

Stacks



STACKS is a SCRANTON, PA-based
writing group with a focus on
fiction.

For details,

email

stackswritinggroup@gmail.com.

ether

what originally drew me to a person like darren is a mystery. he was the kind of kid that parents steered their kids away from. mine tried, but ultimately failed. darren was this kind of neal cassidy character with whom i had many adventures soaked in booze and tryptamines.

lately though things have changed. darren lost his razor-sharp eyes and his mastery over his many talents. no longer did he feel safe walking around with a backpack full of booze he stole from nameless bars late at night, nor did he feel safe amongst all the hobos we became friends with over the years. he lost his unique kind of control over the world around him. i saw in his eyes one night the realization that he is no longer invincible.

b u c k

The Summer There Was No August

by Marion Beddoe-Iobst

The bridge ahead was small, an easy climb for the early morning. Not much traffic until after 8 and he wanted to avoid the crowd today. A new promotion with increased responsibility required he be early. His mother had awakened him on this particular Monday morning with the sound of her singing. She was happy today, despite the hardships of the war; the food shortages, in particular. His sisters had visited over the weekend and the grandchildren were healthy, round-faced and smiling at the cool water's edge. Chasing after them, he hugged them and sung silly songs with them.

The garden behind the tiny house had yielded plenty this warm summer and his mother had made his favorite breakfast of layered vegetables and eggs. The eggs she purchased from a neighbor with the money made sewing many hours a day. Her fingers were raw and stained from the fabric dye, but it was necessary. Father was off fighting in that faraway dry rock place. He knew, his mother knew, and his sisters knew, everybody knew father would not return. His sisters' husbands had been called to fight too. Left home, a skilled worker needed in the factory building the trucks that carried the bombs and the men to battle, he outwardly spoke of disappointment in not serving his country as so many of his friends had done. He was glad to stay home with his mother, tend the garden with her, go to the factory, and read when he could. Besides, he hated war.

Secretly he did not believe the government propaganda: their daily messages of the enemy's evil intentions, heartless desires and cruel acts. He was certain the enemy soldiers had mothers, sisters, maybe children they loved as he loved his own family. He did not believe

they were much different from himself, except for the obvious physical differences and he didn't believe that really mattered much. But he could not speak of these things to anyone...that was dangerous.

On such mornings, his mind wandered to thoughts of what he might do after the war: have a wife and sons, maybe a daughter, buy a green farm outside the dirty factory-filled city, images that gave him hope as he peddled toward the bridge that overlooked the city.

A slight sea breeze cooled the August air and olcander from a garden waved as he passed. The bridge could be seen through the trees. On it school children ran between several bikes and threw shouts at those ahead, old men and women carried empty sacks on their way to market, mothers held the hands of excited toddlers.

He heard the 8 o'clock temple bell reassuring him he would make work before 8:30. The boss would know what an excellent choice he had made in promoting him. Hours had been long recently and had left little time for summer activities, but July had given two days away forgetting the war under the warm July sun. There would be no time for vacation this month. The factories were running all the time now.

He wondered if the enemies' factories were running all the time, if the enemy had a chance to vacation, forget the war and enjoy their families. When would this all end? His heart ached for his losses; never seeing his father again, not playing chess with his favorite brother-in-law again or swimming with friends surely dead now. But he did not hate as he was told to. His mother had taught him their faith and surely when the war was over all this hatred would cease.

He came to the bridge 5 minutes later. It had become a more crowded so he decided to walk his bike across the

expanse. This would give him a little more time to enjoy the morning, think of the future, consider his choice of a wife. Surely she would be pretty like his sister Tamika. The factory was loud, dusty and dark in places. He needed the air, the sun and the sea breeze this morning. Knowing he would be at his station before 8:30, he took his time now, looking here, there, across the bay, the sun on the water so clear this morning, taking in everything. The war was not on this bridge this morning.

Just as he reached the crest of the bridge he thought he heard the buzz of a plane. Was it ours, theirs? He hadn't heard any sirens since dawn and the all-clear had rung. Must be ours, he thought.

