



StrippedLit500 Fiction Magazine

Issue 3
March 2017

New short fiction from Shannon Bell, Elizabeth Bradley,
Jim Freeze, Stephanie Hutton, Margaret McGovern,
Megambiguous, Mike Olley, Dan Soule,
Paul Stansbury and Trinity

Issue 3

Spring again, or nearly. Storm Doris blows across Britain; hopefully it's blown a few cobwebs away too.

Our theme for this third issue is "unseen", and we have a fantastic selection of flash fiction stories to share with you on the subject.

The quality of writing is uniformly excellent, and we can offer you unease and uncanniness, sadness, hope, strength and karma in these ten small but beautifully formed bites of fiction.

It bears repeating that the flash fiction we feature here are all stories, with a beginning and end, and something happens in between. You will come away from each story a little moved, although we cannot guarantee you will enjoy the movement...

With thanks to everyone who submitted; these are your stories, and now they can be seen.

Margaret McGoverne
3rd March 2017

Strippedlit500.com

[Submission guidelines](#)

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Vivisepulture

By Shannon Bell

I'm not allowed control or choices. You buy my clothes and food. I wear what you want, when you want and I eat what you want when you tell me to. I have nothing and I'm not allowed to go anywhere. You remind me that I'm lower than an animal and don't need rights or freedom, that the only privilege I need in life is being with you.

"Congratulations. Your ability to inflict pain is remarkable. But I wonder, what is your tolerance for receiving it? Well, my love, tonight we'll know."

I smooth your jacket and straighten your tie.

My friends don't bother with me anymore. You embarrassed and humiliated and threatened them. At first, they were uncomfortable, then insulted, and finally afraid for their safety. I have no one. You tell me that's the way it should be because I'm a worthless, useless piece of shit.

"Most of my suffering was physical. Yours will be emotional. I lived through mine. You won't survive yours."

I tighten the ropes and remove the gag.

When we have sex, it's rough and painful and borders on rape. I learnt the hard way never to say no. You tell me I deserve it because I'm a dirty whore, a filthy slut who fucks everything she sees, someone who can't be trusted with anyone or anything.

"Your agony won't be as long as mine, but my pleasure at being the cause of your anguish will be as intense as yours."

I stroke your trembling hand and kiss your quivering lips.

It's hard to clean away the blood and dress your wounds when your bones are broken. I gave up trying to hide the bruises and injuries. I gave up making excuses. Everyone knows, but no one helps me. They all turn a blind eye and pretend they don't see. Who can blame them? I'm scared to get anyone else involved. Who knows what you'd do to them.

"No one will hear you. No one will find you. No one will miss you. No one will care."

I close the lid, climb out of the hole and grab the shovel. I smile, enjoying the sound of your screams, enjoying the sound of the dirt hitting your coffin.

Author Bio: Shannon Bell is addicted to words. You will find him madly writing away in the spare time he has available between holding down a full-time job, being part of a dysfunctional family and looking after his attention seeking dog. His stories have been published in Dark Edifice, Short & Twisted, 101 Fiction and strippedlit500. You can follow Shannon at [@ShannonBell1967](https://twitter.com/ShannonBell1967)

Encounter

By Elizabeth Bradley

Gravel skittered down the desolate road as Jenn kicked her feet, hypnotized by the crunch and scatter in the otherwise silent air. Fog had descended on the forest suddenly and caught her more than a mile out from camp. She hitched the leather strap on her shoulder, repositioning her rifle and tried to ignore the churning of her stomach. She wasn't expected back for hours, but the fog had obliterated her chances of tracking anything in the woods. Her t-shirt clung to her slick skin underneath the thick canvas jacket. She shivered.

Trees towered over her, stark and menacing in the semi-darkness. They appeared from nothing and then receded behind her, back into the thickening fog.

Her breath rose in a mist. She gripped the leather rifle strap, her knuckles white. Quickening her pace she glanced around, trying to find something familiar. Had she passed the turnoff?

