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Editor's Note

Autumn has always been our season, our world, our whole fuckin' *vibe*. Fifteen years ago, in October of 2009, Eirik and Monica released the first issue of *Jersey Devil Press* to rampage its way through readers' imaginations. Since then we have expanded to include poetry as well as speculative fiction, changed captains a few times, published work from hundreds of talented writers, and experienced a devastating loss that I discussed in the note for the previous issue and am still grappling with as I type this one. Still—more than ever, maybe—art matters, and we are tail-thumpingly glad to have a new batch of stories and poems to share in this anniversary issue.

Short form fans will dig Randy Brooks' haiku and Sydney Wagner's "Autopsy of a Relationship," while Nikki Allen's "Catch" and Simon MacCulloch's "Death of Light" serve up some fresh rhymes. If you're of a narrative disposition, slink through "Dillon's Door" with Charlie Kieft and live the "Cheese Life" with Cass Noah.

Carry on, fellow creatures. The moon hasn't answered yet, but that won't stop us from howling.

— Laura Garrison

The Death of Light

Simon MacCulloch

Above a sheen of estuary, below a cloud-clod sky
Is where the light comes crawling when its time has come to die,
And spend itself in spasms on the silken ebb-tide waste
Until its dancing glimmers lapse, dissolved to muddy paste.
In sunless gulfs an unlit moon goes bobbing blindly by.

So now the scene is set for what was separate to merge
In mindless dim fulfilment of the primal cosmic urge
To be itself, the way it was before the great delusion
Of ordering perception marred the peace of perfect fusion;
All contrast, conflict, draining in a slow liquescent purge.

And that is how the hapless parts become the happy whole,
Denying the distinctions of a body or a soul;
The undistinguished lump that is existence in the raw,
Through which, with probing snout and gloss-black fur and
scooping claw,
A god who'll never speak again comes burrowing like a mole.

SIMON MACCULLOCH lives in London. His poems live in *Reach Poetry*, *The Dawntreader*, *Spectral Realms*, *Aphelion*, *Black Petals*, *Grim and Gilded*, *Ekstasis*, *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Ephemeral Elegies*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Emberr*, *View from Atlantis*, *Altered Reality*, *The Sirens Call*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *I Become the Beast*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Awen* and elsewhere.

two haiku

Randy Brooks

snow swirling
outside the food truck
the sizzle of fajitas

windmill pump
a flapping Jolly Roger
feed bag flag

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*.

Dillon's Door

Charlie Kieft

You install cat flaps for a living. It's reliable work in this yuppified city. Pays better than you'd expect too. You chitchat with the client, cut a hole in the door at feline height, insert the flap, put in some screws, and, bingo, there's another free-roaming kitty for the coyote buffet. Oh, and while you're there, you don't forget to check the property for security cams, door alarms, and the like. That's how you choose the houses you'll come back to rob.

You had forty-three clients in Missoula over the summer. Now it's winter, and many of them have snowbirded south to Palm Springs or Cancun, or gone skiing at Big Sky. That's forty-three empty houses for Christmas. From what you can tell, only sixteen of them have fully equipped home security systems because a) Who can afford that luxury these days? or b) "I've got a gun; why would I need a security system?"

It's well past midnight. You're strung out on horse pills in a client's bedroom, having broken in through the cat flap you installed four months ago. You're rifling through her turquoise leather-veneered jewelry box—*old rodeo belt buckles, interesting*—when something touches your leg. Your heart stutter-steps, so do your feet. You shine your Maglite down at the carpet.

"Oh! Hi there."

It's a cat, an old, three-legged calico. Or rather, *she's* an old, three-legged calico. You know that 99% of calicos are female; you basically grew up in your father's vet clinic. The coloration has to do with the X chromosome or something. You've always had a soft spot for cats. She nuzzles against your pantleg, purring urgently, leaning into the headbutt. Her golden eyes flick up to yours. They're all affection.

Flattered, you squat and stroke the calico's vibrating throat with the side of your finger, then your fingernails, and work back along her cobbly spine to that sweet spot just in front of the tail, which makes most any cat stand on tiptoe, this one included. Her fur is clumped and oily, flecked with dander.

"You're about eight lives in, aren't you, girl?" you say. The calico sits and cocks her head, like reminiscing, tallying up her near-deaths. She gives a sly twitch of her whiskers. She's playing coy.

A coyote howls outside. You remember that you're mid-burglary and shoot to your feet. You need to get the hell out of this person's house. Heart racing, you dump the contents of the jewelry box into a duffel bag, and you're about to tear through the drawers of the dresser, when something fishhooks your eye, pulls you back.

