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Silk Road

a literary crossroads

Pacific University
Oregon

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Josie Sigler's stories, "Chicken" and "The Ride," appear in her
book *The Galaxie and Other Rides* (Livingston Press, 2012)
Xu Xi's story, "To Body To Chicken," appears in her book
ACCESS: Thirteen Tales (Signal Press, 2011)

SUBMISSIONS

The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction,
translations and first chapters of novels from August through April.

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Editor's Note

The poetry, nonfiction, and short fiction in this issue of *Silk Road* are very fine and reflect not only the admirable work of the authors but the discerning and demanding eyes of our editors.

For the first time we include opening chapters of novels-in-process. The two in this issue, by J.K. Wise and Grant Farley, capture the electric first-person narration that hooks a reader and carries a novel. We look forward to reading their finished books.

We started another new tradition we like to call “Writers We Love.” These are writers we keep publishing in *Silk Road* because we can't get enough of them. Josie Sigler, for instance, brings to life post-industrial Detroit as no one else can. This makes four of her stories we've run so far. All are included in her forthcoming collection *The Galaxie and Other Rides*. We're also delighted and moved to include another one of Annette Berkovitz's nonfiction pieces about her father, an artist and Holocaust survivor. Toshiya Kamei's international translations take us everywhere in time and space. This issue Kamei brings us a Spanish story written in the late 1800s by Vicente Riva Palacio. We're also reprinting fiction by Xu Xi. We published her work when *Silk Road* was in early stages as a magazine. “To Body To Chicken,” included in Xu Xi's new collection *Access: Thirteen Tales*, deserves a wider read, so we're sharing it with our growing readership.

We recommend the interview with innovative fiction writer Valerie Laken. She says, “What's nice about liminal spaces is that everyone's a misfit in them, an interloper. Maybe that puts me at ease.”

Cheers to the in-between, nowhere land where our authors live. Those of us who love good writing are at home there.

Kathlene Postma
Editor in Chief

In the woods, sunlight filtered through the yellowing oak leaves. We came to a path that ran dark and narrow through two rows of tall pines. The unnatural straightness of these rows always terrified me. It was the same with topiary. I would shudder to see certain bushes in our neighborhood, clipped to look like castle turrets and baby deer, hideous in their bright green perfection.

from “The Bell Choir” by Jennifer Robinette

When my brush is dry,
I see where the wind has been –

my painting is not of the bison
but of where the wind took form.

from “Paleolithic Possession” by Tom Holmes

When the Lake Makes Ice

Catherine Doucette

I can no longer remember the first time I heard the ice booming on a frigid night. That exact moment eludes me, not so much slipped from my mind as fused into the layers of childhood memory, bound to the accumulations of the past.

I grew up on the steely edges of Forest Lake in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. There was something silent and selfish about winters for me. Our home, and my grandmother's home just two doors down, were the only winter residences on our side of the lake. Although the bulging dirt road was plowed for us in the wintertime, the rumble of the plow rarely broke our winter slumber. We were not the town's main concern. The summer folk had stowed their canoes upside down, drained their water pipes, locked and shuttered their windows, and pulled their docks up on the sandy shoreline. The lake belonged to me again. Only the occasional cross country skier, ice fisherman, or snowmobiler trespassed on my white oval. Otherwise, and especially at night, the lake was mine.

During snapping cold nights my Dad zipped up his old grey coat, laced his frayed hockey skates, and ducked out the front door. Alongside our dock was the outline of a rectangle of ice, snow banks heaping around the edges. Grabbing the rusted scoop shovel, he would methodically scrape the rink free of snow. It looked like a carefully tended field, rows of shovel marks disappearing into the nighttime. Once it was cleared, he dipped cracked five-gallon buckets through a hand-chopped hole. Skating out with the buckets dripping, he threw the dark water onto the ice. Cool lake water flooded the cracks and seeped into the gaps. The spotlight, attached

to the deck, cast Dad in thin shadows as he worked to create this space for us. Only on the coldest nights would he be out flooding, to even out the ice, eliminate the friction, and restore the rink. We awoke to smooth surfaces refreshed by work and water.