His mother was awakened by that siren earlier. That is why she had been up so early to making breakfast. He loved his mother and would take her to the farm. She wouldn't have to work so hard and her fingers would heal, braid her grandchildren's hair and plant flowers in the beloved garden. Tonight they would speak of the future in that same garden.

This was his last thought as he saw the flash of light, felt the intense heat and then nothing. The enemy had taken it all; the farm, his wife, his children, his mother and this Japanese August.

IT SEEMS PEOPLE CAN'T STAND THIS RAT RACE...
THE THREAT OF WAR...SKYROCKETING PRICES
ALONG WITH MASSIVE FAMINES ON THE HORIZON

untitled

the three boys stood by the serving windows, commenting on all female forms that walked by. they developed a code for talking about women while on the job.

"did the giants win last night bruce?" one of the boys yelled out to one of the other food stands across the path.

"yea, complete shut out," bruce responded. phillip chuckled to himself and then turned to brad and proceeded to point out the female in question as eli stood behind them, hidden under his winter hat.

the fry cook in the back of the food truck just shook away all the obscene comments polluting the air around him.

b u c k

THERE'S NO PEACE OR COMPASSION IN THESE SESSIONS...
ONLY PUTDOWNS, ANGER AND TEARS.

The Exquisite Corpse Game

By

Buck Mulligan, Leslee Clapp, Christopher Humphries,
Marlon Beddoe-Iobst, Stephanie Major and Stef Szymanski

Exquisite Corpse is a parlor game where each player takes a turn writing a piece of a story, having only the preceding player's contribution to build upon the sequence. The story is assembled upon completion, and much like the game of Telephone, it often does end up very different than how it started!

She sat at the kitchen table, legs crossed with a flowery skirt flowing down to her ankles. The top of the skirt wrapped around her waist and tucked in the white blouse she wore. Hunched over the kitchen table, she rolled three perfect cone joints complete with a filter and all. "One for now, two for the party," she thought to herself. She packed the two joints and was just about to light the remaining one when all of a sudden a violent banging came at the door. Cautiously, she picked up her purse and started to handle the pepper spray, just in case it wasn't one of her friends trying to scare her.

"Gloria! Open up!"

She tucked the remaining joint into her purse, palmed the pepper spray and turned to the door.

"Gloria! Come on. Open the door!"