Wedge in the bottom of the empty jewelry box is a photo of a kid in a western-cut shirt with a horseshoe pattern. School portrait, must be, kid about eight or nine, with the goofiest dimpled grin. A missing tooth. The kid's gaze is off-center, though, well away from the camera lens, as if at an adult who's scolding them. *Sit up straight, goddammit! Smile!*

Out of the corner of your eye, you notice her, the tripod calico, patiently regarding you from below. She's ancient, but still cute.

The missing leg makes her spunky, grizzled. It's like she's waiting for you to do something. The way the bridge of her nose is perfectly split by one patch of orange and another of black...she's so familiar. And so is that kid in the photo, you realize. *Who is that?* Your gaze ping pongs between the photo and the cat.

The photo. The cat.

The kid. The calico.

Recognition stampedes through your chest.

"D-Dillon?" you ask, wide-eyed.

And Dillon responds with an affirmative "*Preow.*" Like: *Finally, you understand.*

Your gut tenses, coils, and springs, taking your legs with it. You leap over Dillon, sprint out of the bedroom, down the dark hallway, banging against walls, shining your stupid Maglite every which way. You fling open the back door (the one with the cat flap), close it behind you, fly across the crinkly frozen lawn, vault over the back alley chain-link, get into your waiting shitwagon car, and you're off, sputtering, into the frigid night.

Dillon watches you go, then slips back inside. Too many sharp teeth out tonight.

"Mysterious Cat Flap Burglar Pounces Again," Missoulian.com declares next morning. They ID the homeowner/victim as:

Former champion barrel racer turned rodeo announcer, 'Calamity' Jane Landers, a local legend who now resides primarily in Texas.

"Fuck!" You fling your phone at the wall of your trailer. Last you heard, Calamity Jane was shackled up with some retired rig

worker in Corpus Christi two thousand miles away. When you installed that cat flap last summer, Jane wasn't there. If you'd seen you, you would've run for the hills. It was the neighbor who let you in, right? And, surely, Dillon wasn't around. As far as you can remember, you did your thing (noting the complete lack of security features) and left, intent on returning months later in the dead of night.

You retrieve your phone from the floor and pull up PayPal. You flick the transaction screen back to August, looking for the payment for Dillon's cat door. Looks like you were paid in full, but not by Jane Landers. She used a pseudonym.

Kitty Russell.

You groan. How could you not have seen it before? She gave you the clue of the century! Ms. Kitty Russell was the name of the saloon-owning madam from *Gunsmoke*, Calamity Jane's favorite old-time TV show. You think *Gunsmoke* was pure horseshit, a black-and-white Wild West fantasy of gunslinging heroes, lazy-eyed villains, and helpless women. The real West, what it's become, is nothing but tragedy upon tragedy, cold, stacked stones.

You abandon your trailer and start sleeping in the shitwagon on the outskirts of town. Cops must be watching for you. Probably WANTED posters at all the pawn shops within a two-state radius. You'll have to lie low for a while, stay hidden and silent, like a lost cat.

In the shitwagon's backseat, you look through what you stole from Jane. Or, you now gather, what she meant for you to steal. What

she gave to you. The only things of any value are those studded and engraved rodeo belt buckles from the jewelry box. You spend your sober hours tracing each of them with your fingertips.

THREE FORKS RODEO 1990 CHAMPION.

THE 1983 LIVINGSTON ROUNDUP.

CALGARY STAMPEDE CHAMPION 1982.

PENDLETON ROUND-UP 1989 CHAMPION.

HOUSTON LIVESTOCK SHOW & RODEO 1982.

All those rodeos, Jane's glory days, happened long before you were born. You look down at your own brass belt buckle, which holds up your torn and stained Walmart jeans.

In the center of the buckle, there's a cowboy on a bucking horse, a rodeo clown nearby, a mountain range behind. The Absarokas or Beartooths, you reckon. Twisted rope and barbed wire border the outside edge of the oval buckle. It's a thing of beauty. 2015 ROSCOE RODEO CHAMPION it reads.

You remember the flared-nostril battle and thrill of bronc riding. Like straddling a bolt of lightning in front of everyone you've ever known. The rodeo community was your family. You hear again the boom of Calamity Jane's voice coming from the announcer's booth. She joked about being nervous for your first professional competition as you mounted the horse—a spitfire pinto named Oil Strike. The chute opened and Oil Strike everything he could to send you flying. He bucked and spun and writhed, but you held on for the full eight seconds with good form. Even before dismounting, you knew you'd won. You felt like the king of Montana. Oil Strike must've sensed you loosened your grip because he gave his hardest buck yet. You tumbled to the dirt.

