Stroke. Then behind you. Ahead. Behind. You swim above the treetops.

Passing a familiar water tower you level off and tread the air, legs gently scissoring, arms sweeping in figure eights. You hover

and observe the earth below. People move in fits and starts, rebounding off invisible barriers and changing direction. They enter cars, drive a few miles, stop—then exit and resume their nervous walking patterns. Some enter buildings, passing people who are leaving.

The dogs are the first to notice you, noses pointed skyward. Then children, their mouths forming little o's. Finally, a few adults start pointing at you.

Noiselessly you push aside the air. Observed, you allow yourself to feel joy. You can fly! For show, you dive close to the earth, then swim circles above rolling hills, colored by invisible crayons: green patches of land, yellow and red flowers, white dash-lines on blacktop roads with grey cement curbs and sidewalks. You strafe a crowd that has gathered to witness the amazing man whose arms push air aside like water. Your heart beats loud as thunder, and your eyes tear from the speed. Your arms tire, and you look for a place to land, treading air.

You alter course and propel yourself upwards, to broaden your view. Higher, the air thins; your arms move more easily, but more strokes are required to keep you aloft.

Time feels like a rip tide. The light casts shorter shadows, as the sun muscles its way skyward. Houses, trees—objects of all kinds—are flattened by the brilliance; shapes disappear. The noon-high sun stalls. You are growing fatigued and anxious.

Your stomach feels it before your other senses—a harsh curl upward followed by quick drop, then another climb. You are a roller coaster without wheels. The noon-bright colors fade. The landscape, stretching as far as your eyes can see, loses form. The sun bleaches everything.

You swoop down, arms fatigued. There — there is the road where you began, only white now. White, with tiny wrinkles. Your arms pull and claw at the thinning air. Your clothes are stripped from you as you fall. Everything is pure white. White cotton. You close your eyes and wait for the impact.

Your cheek feels cool against the sheet. Your naked body is face down, spread-eagled against the bedsheets. In the split second between flying and crashing, your stomach sends you the message that you have fallen to the bed from a great height. There are no sheets on your back.

Your wife says: "Whoa!" and rolls away from you. "What was that all about?"

"I was flying."

"I'm going to have a bruise," she says, sitting up.

"Where?" you ask, reaching out to her.

"Here." She guides your hand to the fleshy part of her upper arm beneath the shoulder. She is too calm for you to believe a bruise will form. "Ow," she says, smiling.

"It was a dream. I can't apologize for a dream."

She stands up and grabs a robe from the floor, wraps it around herself tightly. She sits back down on the edge of the bed. "Still, your arms were out wide," she says, stretching her arms out to each side.

You explain: "I do the breaststroke when I fly." You demonstrate, swinging your arms. She laughs, of course. This is not the first time. "I don't dream I'm flying very often."

"Thank God for that," she says, with a smile.

"This time, I think I actually was above the bed," you say.

"Really?" Sarcasm. You don't blame her.

"It was the way I landed. I tried to keep flying right up 'til the end. I really felt it in my stomach, you know? How when you drop really fast, your stomach rises up? I felt it. And I felt I hit the bed hard."

She may be angry with you. "Look. I understand," she says. "It's like our dog dreaming he's chasing a rabbit, legs pawing at the air." She gets up and walks over to the dresser, looking at her arm and then her face, in the mirror. "Jesus," she mutters grimly.

You sit up on her side of the bed, close to where she is looking in the mirror. You reach out to her. "I started in a neighborhood I knew," you say. "Like where I grew up. But then I lost track of where I was. And the air got thinner—"

"Honey?" She interrupts you, which she does not normally do. She retreats from the mirror and stands next to you, grabbing your head gently with both hands around your ears. She tilts your head up. Slowly her head lowers towards yours. She kisses you on the top of your head, and says: "When are you going to stop dreaming you're flying?"

