

Volume 20 (2017)



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Three Poems by Karla Huston
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Blurb
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Nathan Leslie – Silent Treatment
J. T. Townley – Liana of the Soul
Jordan Gosselin – The Outlier
Kathryn Piper – August
Jenae Winter – Daughter of the Earth

Dylan James Harper – Not All Kids
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Craft Talk:

Robert Lopez and Sam Ligon Talk Flash-
Fiction

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Jesse Millner – After Reading Phil Levine
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Kayla Cash – Hubris
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Jacqueline Jules – Squatter
Gaylord Brewer – My Birthday
Paul Hostovsky – Only Child
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Maureen Tolman Flannery – Path to the School Bus
Richard Levine – Brother Fat
Gary Metras – A Rainbow Trout in Rain
Lindsey Weishar – To Ask a Little Bolder
Terry Savoie – A One-Way Ticket, 1969
David Starkey – "Recuerdo" Remembered
Ronald J. Pelias – Appearances
Terry Persun – It's Personal
Sara Dailey – Self Portrait with One Half Missing
James Croal Jackson – After the Stroke
R.T. Castleberry – Cloudburst
David Starkey – Sonnet: "A Choking Gall, and a Preserving Sweet"
Lindsey Weishar – Rose Window
Radford Skudrna – Deep Down
Michael Skau – Closing Time
Dina Friedman – The Neighbors
Ken Craft – In the Dentist's Killing Fields
Tom Myers – Wolf House
Milton P. Ehrlich – How I Feel about My Life Coming to an End When It's Coming to an End

Special Selection: *Hear, Here* Prize-Winners

David Krump – Ophelia Soft

Kyle Constalie – Into Collision

Tegan M. Daly – Trauma Center

Susan Houlihan – River Walk

Art:

Amlan Sanyal – Hope (front cover)

Hayley Pauli – Ruins (back cover)

Mark Wyatt – Calcutta, India, 1980

Szymon Barylski – I Refugee

Mark Wyatt – Brindisi, Italy, 1980

Rona Neri-Bergmann – Dawn Birder, Adrift

James Proffitt – Bobbers

Grant Broeckel – Transience

Rebekah Kienzle – Desert Flower

Ella Luepke – Hands at Play

Amlan Sanyal – Play Time

Veronica Scharf Garcia – Atalanta

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CRAFT TALK

Robert Lopez and Sam Ligon Talk Flash-fiction

NONFICTION

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With Coyotes Watching: Nick Alti



It's hard to climb a maple tree with a .22 rifle and no shirt under your suspenders. Mandalas manifest on my forearms and chest, beads of red swim fields of pale flesh. The rifle, suspenders, and the plastic yellow visor I borrow from my parents' storage closet. They were in a pile, a throwaway bunch of items I gathered in harmony. My parents hired me to watch their vacant home for a week while they fish and drink cabernet and try to love one another in a cabin up north. I'm 28. In the distance, quiet coyotes surround a fawn.

My parents live on an acre of modified grass surrounded by soybeans. Some corn stalks linger and loom like reapers. A topless jeep drives by on the dirt road, an elderly couple, both bald with glasses. I trace them with the rifle. These are people I can kill. Something has to die, right now, because I want to visit labyrinths in Greece, take mushrooms and paint on leaves with a woman who loves me. This is my sacrament. I'm a boy who lost his toys, all of them. I'm often sick, my shadow limps. I hate how quietly I answer the phone, how I used to eat pages from books. In my dreams, I do laundry or place my palms and forehead against a wall. I stand too long in showers too warm, I'm melodramatic and frightened, steal candy bars from mom & pop dime shops, break windows at night with bricks.

They drive away. I do nothing but watch and quietly beg them to slow down, to give me a minute to think about what I'm doing. These people have fine skin and teeth, nothing like moles. The thought of doing something for myself makes me sore.

A squirrel crawls up to my branch and sits beside me. I aim the rifle at his heart. His reddish testicles gyrate. He eats a battery. I lower the gun. "Psst. Don't eat that, little idiot."