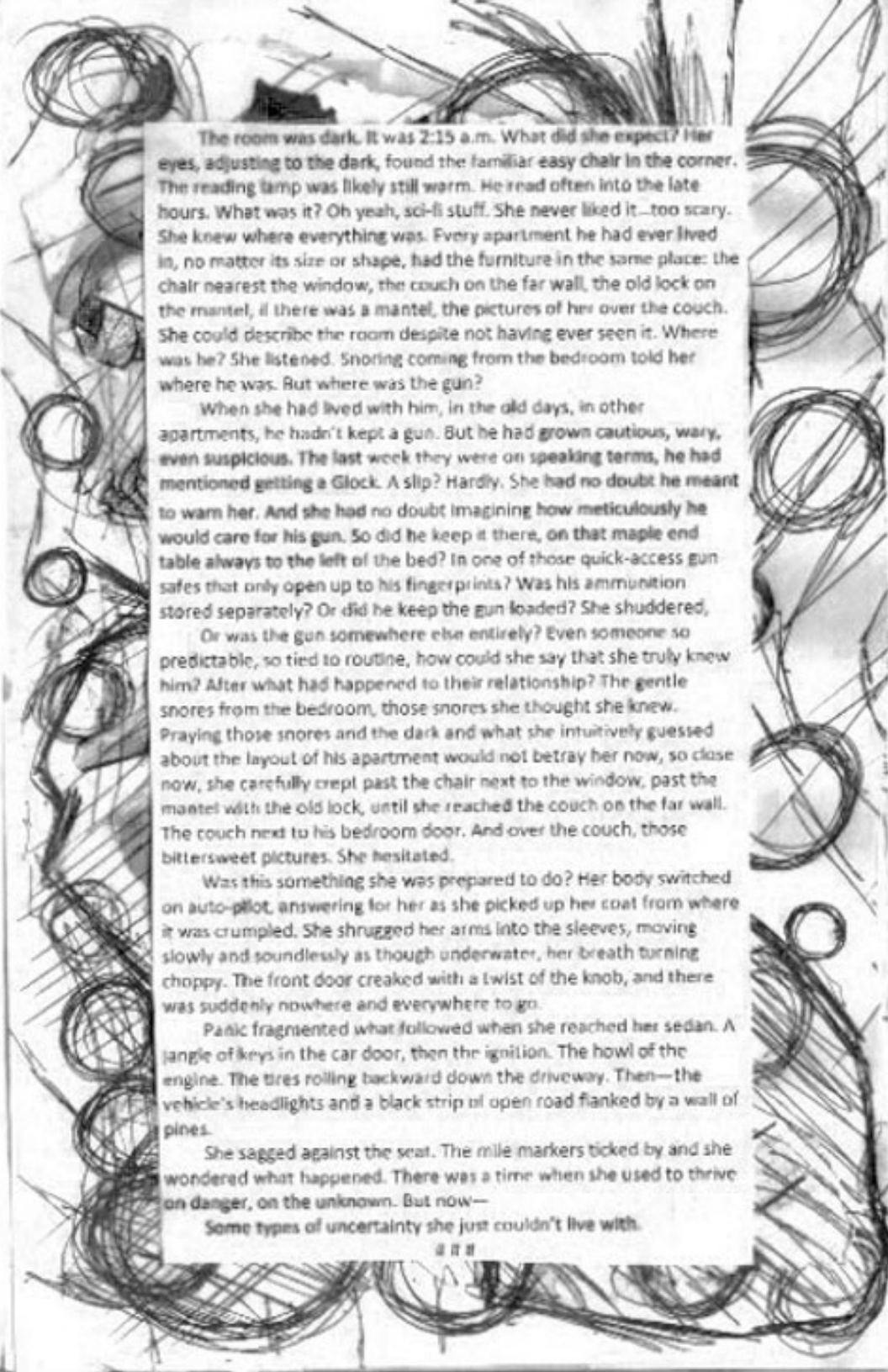
The door shook under the pounding. Now she recognized Leo's winy nasal tenor. She sighed and let go of the pepper spray. She wanted to unwind from her rotten day. She was dressed for the party in her flowered skirt and white blouse ready to go. But she'd never make it now.

"Gloria, please, are you home? You gotta hide me."

She imagined how scared he was, his eyes would be bulgy and his hands sweaty on her door knob. He'd have on his aluminum hat too. Ever since they'd seen the lights over Roswell, Leo had acted weird. She couldn't remember everything from that night either, but you didn't see her panic. She put her hand on the doorknob.

"Come on, girl, be a brave little girl, be a brave girl, come on, girl," she chanted to herself with a quivering lip. It was a comfort her late father used to whisper to her when she was scared as a child, and Lord, a scared child she was. Oh God, she missed him, she thought as she inhaled, and could use that hand on her shoulder and kiss on her forehead now, but he'd probably not know what to do. Who would? Who in their right mind was prepared for this? Leo used to be a rock in her life, but now that rock had cracked. At times, it was like he was barely hanging on. He would never hurt her, but he hadn't been himself lately. Leo's eyes, those soft eyes...they'd changed somehow, like a broken mirror looking back.

"Oh, frack!" she exclaimed against her better judgment and the inner voice screaming to run and took a deep breath. Gloria Maria Fernandez, the brave girl, turned the knob.



The room was dark. It was 2:15 a.m. What did she expect? Her eyes, adjusting to the dark, found the familiar easy chair in the corner. The reading lamp was likely still warm. He read often into the late hours. What was it? Oh yeah, sci-fi stuff. She never liked it—too scary. She knew where everything was. Every apartment he had ever lived in, no matter its size or shape, had the furniture in the same place: the chair nearest the window, the couch on the far wall, the old lock on the mantel, if there was a mantel, the pictures of her over the couch. She could describe the room despite not having ever seen it. Where was he? She listened. Snoring coming from the bedroom told her where he was. But where was the gun?