"I don't want to stop, actually," you say, leaning forward and up to kiss her on the lips. "It's such a great feeling. Until the end, that is." She feigns rising away from you, but relents, and when your lips touch you close your eyes. Her lips are the thin ribbon of scarlet in your dream. There is a sweet taste of cherries in your mouth. The kiss is too short.

She moves back to the mirror again, and combs her hair.

You ask if she is coming back to bed.

"I've heard that people who have flying dreams are unhappy with their lives. Flying represents a desire to escape, to have more freedom."

You walk over and stand behind her as she continues combing. You look in the mirror at your two faces, side by side. She closes her eyes. "No no no," you plead. "I'm happy. I'm happy with you. With us."

She lays down the comb and opens her eyes. She looks at the reflections in the mirror, and smiles, lips curled up at the edge—a very sexy half-smile she has used, since the first time you met, to beguile you. She puts her arms around your neck and continues, "You're happy with our sex life? What little we have these days?"

Now you can smile. "Of course I'm happy," you say, ready to kiss her. "I don't need more." If you were lying about this, she would know. Your noses touch.

"Let me tell you about *my* dream," she says.

"Do I want to know?" The kiss will have to wait.

"I'm going to tell you anyway. For the same reason you told me about yours."

She walks back towards the bed. "You woke me before it was finished," she says, calmly. You remain near the mirror, admiring her form, framed by the window, visible through the thin nightgown, a streetlamp providing the backlight. She lays down on the bed facing you. "You were making love to me." Her eyes open wide. So, you imagine, do yours. This dream is also a familiar one. You feel a tremor of anxiety.

"But?" you ask. You walk back, and lie down beside her. You look at one another, your faces in close proximity. Hers in shadow.

Her skin appears blue. How is that possible? You lean up on one elbow, cupping your ear.

"But then suddenly, it wasn't you," she says, reaching out to touch you. You pull yourself closer to her.

"What did you do?"

"I kept touching him. Like this." She strokes your shoulder, your cheek, all the features of your face — with the back of her fingers. Gently.

You are not aroused. "Even though it wasn't was me?" you ask.

She pauses, increasing your anxiety, before saying, "It was just a dream."

Her touch on your skin does not tingle or excite. This is your failing, your flaw, which you have learned to ignore. Her unbuttoned nightgown has fallen off one shoulder, exposing the gentle outward curve of her breast. You want to touch her, but hesitate. You both know that only when you *do* touch her — only then — will you become aroused.

She shimmies her gown further down, revealing a red mark that could become a bruise. "I'm sorry," you say. "For the arm swing, I mean. I had no control."

A tear suggests itself in one eye. "While you were flying, he was pressed against me." She is not being cruel, just honest. You know this, but still...She closes her eyes, then opens them wide. "I was ready. But he was waiting."

"Waiting for what?" you ask, your free hand poised above her hip. She is all beauty. All the beauty there ever was.

"The right moment, of course," she says, exposing her neck. She sighs and you pull her to you with one arm, gently adjusting her position to allow her nightgown to slip off. Her body becomes the

familiar territory you were looking for when you were flying, the earth you've known for so many years. Her curves and twists, hills and valleys. Her sweat is morning dew.

You hover above her, just inches away, then press your body against hers. "Like this?" you ask her, knowing the answer will be yes. You realize this is what your flying dreams are really for: to prepare you for this precious view, to experience the weightlessness of love, to guide you home.

The air thickens as you kiss her.

PETER HOPPOCK has published numerous short stories and novellas in a variety of literary magazines, both online and print. Among them *Adelaide*, *Curbside Splendor*, *The Write Launch*, *Dillydoun Review*, and more. His novella "Mr. Pegg To You" was one of two finalists for the 2013 Press 53 novella Award. Most recently, his short story "Blues For Rashid" was selected by Palasatrium: substack.shortstory for their June 2023 publication.

On the cover:

“Goat with Boy”

GIMAL UDARA is a graphic designer and YouTuber from Eheliyagoda, Sri Lanka.