He lodges a tooth in the battery, struggles to yank free. He says, "Look, I need lithium to treat my mania. Do you know the feeling of existing one moment as a Valhalla war hero with mead and

revelry and the next moment feeling like a maggot in the wound of a boy soldier? Do you have any idea how hard it is to be me?"

I cradle the gun in my lap, scratch the wooden butt with my fingernail. "I didn't know."

"Never do. Never have." He finishes the battery and drops it on the lawn. "Don't mow that over."

He jumps from the branch. A hawk grabs him midair and soars away.

Tree bark rips my skin as I descend. Spinning, I gain momentum and launch the gun into the crop field. I strip from my suspenders, sit in the grass and look toward the sun for the hawk.

Nick Alti is a senior at Western Michigan University. He comes from Stevensville, a quiet place in Michigan, and is currently waiting impatiently until he has enough money to move somewhere near mountains.

Three Poems by Karla Huston



Resurrections

For Easter each spring, Doerflinger's
sold canaries, cages suspended
from the pillars of first floor, from where they
looked over handbags and fake pearls, bars
of chocolates and plumed hats, men's socks
folded into pairs. The morning the heat
went out, the janitor found the air
quiet, the birds on their backs and silent,
feet clutched in small eighth notes.
He took them to the alley and dumped them
like so much dust. Later when the sun
thawed the air, the birds, some of them,
called from under tissue leaves and branches
of cardboard. Inside again, the singing ones,
their throats warmed with drops of brandy,
chirruped to the showers of snow outside,
and even shadows vibrated with yellow,
those voices praising bonnets of flowers
and Arrow shirts, both arms crossed in front.

Mannequins in Storage

They stare from where they are left,
each standing on a chrome pole,
leaning on each other for balance
on the tilting wooden floor.
When no one is around,
they gather broken arms
and chipped fingers, try to assemble
better versions of themselves
so whenever the freight elevator
drags its chains and begins
its slow pull or the moon outside
lowers itself for a long look
the mannequins stop their collecting.
Some, with hips cocked left, some right,
some with toes pointing backwards,
one with its lone arm reaching.
All of them with hard lips pursed, eyes
looking everywhere at once.

Window Dressing

The woman in the window
banged off plastic arms, twisting
the waist loose, then shimmied silk
dresses over hard shoulders and hips.
Arms reattached. The quick zip.
She loved the heads the best, the way
she could remove the skull cap,
reach in to adjust the backs
of the eyes, then face them where they
needed to look. In spring, she'd strew
silk tulips, gardenias and leaves
linking them together. Outside,
shoppers stopped to peer through slips
in the grey muslin and vowed to return.
Inside the resin women stared
into the wall of glass, that vacant
wishful look—were they expecting
the men from the opposite window
to save them, their chiseled chins
glowing like lighthouses? The children
at their feet with their baskets

and bonnets, their bright maryjanes,
wondered, long after the curtain fell,
if anyone would notice them, see
how their hunger lingered long
after the light spilled
into the street below them.

Karla Huston, Wisconsin Poet Laureate (2017-2018), is the author of *A Theory of Lipstick* (Main Street Rag: 2013), winner of a Wisconsin Library Association Outstanding Achievement Award. She has published eight chapbooks including *Grief Bone*, from Five-Oaks Press. Her poems, reviews and interviews have been published widely, including in the 2012 *Pushcart Best of the Small Presses* anthology. She teaches poetry writing at The Mill: A Place for Writers in Appleton, Wisconsin, and serves on the author's committee for the Fox Cities Book Festival as well as the board of directors for Council for Wisconsin Writers and The Mill: A Place for Writers.

Craft Talk: Robert Lopez and Sam Ligon, dynamic duo, deliver flashes of insight on flash fiction and short-shorts



On October 11, 2016, in the midst of extensive book tours, writers Sam Ligon and Robert Lopez visited La Crosse, where they conducted dynamic readings (including a joint-reading of one story they co-wrote) and they presented a craft talk to students enrolled in Matt Cashion's and William Stobb's creative writing classes.