But this is how a skating rink is maintained, not how the lake builds that thick plate of ice each year. The lake forms skims of ice that first cling to the dock and shore close to home, and eventually reach out to cover the whole expanse of water. Frosty fingers stretch away from the shore to creep into the deeper waters, growing and spreading until they join with ice from the opposite shore, far in the distance, to form the first delicate skin. That is how it begins.

New ice accumulates one layer at a time. But it is created from below. Water is the only known non-metallic substance that expands when it freezes, and younger layers of fresh ice push the existing ice upwards, splitting it like an old skin that no longer fits but refuses to be shed. The oldest ice is on top, history turned upside down to expose the cracks of the past. Fractures shoot and explode across the plate, reverberating like snapping cables. It is an oddly electronic and far-reaching report in the night air.

The first thin sheet would send us to the closet to dig out skates, fingering the sharpness of the blades. In the evenings after dinner, when darkness coated the landscape, my dad would lace up my hockey skates. Kneeling in front of the wood stove he pulled and tied the long cotton laces. Then I would wobble on the blades over the carpet and slice across the porch, down the beach, and finally glide out onto the rink. Skating on cracking cold evenings we could hear the lake making new ice, heaving the surface upwards. Our shadows, cast from the porch light, would melt into the darkness as we skated steadily away from home.

Just when the ice began clinging to the shores, we took our seasonal trip to Littleton, the next town over, to go see Mr. Stefekos. He was a compact man with a basement full of used

When the Lake Makes Ice

hockey skates. As we grew from year to year, we traded in our old pairs for new ones. The empty skates lined the room, several rows deep with the smell of leather and heat. After we put on thick winter socks and jammed our eager feet into several pairs, Dad would settle on a cluster of skates to take home. Then we would get to watch Mr. Stefekos sharpen them. Sparks shot from the machine as the buzz spoke of the honing. The blade, shiny and sharp, would be ready to score the even surface of our rink. For years we had a hard time remembering what skates belonged to what child, both were in constant change. Eventually, our feet stopped growing and found permanent homes in the thin black leather of hockey skates, the laces fat with use. Even now, our skates wait in the dented boot box for our wintertime visits to the icy playground of our youth. There is some reassurance in returning to that thick place of past, to the secure yet impermanent surfaces of wintertime.

Ice is also less dense than water, and the first skims of ice float to the surface, gathering into a sheet that protects a whole ecosystem hidden below. Despite the often violent expansion of ice creation, the sheet ultimately insulates and preserves. Cracks ooze with water and seal again, scarred, but better able to bear weight. Raised ribbons weld the lake together until the next snap of growth. The building layers that fracture with each cold heave leave the lake more stable, and protect the life still thrumming below the surface.

As children we would lay our muffled ears against the hard ice and wait for the boom. Sharp stars kept us company. Then a sonic thump would buckle the lake from below. Thick shots of sound exploded and ricocheted through the ice. Our whole bodies rocked with the change. We could feel the ice growing beneath us. We knew that despite the cracks, it was building. As a child I found it hard to believe. How could something be getting stronger by splitting apart?

My Dad long ago stopped maintaining an ice rink. My siblings and I have scattered. My Dad has aged, and the bitter nights no longer beg his attention, nor do insistent children. But when I returned home for the holidays a few years ago, the lake had done the job for him. In a rare thaw-freeze cycle the ice froze smooth and no snow blanketed the skating surface. Still jetlagged from my flight from Switzerland, I tightened my own skates to head out. My Dad, Mom, and I cruised effortlessly over the mirrored oval together. I stooped to look through the ice, my jeans growing cold at the knees, and peered into a black sheet. The ice was clear enough to see into, thick enough to carry our weight, and strong enough even for remembering. It held smooth and supportive against my skate blades.

