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Editor's Note

This can be a tough time of year for many of us; the icy winds slap our chapped faces while the trees dance their sad skeleton dances in the thin winter sun. And that's not even getting into the particular problems of our current era, which are distressing and multitudinous. But against this bleak backdrop, the story and poems of issue 127 gleam like a handful of polished stones, each distinct in shape and color yet creating a pleasing effect together. From the imaginations of Laura Daniels, Corbin Hirschhorn, Jessica Fordham Kidd, Tony Kitt, and Kenton K. Yee, visions of beauty, danger, and magic pulse and swirl in soothing currents, offering a plethora of small treasures to cache in the mind's secret drawers.

Prepare to engage all your senses, because the imagery power is set to stun.

— Laura Garrison

Jersey Baked

Laura Daniels

Calandra on First Street in Newark
the best fresh French baguette and Italian roll
straight out of the oven if you're lucky
the first roll's gone before you drive two blocks

Metzer at Five-Points in Union
the best German-styled cakes and pastries
long before the Food Network existed
they made award-winning three-dimensional cakes
fire engines rolling to a call, princesses or enchanted gardens

Delicious Orchard on Highway 34 in Colts Neck
the best and freshest fruit pies—regular or crumbled
blueberry in the spring and peach in the summer
apple in the fall and mincemeat in the winter

Watson on Chancellor Avenue in Irvington
the best savory bagels—plain, rye, pumpernickel
buy them by the dozen and get an extra one
tasty with a smear of butter or cream cheese

Marvel on the main drag in Beach Haven Terrace
the best and tastiest sugared doughnuts
watch the conveyor belt by the deli deliver
drop golden-brown delights into a sugary tray
the sweet cinnamon embraces you at the door

LAURA DANIELS (she/her) is a neurodivergent multi-genre writer. Founder of the Facebook blog The Fringe 999 and editor of The Fringe 999 Poetry Forum. Curated recently in *One Art*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *Smarty Pants Magazine for Kids*, and featured poet for *Poetry for Mental Health*. Her poetry collection *Gentle Grasp* (Kelsay Books) was published in December 2024. Her poems grow from a love of wandering and New Jersey, where she lives with her partner in Mt Arlington and works in the community garden. She can be reached at <https://lauradanielswriter.wordpress.com> and @thefringe999.

The City of Thieves

Corbin Hirschhorn

My city is a city of thieves. Our national anthem is "Stand and Deliver." Our national bird is the magpie. Our adopted hero is Robin Hood. It is difficult to get around this city for obvious reasons. They say here to hold onto your bag when you see your shadow. There is a holiday based on this tradition. A little far-fetched, no? But perhaps I should not say this, because I've only just moved here.

The city of thieves was said to be a place of culture, learning, and entertainment. Of course I had heard the stories, but none seemed particularly frightening—at least not more than those from any other city. There are rumors that float around here, such as one that the thieves form illicit guilds with ambitious plans to rob you. Some say that everyone is in on it, with window washers lowering themselves to nick your wallet and laundrymen who steal your undergarments—one sock at a time to hide their guilt. I believed none of it.

A number of philosophical questions are raised among the intellectuals of the city of thieves: Is it wrong to steal once stolen from? Is it wrong to steal something stolen? Does anything belong to he who has stolen? Perhaps ironically, the most important concern to philosophers in the city of thieves is ethics, and more than once they have been accused of publishing the notes of others.

I only moved here for the incredible stories and promise of a good time, but after these observations, the idea of theft often turned over in my mind—perhaps more often than such a thought

should. I can admit that I fell victim to checking every corner before turning and carrying money not just in my wallet, but in other pockets—the inside of my jacket, socks, and at least a few times in the elastic of my underwear. It didn't make sense to take chances in the city of thieves.

I had heard from fellow countrymen also living here bizarre stories of the most elaborate plots to swindle the public. According to one of them, a man on a train, after shoving corn flakes into his mouth, had begun coughing and spitting, standing up and holding his throat, spewing corn flakes and falling over, proclaiming he was going to die. Covered with spit flakes, passengers either helped or fled, distracted as men with fake plastic arms protruding from overcoats emptied purses and pockets with the real ones hidden underneath. I didn't regard any of it with concern. I resigned myself to thinking that if I were robbed, I would just be paying for the elaborate theatrics and the story. But be aware, I would happily take and tell that story if it were mine.