You hear again the sound of your pelvis shattering under Oil Strike's hoof. It happened so quick. From one instant came endless pain. You remember dehumanizing surgeries, orthopedic scaffolding sticking out of your waist and hips, torturous physical therapy, online classes to finish high school, and fentanyl, fentanyl, fentanyl.

A week later, the first blizzard of the year parks itself over the Missoula valley. It snows into the night. You're far too sober to simply endure. Shivering in the heater-less shitwagon, you decide to cruise past another cat flap you installed last summer on a big, green craftsman near the university. The Dean of Veterinary Medicine's home.

The streets are empty, the accumulating snow unmarked apart from the shitwagon's tire tracks. When you drive past, the green craftsman's lights are on inside and out, and the resident dog (a one-eyed rottweiler) watches you from the living room window. *Way too risky.* You keep the shitwagon rolling, thinking what to do. You contemplate spread-eagling naked in the Dean's snowy front yard, inscribed in the blankness, your organs crystalizing. Like the Vitruvian Man.

You wonder what the Dean would think of that, if he, patting his huge dog, happened to look out the window at the right moment—to see his child's bare body in the snow. Does a vet know how to resuscitate a frozen human heart? Would he even bother? He's probably figured out by now that it was you who nicked the controlled drugs safe out of his truck. It contained enough

phenobarbital, trazodone, and fentanyl to kill several horses. Those drugs kept you rolling numbly through this half-life for a long while, but now they're gone. The pain rooted deep within the confines of your Frankenstein pelvis is reawakening, isn't it? It'll never go away, will it?

Suddenly, the shitwagon's mirrors ignite with light. A blazing sun floats in either sideview mirror, the pair together in the rearview. Headlights, wide-spaced and circular. Unmistakable. Your mind fills in the details your blinded eyes can't see — a 1972 Chevy pickup, seafoam green, license plate: COWGRRL.

Calamity Jane.

You floor the shitwagon, tearing down the slick avenue, and slip-slide hard left at the next intersection.

Like any decent outlaw, you make for the hills. The Chevy hurtles after you like a comet through Missoula's deserted intersections. Blocks fly past. You leave the illuminated suburbs and fly up a narrow, snow-paved track. The shitwagon slows, its bald tires unable to grip the steep, deepening powder. You feel the Chevy's chrome grille closing in from behind.

The impact is surprisingly gentle. Calamity Jane fishtails you, easy as anything. The shitwagon spins out into the hillside ditch. It lands hard on the left headlight, which is snuffed out. Miraculously, the airbag still works. It saves your face from becoming a bloody pancake. The shitwagon settles on its left side at the bottom of the ditch. Its pistons sigh one last revolution, then die.

You orient yourself in the cramped, pale darkness, and find that you're pressed up against the driver's side window. Pulling with both hands, you extricate your legs from under the dash. You rotate

your body to align with gravity, plant one foot, then the other against the smashed driver's window, and stand halfway. You force the passenger door open over your head and emerge into the blizzard. The Chevy's twin sun headlights douse your face. You've got a helluva nosebleed.

Calamity Jane steps down from the Chevy's cab in a wash of diesel fumes, reverse-haloed against the frosty midnight sky by her black Stetson. She slams the door, takes five crunching boot steps, rifle in hand.

"Hey, kid," she says.

"Ma," you say.

Many, many hours later, you awake in Calamity Jane's bed beneath a grizzly bear of withdrawal. You're feverish, nauseous, you hurt all over. Dillon has placed her little, rumbling body on your chest. Her weight over your heart is reassuring. Your father once told you that cats purr at a healing frequency. You believe it. She stretches her sole front paw out to touch your lips. Her golden eyes ask you where you've been, all this time. And you think of the darling schoolkid posed at the bottom of your mother's turquoise jewelry box, which is still sitting there on the dresser. Dillon was just a ragamuffin kitten back when that photo was taken.

You kiss Dillon's toe beans. "You first. What happened to your leg, girl?"

"She went looking for you," Calamity Jane says. She's standing in the doorway. Your mother's voice is raspy, always has been, like blades of prairie grass rubbing together. She's gone two shades

grayer since the last time you saw her. "After you left, Dillon searched for you. She ventured farther and farther out until one day she got run over and limped back home with a broken leg. Your dad tried to pin the bone together, but it didn't heal, so he had to amputate. That was a long time ago now, before the divorce. Anyway, she gets around pretty good."