When she had lived with him, in the old days, in other apartments, he hadn't kept a gun. But he had grown cautious, wary, even suspicious. The last week they were on speaking terms, he had mentioned getting a Glock. A slip? Hardly. She had no doubt he meant to warn her. And she had no doubt imagining how meticulously he would care for his gun. So did he keep it there, on that maple end table always to the left of the bed? In one of those quick-access gun safes that only open up to his fingerprints? Was his ammunition stored separately? Or did he keep the gun loaded? She shuddered,


Or was the gun somewhere else entirely? Even someone so predictable, so tied to routine, how could she say that she truly knew him? After what had happened to their relationship? The gentle snores from the bedroom, those snores she thought she knew. Praying those snores and the dark and what she intuitively guessed about the layout of his apartment would not betray her now, so close now, she carefully crept past the chair next to the window, past the mantel with the old lock, until she reached the couch on the far wall. The couch next to his bedroom door. And over the couch, those bittersweet pictures. She hesitated.

Was this something she was prepared to do? Her body switched on auto-pilot, answering for her as she picked up her coat from where it was crumpled. She shrugged her arms into the sleeves, moving slowly and soundlessly as though underwater, her breath turning choppy. The front door creaked with a twist of the knob, and there was suddenly nowhere and everywhere to go.

Panic fragmented what followed when she reached her sedan. A jangle of keys in the car door, then the ignition. The howl of the engine. The tires rolling backward down the driveway. Then—the vehicle's headlights and a black strip of open road flanked by a wall of pines.

She sagged against the seat. The mile markers ticked by and she wondered what happened. There was a time when she used to thrive on danger, on the unknown. But now—

Some types of uncertainty she just couldn't live with.



ster szymanski

here's what i
want:
a story
in which
nothing
and
everything
happens

Here's what I want. I want it to snow. I never want it to snow, but now I do. I want it to snow on a Friday evening, and I want it to cloak the neighborhood in white, and the night sky and the streetlights turn everything orange and ethereal. And I'll stand on my porch, slightly tipsy and warm from wine, and I'll have my winter coat on over my pajamas and everything will be so quiet that I feel like something can't not happen.

I want your headlights to sweep down my street, and you to park in an accumulating snow bank. Then you'll unfold yourself from the car and shuffle toward me, kicking up snow, slightly sheepish, hands deep in your pockets, teeth chattering but you can't be that cold yet. Maybe you'll be nervous. I want you to be nervous. I want you to be brave too.

I want to take a walk. You're coming with me. I want to walk in the middle of the road, sucking in gulps of cold air and heaving out heavy sighs for no reason other than it feels good. I want the snowflakes fat and falling with a lazy but increasing urgency. I want the sky black. I want the houses silent. I want to notice how otherworldly everything is, but I don't want to notice myself noticing it, because that's when the magic is gone.

I don't want any small talk; I don't want either of us to try to make this moment in any way normal. I want us to embrace the intoxicating possibilities, this feeling that anything goes. Instead, I want the supernatural quality of the evening to turn us honest. I want to be comfortable telling you all the crazy thoughts in my head. I want you to have crazy thoughts of your own. I want us to be even more alike than we'd originally thought.

I want you to tell me that I mean something to you in a way that I may never understand, and I want you to say that it no longer makes any sense to continue pretending otherwise. I want you to tell me that you always think of me. I want you to want to be with me. I want you to want to be good for me, and then I want you to be.

I don't think we should talk about all the ways we could fail; I would rather focus on all the ways we could be successful. I think that we should be ambitious. I think that we should try, because I've been trying to pinpoint why this is so scary and now think that maybe it's because there's nothing to be scared of. I don't think we're used to that. I want us to get used to that, and I want us to start tonight.