Additionally, they offered to ride donkeys, juggle, and talk about the balance between the various kinds of work that might make up a life of letters. They have developed a flash fiction workshop called The Annihilating Form that they've taught together at several schools. Ligon and Lopez met in the MFA program at the New School and have maintained a strong editorial and artistic relationship for over 20 years since then.

Their craft talk was recorded and transcribed by Kayleigh Marshall, and a portion of it (edited slightly for brevity and clarity) is presented below. The packet of stories they shared as models included work from Grace Paley, Jamaica Kincaid, Kim Chinquee, Amy Hempel, Jess Walter, and Shawn Vestal.

Ligon is the author of two novels—*Among the Dead and Dreaming* and *Safe in Heaven Dead*—and two collections of stories, *Wonderland*, illustrated by Stephen Knezovich, and *Drift and Swerve*. He coedited, with Kate Lebo, an anthology of poetry and prose called *Pie & Whiskey: Writers Under the Influence of Butter and Booze*. Ligon edits the journal *Willow Springs*, teaches at Eastern Washington University in Spokane, and is Artistic Director of the Port Townsend Writers' Conference.

Lopez is the author of five books, most recently, *All Back Full*, a novel, and *Good People*, a collection of stories published by Bellevue Literary Press in January, 2016. He teaches in the MFA program at Columbia University, and at The New School, Pratt Institute, and the Solstice low-residency MFA program at Pine Manor College. His Flash Fiction, “Bleeders,” first appeared in *Willow Springs*, and is included in the book *Asunder*, published by Dzanc Books in 2011.

Ligon: Rob and I both write novels, stories, and short-short stories, or flash fiction. Flash fiction has been around for a long, long time, but in the last, maybe, fifteen to twenty years, it’s become more popular; probably because of the internet as much as anything, because the form works on the internet.

A book called *Sudden Fiction* came out in about 1988, which gathered a whole bunch of very short stories. Today we probably wouldn’t consider some of those short shorts, stories like “Say Yes” by Tobias Wolff, or Dybek’s “Pet Milk,” and many others that are around 2,500 words. I think when you get to that length you’re actually looking at stories that just happen to be fairly short stories.

When you go under 1,000 words, however, something else happens. When you go under 300 words, you’re getting into a territory that’s totally different—because you’re not going to include a lot of narrative movement in 300 words. You’re also not going to have a lot of room for character development in 300 words, so things will change in the prose as a result of that.

I’ll tell you a little bit about my experience and then we’ll look at some stories, and Rob will do the same. I started writing flash fiction five or six years ago after an editor asked me to contribute to an anthology of short-short work. He wanted a 300-word story and I said, “I don’t want to, I can’t contribute to it, I don’t know how to do it and it seems stupid to me.”

I didn’t actually say it seemed stupid, but I thought it did. Why would form come before content? Whenever I start writing something, it’ll end up being 1,500 words, 4,000 words, or 6,000 words. I never come up with the word count first and then write the piece. But I couldn’t stop thinking about this 300 word story, so I went and I tried to do it—and I failed. I wrote a story that was about 800 words.

Before long, I became obsessed with trying to make the story work, so I ended up writing it and rewriting it and rewriting it, and I finally got it down to 300 words and what happened as a result of the process was that the voice of the story completely changed because of this massive compression I put on the lines.

I realized that it was really cool to have this box to pour work into, this form that I’d never considered before, in which my voice changed, and the lines I was writing changed. Poets talk about formal constraint, and what they mean is they’re writing in form, such as a haiku, say, where they’re constrained by the syllabics of the poem. Or in a sonnet you’re constrained by a rhyme scheme and number of lines. I always thought as a fiction writer that was stupid, to have formal constraint, because I was stupid.

Lopez: He thinks a lot of things are stupid.

Ligon: I thought it was stupid because why would you write a 14-line poem? Who cares? What I learned as a result of my experience with the short-short was that you have to succeed in spite of the form, or opportunity arises from the form. In short-short stories, you create a problem for yourself, having to create a 500 word story or a 900 word story, whatever it is.

