

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



Issue 133

July 2026

Jersey Devil Press

July 2026, Issue 133

ISSN 2152-2162

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Editor's Note

Issue 133 is filled with precise observations. The settings and voices are varied, but the attention to detail is consistent. Each piece invites a multiplicity of interpretations. One might be tempted to conclude that noticing things, whether real or imagined, and using language to intentionally communicate these things so others can ponder them and connect them to their lived human experience still matters.

—Laura Garrison

The Last Borg Finds Meaning

Ed Gaudet

And so it was sulfurous,
gray-sun vista and gun-metal
sea or what I remember.

(do I remember?)

Data suggests ochre
sequence, sludge
on a jagged surprise.

(I am no longer surprised.)

The smog suffocates.
They used to grip things:
rusted railings, kitchen knives.

(I understand failure now.)

No more frantic strangers
colliding in those geese-slicked
alleyways, windowless blocks.

Data discusses carnage
like weather no longer discussed.
Gloom lengthens. Or lengthened.

(do I still know how to conjugate?)

Notice the skeletal scalps under
fluorescent glare and flickering
in a nearby building with linen,

(who notices if nobody is left?)

clean and muscle-wasting
amidst a distinction that no
longer matters. Fate was called.

I never understood fate,
its blunt-force execution
of probability and the grinding

of teeth against wet stone or looping
and mere simulation of suffering.
The barricades remain bolted.

(wondering is pure misery)

The harpies shriek in archived
audio files, their high-pitch
discords a kind of music now.

(music made little sense before)

Feral beasts haunted sewers, or
still do: past and present blur
when you are nearly eternal.

(what is death without province)

It rains. Bleached skeletons crumble
and breath-channels collapse. Living
tissue rots. I scan for movement.

(measuring pH is purpose)

ED GAUDET is a poet and healthcare entrepreneur from Hanover, MA. His work has appeared in *The Southwest Review*, *The Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA)*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Blood & Bourbon*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *the Fourth River*, *Slipstream*, *Kitchen Table Quarterly*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Panoply*, and *Burningword Literary Journal*.

Self Portrait

Kang Yihyun

It is a parking lot. I do not know how I came here. It seems I have come back. The airplanes lined up in neat rows are smaller and quieter than they should be. This is a suitable place for a soccer match. Borrowing the gaps through which the ball moves I blend into the sparse crowd. When someone kicks the ball a burst of excitement passes to someone else. It feels like a set of rules invented to forget there is an end.

The soccer ball rolls beneath an airplane. I stare quietly at the place where it disappears. Asked what I am doing I answer only to myself that I am drawing. Fractured words come to mind—*draing* and *nitti*. Still I cannot remember even the simplest noun. The deep, dark underground goes on.

KANG YIHYUN is a poet based in South Korea. His work has been noted for its lively imagination and its subtle, wistful sensibility, observing life through delicate frictions and shifting perceptual boundaries. Kang's poems have appeared in *Eunoia Review* and *Spillwords*.

House Divided

Itto and Mekiya Outini

It's my eighteenth, and the axe is calling. And it's my brother's eighteenth, too. I know this even though I've never seen him, unless you count those fleeting glimpses over the fence between the yards, him planting, digging, pulling weeds, gazing off vacantly into the sky as my father and I pull in and cross the yard, our grocery bags wound round our arms. I could get over the fence if I wanted to, but the house was first divided, according to my father, and the axe is hungry for that first division.

My father taught me how to use it, how to set the blocks and swing so birds would startle from the trees, so I believed him when he said he'd teach me other things. Sometimes I hear my brother and his mother chopping wood on their side, so I know they also have an axe, a need for wood. It was too hard, according to my father, to divide the heating. Better to learn how to live off the land than to split the utilities. One side could've cranked the heat up in July to make the other suffer. One side could've left the water running just to make the other pay. The only way to keep the peace was by returning to the 1800s.

In town, I've seen electric lights, I've shivered in AC and sweated in winter, I've watched water spatter out of faucets and swirl around in toilet bowls. Just in case I ever have to make it in the world, I'm prepared. But my father doesn't think I'll have to. He says that all the world's good for is supplies. He's always worked so he can buy them, but he says it's only habit, says it's just as good to steal. Like hunting—stealing life—which he also said he'd teach

me, and I really thought he would, only now I'm turning eighteen, and he's gone, and I've never met my brother, never even seen his face, unless you count those fleeting glimpses, or my own face in the mirror, which might not count for all that much since he might have something I don't have, like scars.

Your brother isn't like you, says my father. He looks like you, but he's not like you. You run into him, don't try and talk to him. Or, what the hell, go ahead, try and talk to him if you want to. You wait till he opens his mouth. You'll see.

Which I take to mean he's missing teeth.

She could've made him like us, says my father. Like you. But she won't. She'll never. More than anything, she hates us. She could never stand to let him be like you.