"Consider at least some of this advice," one of my acquaintances said. "I'll tell you that I regretted my nonchalance when I lost my eye." When confronted by some of the less artistic thieves, a few height-challenged brutes only asking for a wallet, my new robust friend had proudly and rightly told them, "No." One of the little ones didn't hesitate to grab and break a bottle and thrust it into my friend's face for no more than a few dollars. I would take this story too, if the price were right.

Still, I did not let such abject horror stories govern how I would live. I'd rather think no such reconsideration would occur if it had not been for my employers' change of heart regarding the job that they had promised me. Within only a week, after numerous

contributions I had made to the company, they found a clause which permitted my termination. All of this in spite of the dedication I made to move from my home and my country just to work in the city of thieves.

It's not like I didn't have enough money or options, so I spent my days combing the streets like a bohemian, looking to take at least some bit of insight from this city. The first thing I noted was the disrepair of the sidewalks, which not only looked worn, but rather as if someone had come by and lifted the individual tiles for his own collection.

Jobless, I took to the much-romanticized life of reading for many hours a day at cafes. This was easy in the city of thieves, because waiters rarely came by to check on you. I found many treats in the public library, which I raided often. No need to worry about late fees here, I found. And I realized that, even unemployed, my time spent with books seldom heard of in my country could greatly help my career (which I'll only say has something to do with writing or publishing).

Within a week of my termination, that bad day rather seemed to be a blessing as I started the next chapter of my life as one of the great literary figures of the generation. I had only written a few pages, but sometimes an artist knows the coming fruits of his labor after having written only a single beautiful sentence, and the opening line of my piece showed me without a doubt that it would become my magnum opus.

At the start of spring I would stroll the park, chuffed—not just by the blooming of the coral trees, but the progress of my work. Surely this jaunt in the city of thieves would prove worthwhile, and my travels would be noted in history. I rode the bus back to my

apartment, nearly dozing off after my long morning's walk but not before I noticed an advertisement above the window. At first I thought it was a manifestation of my dreamy mind, but after another look, and a third, it was in fact my sentence! The very sentence I had so painstakingly crafted—not just drawing upon my stay in the city, but my entire life—the sentence that would provide for my family was printed as clear as day. And not as part of some great novel, but the most banal of advertisements. And not on a television commercial or a glamorous billboard downtown but plastered on the inside wall of the most plebeian mode of transportation. The cabal of elite spies and thieves had used my sentence for their own corporate greed. A conspiracy of stupid bastards stole my life's work just to squander it on a rash cream ad.

Slowly but steadily, a pain in my gut developed over the following weeks, which I wish I had taken care of before it was too late. I had to rush to a cab to get to the hospital. Good luck for the cabbie that day, because after seeing my agony, he took a large bill and conveniently told me he didn't have change. I actually made the attempt to find exact change, but my next memory was being told that I needed immediate invasive surgery.

I woke up to find a hefty bill on my bedside table and the news that the brilliant doctors of this city had removed a section of my intestine, apparently the source of the pain. Perhaps I am too skeptical, but I didn't believe them for a second. I called over to the nurse, who already had hands out to take my money. "Show it to me," I said, receiving an indignant look. "If you took it out, show it to me."

"Sir, I cannot do that," she replied.

"It's my intestine. I paid for the operation. I want it back."

"That is not how we do things here," she said, leaving me to wait. The second she left, I shot from bed to get out of there, but the pain got the best of me. When the nurse came back, she saw that I opened my stitches and was bleeding through the gown. They left me bedridden and bored so that I would concede to pay.

One weekend, with less drive and intestine than before, I decided to get away for a while. I boarded a train for the beach one hour from the city. The ride was smooth and pleasant. It pleased me to see the ocean water had taken on a lovely grayness from the cloudy sky, both which seemed to be taken from the tonalist, Dabo. "Give me the bag, or else." I hadn't noticed that the rest of the passengers had huddled with their belongings in the back of the car, and I sat alone to face a thief.