As I held still and balanced, I watched my parents, off a little ways, holding hands, their big mittens bulky in their union. I followed them with my eyes, their heads tilted together, their strokes steady. With a shift in my weight, my blades scored the ice in a circle and I turned to look homeward. Nestled between soaring pines was the house, right on the shore of Forest Lake, where the ice is strongest. From this distance it is easier to take the scene in. Although I have lived away from here in recent years, my sense of belonging to this place has built like the slips of ice that harden into a thick sheet. I trust that this process will hold. I have come to understand it better, having lived the logic in the strength of fracture. That night, I felt the house buck when the ice boomed, a sound I have never heard anywhere but home.

Bayou Gold

Alison Pelegrin

I am counting on karma's jackpot
to break me even in the nick of time.
Casinos give me endless days—
no windows or clocks inside—only sirens
and the muzak of the slots. Maiden voyage
by charter bus after mass, that first day
of casino barges, parades on the hour,
magnolias beneath a twinkle light sky—
I gave myself twenty tries to make
the glitter cherries lock in line. Since then
I have been back so many times—so close
so many times—when can I say I've arrived?
Koi fish outgrow the pond in the lobby
and I wish with fake tosses of coin.
I'm like a witch with dreams of gold.
Gray hair, gray bra, gray tooth glued in,
preaching a home-brewed hangover remedy.
Pawn shops won't cash what I have left.
I still feel young at heart, a stranger in a world
of has-beens, surprised as anyone by my looks,
my ringless fingers, their naked reaching
to anything that shines. I'm on the way back
to wealth, to cigarettes rimmed with gold,
how I was backstage in my claim-to-fame
snapshot with Brenda Lee. That was my prime.
All I need to strike it rich again is luck,
to rummage once more the sofa cushions
and come up with a gold watch, gold charm,
gold pendant with my name, any name, in script.

Debris

Alison Pelegrin

I've seen debris, water closing over streets, floating balls of ants, manhole covers that levitate and leak fish—and yet a flood was something I looked forward to. Fondue dinner at dusk, saints I could believe in keeping watch from hurricane candles while we slept. Half the year, beginning June first, we prepped for 'the big one'—photo albums on a top shelf, the pantry stocked with canned stew. Card games for those days of water, water lapping past the threshold, soaked up by walls that darkened like a granite slab in rain.

Nearly dead of hurricanes, I have traveled by pirogue the grid of city streets erased by flood—not as the crow flies, but as a snake might ribbon through sludge in a ditch. Poled to the hospital, asthmatic, barely breathing, my mother banging a paddle on the glass door clamped shut, the doctors banging back, I fought off sleep when what I wanted was to float away, buoyed in a roux of mud, the canal's backwash, swamp broth from which birds somehow emerge immaculate.

The Bell Choir

Jennifer Robinette

Mr. Jameson never held auditions for the bell choir. He picked kids in grades four through six based on their performance in music class—kids like my brother Elliot, who always had the answers when Mr. Jameson held up the big flashcards of musical notes positioned on the staff. To me, lines and spaces and measures had nothing to do with the music that came from Mr. Jameson’s fingers and made me shiver.

I would lie awake in bed, fingering the sweaty collar of my nightgown and thinking about Mr. Jameson’s hands. They were covered in coarse black hairs, and his fingers were long, with nails pared down well below the fleshy tips. When he played “Amazing Grace” on the grand piano at assemblies, his tuxedo tail hung down almost to the gym floor, and it seemed like his fingers barely touched the shining keys.

Mr. Jameson always acted like he didn’t see me. In the rare event that I did volunteer in music class, he’d look right past me while I answered the question, then down at the floor while he told me whether I was right or wrong. The only time he’d really spoken to me was on the first day I was ever in his class, and then he said the same thing people were always saying to me: “You look just like your mother.”