Two lights appeared, cutting through the fog. Jenn jumped to the side of the road and waved her arms, hoping that the passing motorist would see her. But the lights did not come any closer. She dropped her arms. Slipping its strap from her shoulder, she swung her gun to the ready.

"Hello?" Her words were swallowed by the dense mist. The ground was silent beneath her as she edged forward, years of stalking deer gave her a light foot. A tall figure emerged from the fog. Its back was to her and wrapped in a long coat.

"Hello?" she called again, lowering the rifle. The figure twitched. She pulled the gun up, trained on the stranger. "Can you hear me?"

She gripped the gun tighter trying to resist trembling, adrenaline coursing through her veins. The figure turned. Her stomach tightened and though she tried to speak, no words could escape. The creature standing in the middle of the road was shaped like a man, but there was something wrong. Its features were distorted and stretched. Dark black eyes bore holes into her.

It darted towards her and she pulled the trigger.

The bullet exploded from the end of her rifle in slow motion. A flash of fire. The acrid stench of gunpowder hit her nostrils. The figure raised its arms, pointing in her direction. The bullet

swerved and headed straight for her. It slammed into her shoulder and pain blinded her as she fell.

Gasping for air, Jenn gaped at the figure who stood only a foot away. A loud whirring rang in her ears, and the lights ahead grew stronger, enveloping them both in light and sound. With a crack, the figure vanished, and as the light dissipated around her broken body, she disappeared in the darkness.

Author Bio: Elizabeth Bradley is a writer and mother living in the rural Alaskan bush. Her flash fiction has been published in StrippedLit500, and long-listed in AdHoc Fiction's weekly competition. You can find her on Twitter at [@LizjSmith7](https://twitter.com/LizjSmith7). She is working on her first novel, which will most certainly feature more aliens.

Don't Pet The Bunny Rabbit

By Jim Freeze

I have many memories, mostly good and from childhood. You may not agree with my assessment but my memories, however, may be different than yours on the same occasion. That is the memory holder's prerogative. For example, I thought the possibility of going to hell was something to worry about.

I have a special uncle who went out of his way to make sure my birthdays were unforgettable. He said since my birthday fell on October 31, Halloween, he wanted to separate it from all the chaos of that day. My tenth birthday stands out particularly.

The autumn's quiet arrival seemed to deceive that year. But as I remember when I looked closely I could see a bit of orange on the Maple leaves, a touch of red on the Oak and the Poplars were turning more and more golden by the day.

I remember expressing to my uncle that year and hoping that he would come up with some ideas that would go beyond the common celebration. He told me that nothing he and I could do would be considered common by the people around me.

There were always fireworks on my birthday but this time with a proud, yet melancholy fervor, my uncle almost cried out loud that this year would be the best yet.

I remember trembling like a leaf as the appointed hour drew near. It seemed the hours dragged by slowly. A murmur ran through the crowd as all the children made ready to trick or treat. My uncle made a special point to tell me not to pet the bunny rabbit. I had learned not to question him so I just made sure to do as he requested.

My first stop was at the house occupied by what was known as the Rose lady who now and then added a touch of home- grown tomatoes to her rose garden. I rung the doorbell and she opened the door.

"My, you are a cute little devil," she said with a smile. I responded with, "Trick or Treat?"

She looked at me with her wandering blue eyes which were miraculously darkened, and there appeared in them a murderous fire. "Remember," she said, 'don't pet the bunny rabbit,' As she handed me a chocolate covered stick of licorice.

As I was leaving the Rose lady, a kid was coming up the walkway and had stopped to pet the cute little bunny rabbit. I thought to myself, this can't be good. Just then, the sky lit up over the city about 20 miles east of our bedroom community. A missile had hit directly in the center of

the town. The shock wave rolled in all directions. We had been warned, but there is always someone who ignores the warnings.

I called my uncle, Lucifer, and told him I believed he may have gone too far with the fireworks this year. My uncle responded, "The happy birthday is over and the sinner takes all."