"Oh, please," I begged. "I assure you, there are only books here. Not worth their weight."

"Open it," he said, and I did so, showing him Mondiano's *The History of the World in Seven Dances*, Emanuel's *The Fraud of Consciousness and Appearance of the Divine*, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and an Oxford pocket dictionary. He seemed to reconsider, but there were seven stops left, so there was time to negotiate terms. "I'll take the bag, the dictionary, the towel, and these two. You can keep *Chatterly*." I did as he said, and I saw him smirk at the pages of my book for the next few stops as I sat awkwardly with Lawrence. My robber got off at the station before mine, and I stopped him.

"Here," I said, handing him the book. "You may as well take it. It fits nicely in the bag." He smiled and thanked me.

CORBIN HIRSCHHORN is a writer and broadcaster from Jersey currently living in the Midwest.

Stop-Motion Animator Faces Her Talent

Jessica Fordham Kidd

I'm pleased with this geomancing king—
the way sand grains appear to slip through
his fingers and the way his eyes are both
proud and cowardly.

His robes flow beautifully
even if his steps are slightly stilted
in one scene.

He moves for me, yes,
but he doesn't move me

like the wolf, the witch,
or the soldier who simmers
in her manly disguise.

It took me a few nights to realize
they had quickened.

I wasn't just misplacing them
around the studio.

Then, once I knew, they spoke.

Their tiny, tinny voices are like a record player
without a speaker.

They tell me how we're all escaping
after this film. How we're going together
to some fantastic realm
where puppet, painting, and person
are all as real as real.

Even the king will step smoothly there,
they assure me.

They know he'll have kind eyes
once filming is wrapped.

JESSICA FORDHAM KIDD is a lifelong Alabamian and teaches at the University of Alabama. Her poetry has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Ninth Letter Online*, *Tinderbox*, and other journals; her fiction credits include *Phantom Drift*, *Puerto del Sol*, and others. She is the author of the poetry book *Bad Jamie* published by Anhinga Press.

Lughnasa

Tony Kitt

Flame tigers float
across the moonlit mystery.

Be your greenest self,
be the star harvest.
Unzip your inner zoo.

We remember primordial light.
We remember nothing.
Lend us fireflies, so we avoid
ripples of time.

By the well, mud with the mind of a madman,
its sticky embrace.
Lava candles, beastly amulets,
the wish-book of wash.

Fir-tree antennas vibrate with Braille;
windows are pregnant
with other rooms.
Houses become whispers.

TONY KITT is from Dublin, Ireland. He has been working as a creative writing tutor and a magazine editor. His poetry titles include *Endurable Infinity* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022) and *The Magic Flute* (SurVision Books, Dublin, Ireland, 2019). A new collection, *Sky Sailing*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry, Ireland, in spring 2025. His poems appear in multiple magazines and anthologies, including *Oxford Poetry*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *The North*, *Cyphers*, *The Cafe Review*, *Plume*, *Matter*, *Posit*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Under the Radar*, etc. He edited the *Contemporary Tangential Surrealist Poetry anthology* (SurVision Books, 2023) and the anthology entitled *Invasion: Ukrainian Poems about the War* (SurVision Books, 2022).

Skywatch

Kenton K. Yee

My eyes that once searched for saucers now stare at the big sky tulip. There are more, of course—all beyond reach or so it seems. *I am of you*, it says. The tulip doesn't actually speak but it's what I hear. Luminosity misleads. Twinkles are beyond reach. Why bother? I'm not athletic, I can't fly, I'm not witty—all doubts I've indulged in.

the pond sloshes
with frog
legs

So what keeps drawing my eyes back to the tulip? Where are its stems? Soil? Roots? Photosynthesis was happening three billion years before our ancestors could see. Stars shine brightest when they explode. The purple nebulae are mostly hot air.

on hold, I nap
wake up—
same song

KENTON K. YEE's recent poems appear (or will soon) in *Kenyon Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *LIGEIA Magazine*, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Rattle*, and many others. A theoretical physicist, Kenton writes from Northern California.

On the cover:

“Winter Magic”

NATALIA LAVRINENKO is an illustrator and digital artwork creator from Kyiv, Ukraine. Her work is available online at nataliaillustrations.com