The other thing that happens is that language and voice become paramount. Usually in fiction we think that character is the most important thing we do. In short-short stories, character might be important, but it might not be important.

What is most important almost always in short-short stories is voice and rhythm, or the sound of the story, the voice of the story, the rhythm of the story. This makes it more like poetry, and makes it really exciting for prose writers. Rob, do you have thoughts on short-shorts?

Lopez: None whatsoever. None.

Ligon: Okay, so let's look at this packet to see what other writers say about the form, and then we'll talk about some.

Lopez: I have a couple of questions for the group first. How many poets do we have in the room, people who scribble poems? Okay. And has anyone written short-short fiction before? Okay, so we have some experience in dealing with this form.

Ligon: Here's what some writers say about it, and the main thing to consider is there's a lot of different approaches. These quotes come from that early anthology *Sudden Fiction*. Fred Chappell says: "The two requirements are that it be quite short and that it be troubling. Unease, whether humorous or sad, is the effect the short-short aims for." And I wonder if that's true of all fiction.

Lopez: It is. It is.

Ligon: We want unease, we want something to be wrong, something to be broken. John L'Heureux said: "A really good short-short, no matter what else it may be, is a story we can't help but read fast, and then rereading, and again, but no matter how many times we read it we're not quite through it yet."

I like that one a lot, because when I write short-shorts I feel like I have that experience where I write it and I read it again, and I'm writing it over and over and over. As an editor too, when I'm reading short fiction, if I want to go back to the beginning of the story right when I finish it, it means typically I think that story's working, that it's doing something effective.

Lydia Davis says, "The very short story is a nervous form of story. It keeps itself more separate from you than a longer story." And I think that's a problem with the form. It's hard to get emotionally invested in a short-short story, it's hard to hook a reader in a short-short story because you don't have that much time to bring them in.

Charles Baxter says, "In the abruptly short story, familiarity takes the place of details." He says: "We've seen this before, we know where we are, don't give us details, we don't need them. What we need is surprise, a quick turning of the wrist toward texture or wisdom, something suddenly broken or quickly repaired."

But I would also argue that a list of details is another kind of short-short that is incredibly effective. We might look at a story that works that way. Stuart Dybeck says "Their allusive quality is what makes them attractive. The short prose piece exists in a no man's land between prose and poetry, between narrative and lyric, story and fable, joke and meditation, fragment and whole. Their very limitations of scale often demand unconventional strategies."

This is the other thing I love about them. I think they do demand unconventional strategies and, as such, they tend to allow you to play, they help you discover things you didn't know you could do as a writer. You've got a problem to solve in a short-short if you've got a word count or prompt restriction.

Finally, Joyce Carol Oates says, "Very short fictions are nearly always experimental, exquisitely calibrated..." (that sounds like a poem right, exquisitely calibrated) "...reminiscent of Frost's definition of poem—a structure of words that consumes itself as it unfolds, like ice melting on a stove. The form is sometimes mythical, sometimes anecdotal, but it ends with its final sentence, often with its final word. They're highly compressed and highly charged."

And the great thing about the whole idea about failure in the short-short form, when we fail—and we fail all the time as writers—you don't have a huge investment in it. You spent two days on it, three days. Now go do another one. It feels like a place where you can take a lot of risk because in some ways you don't have a huge investment in it.

Lopez: But in other ways the stakes are higher. I always think about short-short fiction as a highwire act, because you don't have much time to get anything wrong. Every single word, every single syllable has to be exact. For me, the danger of that is intoxicating and what makes a short-short fiction the most compelling form I can think of in fiction.

Ligon: And Rob's not kidding when he says syllable. The beats are absolutely critical. It's the music of the prose. Poets talk about music because poets know every word counts, every line counts, every syllable counts.

Fiction writers should know that too. When we write in the short-short form, I think we bring that sensitivity to sound into all of our work. We should be line writers no matter what, but when we write short-short fiction, we have to be line writers.