Author Bio:

Jim Freeze is seventy- one year's old and retired. He has been happily married for fifty-two years and has two grown sons along with two grandchildren. He began writing in early 2012 to have something to do or to fool his wife into thinking he's too busy to help her. His short stories have been featured in several publications including-(Brilliant Flash Fiction, Calliope Magazine, and The Original Writer.)

Not Seen and Not Heard

By Stephanie Hutton

There are more siblings than windows at home. She must find a way to her parents' eyes. One brother does it with thrashing and crashing and screams. Their eyes follow, but so do their fists. The eldest sister does everything precisely and well. Her success leaves an afterglow of approval in their irises. The twins' symmetry mesmerises her parents without effort, pulling their pupils along on invisible threads.

She practises smiling in the mirror whilst pinching thin skin on the tops of her hands. Separation of what is seen and what is felt, like oil from water. Waiting to be wanted, she sits among the shadows in corners of the house. She watches for signs of their thirst or hunger, for red cheeks that need an open window or blue feet to cover in silk slippers.

There is a world of colour out there. But to step out of the front door leaves her clutching her stomach and breathing as fast as her old dog. Did their eyes flicker towards her as she glanced away? Best to keep quiet watch.

In her dreams, she pirouettes or soars or strides out of flames, as loud as opera as her parents turn their heads away.

She reaches the end of childhood belonging to nowhere and no-one. As the cataracts of attachment fade, she sees that they both look straight through her.

One cool evening, she shuts all the windows and heaves the curtains across. She wets the dog's head with tears as she rubs her nose against his. The weight of his gaze holds her steady as she steps out of the back door under the watchful eye of the moon.

Author Bio: Stephanie Hutton is a writer and clinical psychologist in the UK. She has published her flash fiction, short stories, and poetry online and in print.

In 2016 she won the Writers HQ Competition, Ad Hoc Fiction, and Bibliophone 1000 Words Heard Competition, and was short-listed for the Black Pear Press Short Story Competition and Brighton Prize. She believes in the therapeutic value of short fiction.

The Unimagined

By Margaret McGoverne

Meghan was five, and she was cross. Mummy and daddy wouldn't play with her as much as they used to, and she was in her playroom alone for longer and longer. Mummy and daddy shouted a lot, and mummy often cried. She had crept downstairs yesterday to see them, but daddy saw the door move and pounced on Meghan, smacking her legs and sending her upstairs. "Only naughty girls spy on their parents!" he said.

Meghan's playroom was in the attic; it was light and bright, but apart from her dolls and books it wasn't really a playroom. There was a big brass bed for their occasional visitors but it was Meghan's retreat now, her haven from her parents' disputes.

She sat on the rug in front of the cold fireplace; her dolls were asleep, their long-lashed plastic eyes closed. The afternoon sun streamed through the windows, bathing Meghan in warmth. Her parents' voices were a dull muffle that made her sleepy; she lay down on the rug and slept, thumb in mouth, although mummy said she shouldn't.

Her nap was short, for the sun still warmed her when she awoke. She rubbed her eyes and pulled her thumb from her mouth – sitting on the bed were two figures Meghan had never seen before.

"Who are you?" she asked, and they smiled at her, although not at each other.

Their names were Tulpa and Enty, and they were here to make friends with Meghan. They were all three about the same size. They looked funny, but Meghan didn't feel alone anymore. They chatted about her dolls and books, and they played games.

"Did mummy bring you here?" Meghan asked.

Enty smiled slyly, but Tulpa looked sad.

"No, you wanted us to come."

"I did?" Meghan was mystified, but she was having fun. She had forgotten to be lonely.

Tulpa and Enty came to the playroom every day, and at first, they all played nicely. But one day they couldn't agree which game to play, and they wouldn't stop arguing, even when Meghan asked them politely.

"I'll tell mummy!" she warned. But Enty just slapped at Tulpa and they rolled together, a mass of grabbing hands and pulled hair.

Meghan ran downstairs. Mummy was in the kitchen, Daddy smoked a cigarette at the table.