"You had a nasty accident of your own, huh? And on my account?" you ask Dillon. She just keeps on purring.

Jane hands you a couple pills and a glass of water. "Ibuprofen." You swallow them. A part of you wishes they were opiates.

"I haven't told your dad that you're here. You can tell him if you want. He assumes, basically, that you're dead," Jane says.

"Okay." The last time you saw your father, he pulled a gun on you. No, you won't be speaking with him anytime soon.

Jane comes around and sits on the side of the bed. She doesn't go so far as to touch you, yet she's close. "Here's the deal," she says. "By now, you've figured out that I set this house up to lure you out. It belongs to a friend who lives down the street. When I heard about a 'cat flap burglar' in Missoula, well, I kinda knew it was you from the beginning. Dillon and I have been living down the street since you put in the cat flap. She's been spending her nights over here, waiting for you to show."

You don't have anything to say to that. You're amazed Jane went to so much trouble to catch you. She even got Dillon in on it. The cat's intentions are pure, but what is this about for Jane? Revenge? Justice? Are the cops on their way right now? Your body tenses. You wait prostrate for Jane to deliver her verdict.

"At any rate, you can't stay here. Lou—my partner or boyfriend or whatever you wanna call him—he owns a ranch down in Texas.

It's where I live when I'm not announcing on the rodeo circuit. It ain't Montana, but it's peaceful. You'll be comin' back with me to live there."

So, that's how it's going to be. You finally force yourself to meet Jane's eyes. They're as unreadable as ever. "Are you puttin' me out to pasture?" you ask.

You expect her to scoff. Instead, she sighs. "If I've learned anything over the past few years, it's that anyone and everyone is an addict. Hell, I still haven't quit smoking. Your dad's always been addicted to cable news. And Lou's a recovering alcoholic. You're hardly unique in being an addict."

You're not sure what she's getting at.

Jane continues. "AA didn't work for Lou, so he had to find his own way to getting clean. Now he helps others. He been running a rehab out of the ranch since before I met him. It's fully licensed. They got a doctor, therapists, a cook, yoga, hot tub, everything. They even got therapy horses."

You hear what Jane's saying and you know these are all good things. You ought to be deliriously happy to have a mother who suddenly gives a damn, or maybe you should be furious that she took so long. But you'd given up on having a future, on escaping the spiral. To see a better future for yourself materializing through your mother's words is so unexpected it's unbelievable. You look to Dillon for reassurance. She's still on your chest, eyes closed, smiling in her cat way. She carries on diligently purring. Hers is the cyclical breathing of a mystic, a looping expression of everything-is-alrightness.

"I-I can't leave—" you say.

“Be reasonable, kid. You don’t have a choice in this. You either get clean with me or go to prison. The system won’t be lenient this time.”

“I know. It’s just—I can’t leave her again. I couldn’t.” You wipe tears from your eyes.

Dillon’s four eyelids flick open. Her wide pupils contract to slits in the daylight. You stroke her neck. She’s so skinny. It feels silly, getting this worked up about a cat in front of a woman who’s as unsentimental as they come.

Jane places one of her hands over yours, so that you’re both cupping Dillon’s neck. It takes you by surprise, the warmth of your mother’s palm. Now Jane’s the one avoiding your eyes. “Dillon’s a very special animal. She’s been waiting for you this whole time. I should tell you something,” she says. You notice that her hand is trembling—from age or emotion you don’t know. “She hasn’t been eating well lately, so I got your dad to take a look at her last week. He took X-rays. Her body’s riddled with tumors. He wanted to euthanize her then and there, but Dillon gave me this look, like: *Not yet. Not quite yet. I’m still waiting for my friend to come home.*”

Although you already knew that Dillon wasn’t long for this earth, you begin to sob uncontrollably. You sob for the years that’ve slipped away. Did you let them slip? Or did they slip of their own accord?

Unperturbed, Dillon rides the turbulent waves of your chest. She’s still purring.

CHARLIE KIEFT is an American writer living in England, where he earned his MA in creative writing at the University of Bristol. His flash fiction has been longlisted by the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize. He has two adorable cats, a lovely, dotting partner, and uses a bookshelf as a standing desk. You can find him online @CharlieKieft

The Catch

Nikki Allen

(a dizain)

I am a fisherman who caught old boots,
seaweed sometimes but never any fish.
I've snagged old instruments: one snare, two lutes—
I've scored a place setting: spoon, knife, fork, dish—
sweatpants and collared shirts, new toys with squish.
Call me foolish for the junk in my boat—
poke fun at the anchor rust on my coat;
I may forever stink like stupid sea,
but don't forget the diamond at your throat—
where do you think gifts come from, when from me?