I want you to take a deep breath and grab my hand, a clumsy gesture, using playful exasperation to mask genuine shyness. Even through the thin fabric of my dollar-store gloves, I want to feel the lightning in your touch. This is both amazing and terrifying; there is no going back now. I want to shrug out of your grip so I can wriggle out of the glove, maybe make some bad "no glove, no love" puns before taking your hand again. I want your bare palm pressed flush against mine, skin to skin, fingers locked, heart lines, life lines, fate lines co-mingling.

Then I want us to stop walking and I want us to kiss. I don't care who starts it, just that it happens. I want your lips unsure at first, tentative, exploratory, soft against mine. I want you to pull away slightly, gauging my response, and I give a whimper and tug on the front of your jacket, back toward me. I feel your smile against my mouth and we get braver, the kiss escalating, veering away from innocent. I'll cup your cold face, nip at your bottom lip, lick the corners of your mouth, and your tongue will sweep against mine, a groan sounding from your throat. I want that heady fog to cloud my mind. I want to not be able to see or feel anything past this moment.

Then I want you to figure out what happens next, because I can't do it by myself. If you get stuck, we can work out what follows together. After all, I want us to want the same thing, and what I want is us. ■



BUCK MULLIGAN

is this guy from Scranton who studied in Vermont, spent some time in Massachusetts and ended up back here.

MARION BEDDOE-LOBST

I was born. I grew up (well, that's debatable). You'll love me when you meet me. My bad bits aren't that bad and my good bits are cute. I ballroom dance, play with my grandkids, write, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, and did I say write? I'm working on my dissertation. It's about death and grief. No one wants to talk with me at cocktail parties, but I'll listen to your story. Oh, this is supposed to be my story. Well, I'm alive, for now, and so I write.

STEF SZYMAŃSKI

is the co-founder of STACKS and the writer, artist, director and co-creator of the YouTube animation "Produce High" (www.producehigh.com). She currently has writers block but isn't going to worry about that too much right now. She would also totally talk to Marion at a cocktail party.



Blog: <http://nepwc.blogspot.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/169033759825504>

We are the **Northeastern Pennsylvania Writers' Collective (NEPWC)**, an open writing group. Please join us!

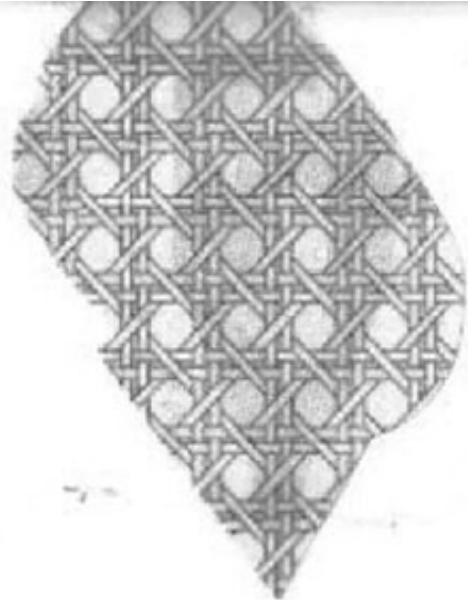
We meet every Saturday at The Vintage, 326 Spruce Street, Scranton from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. We also present a monthly evening of poetry and prose recitations every third Thursday at 8:30 p.m. at The Vintage, combining open mic with a scheduled featured reader.

Meetings are loosely structured and are led by a facilitator who will keep the discussion focused and time-manage the meeting to allow all individuals to present their work and receive feedback. Readers should limit the length of their presentations to permit others to present their work and receive feedback within the time constraints of the meeting. Feedback should be constructive, specific, honest, respectful, and focused on the content, style, or structure of the work. No one is obligated to present work or provide feedback on the work of others, though both are encouraged.

Membership is free, although donations to The Vintage for its continued upkeep are always welcome.

"We're not a timid or polite writing group that will give you faint praise and no real feedback. We're the other guys."

Thanks to Harold Jenkins



2

1