“I think he’s a snob,” Mom said about Mr. Jameson the first time I didn’t make the bell choir. “I don’t know what he’s so cocky about. He’s only second cello in the symphony. Your father knew how to play almost every instrument, not just cello and piano.”

“Maybe Mr. Jameson knows how to play more instruments, too.” I imagined a violin pressed to the stubble of his chin, or his full lips pursed wetly as they blew into the mouthpiece of an oboe.

My mother’s smile was tolerant and pitying. “Oh please, Ava.

Have you ever *seen* him play anything else?" I admitted I hadn't, which seemed to satisfy her. At that time Mom was earning her M.A. in theology, and in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, she had a very logical mind. For her to take something on faith, it usually had to pertain directly to either Catholicism or my father.

I could have pointed out that I'd never seen my father play *any* instruments, though I'd heard recordings of the legendary Mike Bertram, the man who led the Pinestead University of Pennsylvania marching band to victory in five consecutive state championships. Everyone at PUP and in the small college town of Pinestead still talked about my father. He'd actually taught Mr. Jameson. He taught my mother, too—that was how they met. She was a flutist back then, but she stopped playing after my dad died. I didn't remember ever watching her play, but I somehow remembered the sound of her playing: a low buzz that would crescendo to an insistent trill and then descend to a warm hum in one fluid motion, like the flight of some erratic yet graceful bird.

In our parlor was my father's old practice piano, cheap and boxy like the one in Mr. Jameson's classroom. The wall above the piano was plastered with framed photos of my father, a shrine that never failed to spook away the men who came over to eat Mom's pirogues and sit close to her on the couch while watching old movies. Even creepier was Elliot's growing resemblance, unmistakable even back then, to the person in the photos: glossy black movie-star hair, dark Greek skin, yellow cat's eyes. Mom was in some of the pictures, too. She looked the same as always, tall, fair, and sturdy, her sharp chin jutting forward as if she'd just decided on something. In one photo, she stood with my father in front of Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. They both wore oversized souvenir t-shirts. He was grinning at the camera, but she was looking at him, her closed mouth a thin, straight line.

I didn't remember my father much, but I remembered going to the hospital to visit him while he was sick, and whispered words: *Agent Orange, bone marrow, radiation*. I didn't remember the funeral either, but my mother told me that I begged Grandma and Grandpa Bertram to lift me up to the coffin to stare at his body

The Bell Choir

again and again.

I did remember that my mother brought Elliot home soon after I realized my father was missing. The timing made me suspicious. Had Mom traded my father in for this crying blue-and-white blanket, which, on closer inspection, was a dark dwarf of a stranger, wrinkled as an old man? I also remembered Grandma Bronsky coming to stay with us, and the fuss she made about the water stain that appeared on the ceiling above the kitchen table. Grandma claimed the stain was the exact shape of Christ's profile. She told Mom that it was a sign from my father, his way of letting us know that he was in heaven. Then my mother told her, in a voice like cracking ice, that she didn't need a sign to know *that*.

What would my mother say if I failed to make the bell choir yet again? That September morning in sixth grade was my last chance. I couldn't eat breakfast; I gave my two Eggo waffles to Elliot, who devoured them along with his own. When we got to school, I ran ahead of Elliot to the music room, anxious to see the list that Mr. Jameson always scotch-taped to the door. A crowd of kids clogged the hallway. I stared at the glossy backs of their heads, not wanting to elbow my way through. Glad for once to be taller than everyone else, even the boys, I stood on tiptoe and scanned the list. Bertram! There it was, right under the Last Name column. First Name: Elliot. Grade: Four.

I could hear the gastric juices churning around the emptiness in my stomach. Hollow. The skin of my forehead felt too tight against my skull, and the back of my throat itched. I didn't look to see if Elliot was behind me. Instead, I pushed through the crowd to the drinking fountain. The water was so cold that it hurt my gums. Then I went to my homeroom and sat down at my desk. I opened my reading book and stared at the words without seeing them.