NIKKI ALLEN is the author of numerous books, including *Hotwire* (River Dog Press '21) and *Ligaments of Light/Tigering the Shoulders* (Night Ballet Press). She believes in revolution, strong coffee, the hard knocks & the sweetness.

Autopsy of a Relationship

Sydney Wagner

I. Suburban Coffin

My skeletons hide
deep within my coat closet.
I wish to exhume.

II. Dead on Arrival

Scalpel slices skin
This new body lacks a heart.
And yet, it still beats.

III. Autopsy

Name: Unimportant.
Age: It was too long ago.
Type: Clearly not mine.

IV. Handsaw

I break down the ribs
and hope to see flashing red.
Hearts won't bleed for me.

V. The Anthropologist

Winter has frozen
the blood in my veins, and I
yearn to be exhumed.

SYDNEY WAGNER (she/her) loves writing, her cats, and doing anything to keep from thinking. She particularly loves writing things down on Post-It notes and then forgetting about them. She doesn't use it often, but you can find her @sydwagner02 on Twitter, or working on her own literary magazine, *On Gaia Lit*.

Cheese Life

Cass Noah

The mark's house had giant fingernail clippings strewn all over the lawn. His name was Devon, and he let giants pay to clip their nails on his lawn every week. He had pretensions that he was going to learn how to carve the massive keratin crescents into swords. He would take the giants' money, useless to humans for anything but photo opportunities ("look at me with this huge dollar!"), and fold them into paper airplanes people could ride on. Devon hadn't started on any of these projects. Nail clippings dug into the dirt around his lawn like discarded farm equipment. One day they would sink all the way in, Devon's plans forgotten beneath the earth.

It didn't take Mona long to sell him a Cheese Life. When she pulled up to his house, it was raining a little bit, a lawn sprinkler dusting. Just enough to get the neighborhood a little bit dark and a little bit wet. The black asphalt had been recently paved and Mona's black rental car had been recently manufactured. They matched, both turning reflective in the weather. Mona knocked on the door with a haircut that was practically only bangs. Devon answered with a facial expression like he was about to sneeze, but it was just his face.

Mona was framed in the doorway by the debris field of stinking crescent moons of dead giant skin, the lawn overgrown around them. Over her shoulder her new black sedan stood smartly next to a boxy SUV propped up on cinderblocks. She didn't get the chance to explain all the benefits of a Cheese Life, of living one's life

temporarily in the form of a wheel of cheese. She didn't need to explain the dubious legal status it conveyed for tax purposes, the semi-legal life insurance workaround savvy customers could utilize, the timeshare-expensive and timeshare-onerous life insurance workaround coaching program her company offered for less savvy customers who they called "most regular people." The very second Devon understood that there was a life he could live as anything in the world other than himself, his wallet was open.

The briefcase of samples was a formality. Devon seemed to make his choice at random. Nothing about this man, who looked like a series of tubes under plaid tucked into khaki, strongly implied cheddar. Maybe it was the first one he recognized. Maybe when Mona took a machine out of the rental's trunk that transferred Devon's essential conscious being into the body of a bright orange wheel of cheddar cheese, he recognized himself as he beheld his new body sitting in an insulated bag.

Mona tossed Devon's house and found nothing of value: empty boxes, a dull carving knife filed next to cookware, a cabinet half disassembled and half hacked apart on a living room floor. There was a whistle that advertised its ability to attract giants. Mona didn't test it.

She returned to HQ with the carving knife, which could be repaired, the whistle, which she of course claimed she had tested and found to be in working order, some spare change and loose cash. Devon's new body entered a cheese fridge where Mona turned over the other wheels so they wouldn't develop Cheese Life bedsores and rolled some of them along the floor for exercise. When she left the fridge, the room was windowless and dark. None of the Cheese Lives could talk to each other in the darkness. They

were wheels of cheese.

When she clocked out Mona returned to her rental car in the lot with a massive paper bill folded up in the trunk, resting on top of the machine that brought customers into their Cheese Lives. She did not tell herself she would fold the bill, that she would learn to buy from giants or study macro-origami or that she would make it into anything. She only thought, as she held it in front of her in the mirror that night, Look at me with this huge dollar.

CASS NOAH is a fiction writer and poet. Their work has appeared in *Nightmare Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Daily Drunk*, and a few other places. They live in the United States.

On the cover:

“Hand Rose”

BIANCA BLAETH is a self-taught illustrator on Instagram at [@blauth__](https://www.instagram.com/blauth__).