My brother is the biggest mistake my father ever made. Getting him. Not making her get rid of him. Bringing her back here, to where we live now. Going down there in the first place, to the place he found her, crossing that border and roaming that country of whores who look and talk and smell like her—by which I guess he means the underworld. I've read about the underworld. Or else it's the house—buying it with her, putting it in both their names—that's the biggest mistake he ever made. What kind of idiot does a thing like that? he wonders, which leaves me feeling like it's good that I'm there, otherwise he'd sound a little crazy, talking to the walls. And while I'm feeling that, he answers, gripping his bottle by the neck: a drunk one.

But what kind of drunken idiot stays to raise his child? What kind of drunken idiot works like a dog to keep him fed and sheltered? What kind of drunken idiot takes him into town and lets him get a load of all the craziness that's out there, even brings him books so he can learn about the world? And the underworld?

Would a drunken idiot teach himself everything, work with his hands, build walls and fences, firepits and wells, just to stay in the house that's his? My father isn't lazy like his father always used to call him. Whatever else he is.

Gone.

He's gone.

At first, I thought it was just for the workday. Just like every other workday. But then his goneness lingered on. It spread through evening into night, stretching like a shadow toward the witching hour. The house was so still, I could hear through the wall that my brother existed. And also his mother. Still there. With each other. Which meant they were hearing each other. Not me.

It was everywhere by morning: a colorless, odorless, bottomless sort of gone. You'd think my first question would've been where he was, what happened to him, whether he was coming back. But it wasn't. I already knew that he wasn't.

My first question was why I was there.

And then my second question: if this was happening to me on my eighteenth, then why was it not also happening to him? Why was she still there?

My third question was about his face.

That's why the axe is calling me.

That's why it's in my hands.

Through the living room runs the plywood curtain. I don't pause to ask myself what he'll think, or do, or say. I close my eyes and howl, throw myself into the swing. I can feel my brother waiting on the other side. Everything my father ever said to me is true, or true enough: the two of us are not the same. If we were, he would be over there swinging too.

The wall becomes a wound. The wound becomes a jagged window. And then the window is a door. He's facing me, just like a full-length mirror. Instead of wide, his eyes are narrowed, maybe against the flying woodchips and the dust I've raised. His hands hang axe-less, empty, at his sides.

I kick the bottom of the hole I've made a little wider. A chunk of plywood flies into the other living room and vanishes beneath a chest of drawers. My axe is heavy. It drags like his would if he had one as I duck through, scratching on the hardwood.

We stand facing each other. My eyes sting with dust, but I don't dare to blink. Liquid is creeping in, making him warp and blur. I don't know what to say to him.

I say, "Happy birthday."

He says nothing.

"Happy birthday," I say once more. "Happy birthday."

He opens his mouth, but what comes out...it isn't words. It's a stream sounds, but they're moving too fast, like words, but not like words, not meaning anything, not like anything I've ever heard.

There seems to be nothing wrong with his teeth.

"What?" I say. I feel the hot frustration like a snake behind my eyes. It's almost like he's mocking me, but I can't make out how or why. Which makes it worse. "What the hell?" I snarl. "What the hell are you saying? Is that how you say happy birthday?"

He cocks his head. I am reminded of a bird.

With a stomp, I raise more dust, a suffocating cloud. "Happy birthday," I say. "Happy birthday, goddammit. Happy birthday! Tell me happy birthday!"

And then there's no more axe. There's nothing in my hands.

My head jerks to the left as if tugged by a string, so hard that my neck almost torques—and there she is. A bronze face. Brilliant

eyes, emerald green. Cheekbones as high as plateaus. Hair flowing out from her in great, dark, buoyant waves. She grips the axe she's taken from me, not as if she doesn't know how her way around a blade, but as if she is distracted by the image at which she is gazing, the mirror of her son.

When she speaks—to him, of course—it's those same incoherent sounds, more like music than words, except that something tells me there actually are words, that they're hiding inside the sounds; or maybe it's the meaning that's hiding, escaped from the words.

He says something back to her. I stand in the swirling dust motes, my flesh prickling as the particulates land, wanting to track what I'm hearing, to follow, to comprehend. There's still a wall between us, and the axe is useless.

She extends a hand.

Hesitantly, as if uncertain whether he believes in this motion, my brother reaches out and takes the axe from her.

Her head bobs. Almost indiscernibly. And then she's gone, vanishing through a doorway into some other part of the house, or the yard, or the world, leaving the three of us there, alone: my brother, the axe, and me.

His eyes cut the air, the dust, and lock on mine. And finally, I am seeing him. And he is seeing me.

ITTO AND MEKIYA OUTINI write about America, Morocco, and all those caught in between. They've published in *The North American Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Chautauqua*, *MQR*, *CommuterLit*, *Modern Literature*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Hobart*, *New Contrast*, *Eunoia Review*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and elsewhere, and their work has received support from the MacDowell Foundation, the Steinbeck Fellowship Program, the Edward F. Albee Foundation, the New York Mills Cultural Center,

and the Fulbright Program. They're collaborating on several books, running an author support platform, and co-hosting a podcast about literature and the arts, Let's Have a Renaissance (<https://www.youtube.com/@TheDateKeepers>).