Throughout the morning I would yawn in order to keep from crying, a strategy that had always served me well. By afternoon recess I felt like I had things under control. The day was bright and warm. As always I hid in a crevice of the wooden playground with my friends, Mavis and Roberta, while the other kids played tag above and around us. Secretly, I hated them both and was sure

they felt the same about me. But as the only girls in our grade with strange names, we felt exposed among all the Jennifers and Sarahs and Megans. So we clung together for support.

None of us had been chosen for the bell choir. Mavis, who had an IQ of 160 and never let anyone forget it, asked me if I was “terribly disappointed.” I shrugged and stared through the cracks between the two-by-fours of our hideout. Elliot was across the playground, climbing up the sliding board by bracing his dark, skinny legs against its wooden sides.

“I don’t care either,” Roberta said, raking a hand through her loose, messy curls. “Mr. Jameson thinks he’s so great.”

“I need more time to work on my science fair stuff anyways,” Mavis said. “And Ava, you don’t need to bother with music. Mrs. Jarvis says you have a way with words.”

Words. Words were like wrapping breakables in tissue paper, packing them in clearly labeled boxes, and shipping them across empty space. Music was different. My father must have known that.

I’d once asked Mom if my father was a Christian.

“Essentially,” she said.

I asked her if he’d believed in Jesus.

“He believed in music—rhythm and harmony. Those things are love.”

I thought I knew what she meant. Rhythm wrapped around the guts and squeezed. Harmony rose warm into the brain like a pinched flame and stayed there.

“Love,” I repeated.

“Yes. And God is love. And Jesus is God. So, essentially, your father was a Christian.”

She paused. Her mouth looked funny, like smiling and frowning at the same time.

“Even if he didn’t know it,” she finished.

Music brought bodies together, touching. My mother and father, dancing to jazz on the radio, the light from the streetlamp reaching through the living room window and crowning my father’s dark head—a memory I didn’t even know I had until that

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moment on the playground. But I couldn't trust this memory, just like I couldn't trust the words that my mother used to resurrect my father. Words, words like "God is love," forced a wedge between my father and mother, helping her to remember and forget at the same time.

But I couldn't explain that to Mavis and Roberta, so I just shrugged again and said, "Whatever."

After school, Elliot and I walked home together. We gossiped about teachers, friends, and kids we barely knew. We did not talk about the bell choir. Elliot could always sense my moods, and my mother's. He knew better than to press us.

The trees that lined the cracked sidewalks showed tints of red and yellow. The haze of the afternoon sun had settled on the hills, and I thought I heard a faint silver buzz coming from that direction, like the tap of a spoon on glass. Bells and hills. Hills and bells. Words and music.

If we turned to our left and crossed the highway, we would be in the backyards of the hill-people, as Mom called them. But I remembered her warning: "They've all got pit-bulls and rifles, and they're not afraid to use them."

We came to the creek that ran through the woods behind our church, parallel to the railroad tracks that hadn't been used for three decades. I wondered what it would be like to follow the tracks all the way out of town, to a place where nobody knew I was Mike Bertram's kid. Three ducks were skimming across the creek in triangle formation. These same ducks were always there: one with bright green feathers, the other two dull brown. One male and two females, according to my *Peterson's Guide to Birds*. I always thought the two females must share the male.

I stopped, hands on hips. Elliot walked a few steps ahead, then turned around and asked me what was wrong.

"I don't want to go home yet."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. Let's go down to the creek or something."

Elliot agreed—he always had faith in my vague plans.

In the woods, sunlight filtered through the yellowing oak

leaves. We came to a path that ran dark and narrow through two rows of tall pines. The unnatural straightness of these rows always terrified me. It was the same with topiary. I would shudder to see certain bushes in our neighborhood, clipped to look like castle turrets and baby deer, hideous in their bright green perfection. I wanted to attack them with hedge clippers, mutilate them, make them uglier, more real. At the same time, I was drawn to these bushes. I would ride my bike past them again and again, staring. Something about them made my chest ache, like the feeling I got from thinking about Mr. Jameson's hands.