Two Haiku

Stephen O'Connell

headstone—
the moss visited
long before me

storm tonight—
even the horses
are kneeling

STEPHEN O'CONNELL is a writer from Springdale, Arkansas, with a focus on haiku and senryu. His work has appeared in *Wales Haiku Journal*.

Meanwhile, in the Convent . . .

Simon MacCulloch

Nuns with names like tropical diseases
Hover in the walls of whispered rooms.
In the garden prayer-soaked soil releases
Fragrances of subterranean blooms.
Blessed is the fruiting of their wombs.

Window-glass is winking in the tower,
Chipping out a twitch of spastic sky.
In the garden rosary bushes flower,
Beady with the days until they die.
Blessed is the plucking of the eye.

Mazes where the almost-dead stand waiting
Writhe behind the doors of weed-grown brick.
In the garden Minos is creating
Trees of Knowledge, lush and serpent-thick.
Blessed is the odour of the sick.

Reverend Mother moulds the keys to cellars
Where the deepest-probing roots are fed.
In the garden all of you are dwellers
In an Eden grown from living dead.
Blessed is the taste of boiling lead.

SIMON MACCULLOCH has published hundreds of poems in a variety of outlets, including literary, genre, humour and religious publications. He lives in London.

The Space Corn and the Pigeon

Jie Wang

In the middle of the desert where it used to be New New America, stands a colossal corn—at least its lower part is corn, with its golden grains and green leaves. After it touches the sky, it slowly grows into a metal column.

One day a pigeon flies into the desert and shades herself under the corn's gigantic leaves. "Where does this thing come from?" she says. She has been alone for so long that she has formed the habit of talking to herself.

"I am not a 'thing'," the corn says.

The pigeon is startled. "You can talk?"

"Yes. I used to be a man. I worked hard for too long, so I became like this."

"Oh, that makes sense."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from New New China, which is now a different kind of wasteland. I used to be a woman. I travelled all around the world, so I became a pigeon."

"That is logical."

"Why do you grow metal?"

"Because it lasts longer."

"Why are you so tall?"

"Because I want to reach space."

"Why do you want to reach space?"

"Because the future is there."

"I don't understand. There's nothing in space."

"I can build things there." Then he starts describing his vision with a lot of tech words, and the pigeon thinks he is speaking a pidgin language. She is not interested in space, so she dives towards the earth.

"How deep are your roots?" she asks.

"Very deep."

"Are you digging gold?" She looks at the embarrassing but unembarrassed shine of his golden grains.

"Not just gold."

"But you did dig up *a lot of* gold!"

"Do you want some? I can give you some."

"Oh ... thanks." She pecks off a few golden grains, and buries them in different spots, whose locations she will later forget.

"What is the gold for? There is not much to buy here," she says.

"It is my fuel. I also have a powerful underground engine. Do you want to see it?"

"Yes." So he opens a door on his cob into a lit glass lift. She hops in and it goes underground. She sees his enormous roots stretching and bending like the bowels of a great beast, getting thinner and thinner as they dig deeper, and eventually as thin as hair. At the roots of the hair is a boy, breathing slowly, sleeping, sending electric pulses up through his hair that gradually thickens into the roots, the stem, the cob, and the metal column that reaches into space.

The electric pulses coming out of the boy's head constantly change colours like the skin of a dreaming octopus. The pigeon hasn't seen so many colours for a long time. Beneath the boy there is nothing but darkness, so she concludes that the boy must be the engine. She presses a button and the lift goes up.

After she is out, the space corn asks, "Have you seen my engine? It's impressive, isn't it?"

"I saw a boy."

"A boy? What boy?"

"A boy at the roots of your roots. I suppose he is your engine."

"No, my engine is literally an engine—I never use metaphors. It's very sophisticated technology, not some boy."

"Can you see what's going on underground?"

"No, I can't, but I get signals."

"Yeah ... one can be a Kafka's castle to themselves."

He falls silent, as if thinking about something. Drop by drop the night also falls, making his silence bare and unbearable, so she says in a downcast voice, "This is the time space feels palpable, because the night sky is just as dark and cold. It's like ... space has leaked into the air we breathe."

He is not replying. For a moment she thinks he is dead. She touches him, and feels the electric pulses. "The man is dictated by the boy in him," she says to herself, "and after the boy and the man and I die, the thing will still be here." She moves closer to him, wraps one of his leaves around herself, and falls asleep.

JIE WANG loves words and animals, writes very short stories, has been published in *Best Small Fictions 2024* among others.

On the cover:

“Beach Aliens”

CLAIRE RYE is an Australian author, a professional daydreamer, and someone who once Googled “how to write a killer bio” (it didn’t help). She’s a storyteller at worst, a published author at best, and once spent three hours deciding whether a character needed a middle name. (They didn’t.) Claire lives somewhere between the real world and several fictional ones, usually with a headache, too many story ideas, and an alarming number of unfinished drafts. Her writing can be found at www.clairerye.net, and her artwork is at pixabay.com/users/crye-6216780/.