I ran through the avenue of pines and down the small slope of the gorge to the water. I could hear Elliot behind me, legs brushing against ferns and sneakers thumping on moss. We stopped on the dirt bank, breathing hard together.

"Now what?" Elliot said.

I pointed to a thick log, probably felled by an August storm, stretching across the creek to the far bank.

"Let's cross on that," I said.

"Can't we just wade across? It's shallow here."

Elliot was right. Stones cropped up out of the water every foot or so, and we could probably cross without even getting the bottoms of our shoes wet. But I loved crossing on logs: the concentration of centering my body, the precision of placing one foot directly ahead of the other, defying the gray space on either side of me. I had a good sense of balance. Elliot, on the other hand, couldn't even ride a bike without training wheels.

"Do whatever you want," I said.

I strode across the log without once looking down. I stepped onto the bank, whirled around, and let out a yell of triumph. By the time I saw Elliot close behind me, he had already jumped backward in fright. He slipped on a patch of mud left by my sandals and fell sideways into a thorn bush halfway down the gorge. He lay there motionless, his small, narrow face pointed at the sky.

I jumped down from the bank and pulled him up. A trickle of blood ran from his scalp, past his closed eyes, and mixed with the

The Bell Choir

tears and mud on his cheek. His lips were pressed together, but a short, ragged sob broke through. Elliot hardly ever cried.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t move.

“I want Mom.”

So we walked home, first through the woods and then the streets. People in cars slowed down to stare. Elliot was quiet. I held my hand out to him, but he didn’t take it.

We found Mom in the kitchen, making grilled cheese sandwiches for supper. When she saw the blood on Elliot’s face and shirt, she sucked in her breath with a hiss.

“He fell in some thorns,” I said.

Without a word, she grabbed his shoulders and steered him to the bathroom. I stood at the open door, watching as she ran water in the sink and slowly peeled off Elliot’s shirt. He whimpered and shook. Red welts covered the soft olive skin of his back.

“I know, baby,” she said. “I know it hurts. Just stay there a minute, okay?”

I asked if I could do anything to help.

She ran to the hallway linen closet, almost knocking me down. She flung open the closet door, stooped down, grabbed a washcloth.

“Please,” I whispered. “I want to do something.”

She wet the washcloth under the faucet, lathered it with soap, and began to wash Elliot’s back. He didn’t make a sound, but tears streamed down his filthy face. Blood and water pooled on the bathroom floor.

I watched them, a strange ache starting in my chest and spreading through my body to the tips of my fingers and toes. This was the feeling. Mr. Jameson playing “Amazing Grace” on the grand piano. The silver song of bells. Haze on the hills. Hills and bells. Bells and hills.

Thin red stripes on Elliot’s dark body. His gleaming teeth, strong and straight, clenched to keep from crying. The smooth skin broken open. I wanted to touch him, to wash him, to paint peroxide

on his sharp, quivering shoulder blades—but our mother was doing all that.

I thought she might question me that evening, but she took no notice of me at all, not even to ask if I'd made the bell choir. Elliot may have told her during the hours she spent in his room, bringing him food and comic books, changing his bandages, reading to him. Before I went to bed, I asked Mom if Elliot wanted to see me. She frowned and looked past me. Then she said that he hadn't mentioned me and was already sleeping. I went to the practice piano and tried to play "Amazing Grace," but I couldn't.

The next day on the way to school I told Elliot to walk on ahead of me so I could go back home for a book I'd forgotten. But instead I ended up at the railroad tracks. That was the day I found out that if you follow them far enough, they disappear near the edge of an empty lot, sunken beneath soil and tall grass, and you find yourself still in town, at the foot of the hills. So you turn around and follow the tracks to the place you began.