"Mummy, my friends won't stop fighting!"

"What friends?" her mother asked, with a guilty start. Maybe she'd forgotten about Meghan.

"Tulpa and Enty, the friends that appeared in my room."

Her mother's frown changed into a slow smile.

"I'm sure they'll stop soon Meghan."

"But mummy, won't you come and tell them off?"

An impatient tutting from her father made her mother stiffen. The warm smile died in her eyes.

"Not now Meghan. I'll bring you some toast soon."

"Mummy..."

"Please, Meghan!"

She paced dejected back to the playroom. There was an ominous scuffling sound behind the closed door; Meghan was scared, but her mother had told her to go to her room. She peered gingerly round the door: Tulpa lay in the fireplace, her eyes closed just like Meghan's dolls. Her legs were pointing up the chimney, and as Meghan watched she saw a tiny pair of hands reach down and grab Tulpa's ankles. Slowly, slowly, Tulpa disappeared up the chimney. She never opened her eyes.

When Tulpa had completely disappeared, Enty's voice came down the chimney, with a small fall of soot.

"I'll be back soon Meghan. You had better play nicely..."

Meghan sucked on her thumb and waited on the rug.

Author Bio: Margaret McGoverne has just published her first novella, [The Battle of Watling Street](#), a historical Sci-Fi re imagining of the end of the Celtic warrior queen Boudicca. She is also working on her first full-length novel while being distracted by short stories, flash fiction and her [blog about all things writing](#).

The Lurker

By Megambiguous

It lurked.

It lurked like it always did, in the desolate, depths of the darkness, just paces away from the triumphant path, observing all who passed in good confidence. So effortlessly did it remain hidden, invisible to the usual bystander, like a ghost sent to haunt those who routinely passed by, just waiting, waiting until their backs were exposed, just waiting to sink its teeth in.

That was its favorite. That's when it liked to feed; when the threat was not perceived, when the prey felt safest, secure, all guards down, all trust and faith in their physical senses- No, the coast is clear they thought, I can move on. That's when it would attack, when it would strike its deceptive claws into their backs, instantly returning to its den, only to observe the residual effect of its subject's confusion.

Its favorite part was when its prey would swivel around to be met with nothing, nothing at all, minds betraying them, longing to identify the threat, longing but finding no evidence to validate their perception. Distrust, they began to feel, distrust in their own cognition, their own senses; now that was its goal, that was what it fed on.

Doubt.

Time would pass, and again it would wait for its prey to pass too, internally cackling at their fear, their concern, their anticipation of attack, fuelling him further, as he remained hidden and situated, not today it thought, not today, better when they least expect it, better when their focus is upon greater things, when their desires grow stronger than I, and when they forget I exist; that's when they are most vulnerable.

The distrust of themselves would grow, as would its power over them. That's how it kept them there. They could go nowhere else really, how could they? How could they trust themselves to such a thing?

Stay with me my pretty, it thought, stay with me and you'll never have to rely on yourself too much, not too much at all; your existence will be limited but at least you won't risk losing more, but at least you won't risk gaining more.

You belong to me my beloved, it cooed, as it returned to its den, scuttling in reverse to its empty nothingness, its lurking hollow. Yes, I will be here it thought, I will always be here.

They remained. They remained like they always did.

Author Bio: Just a 23-year-old girl, totally on her own, with a passion for writing. Literature has given me the opportunity to live various lives, and I wish to provide others with unique experiences that can only be obtained through living vicariously through another character or story. Life has left me with lots of bumps and bruises, much more than the average girl my age, but I long to provide others with perspectives for their current circumstances, and potentially even connect with the reader, to remind them that we're not all alone after all- we fight the same demons, we wage war with the same inner conflicts, and despite what we might believe, there's hope. Though our settings and circumstances may vary, we are indeed still the very same; we are wired for affirmation and we are crippled by our insecurities. That is what I long to portray. I hope to inspire, move, stir, and motivate the reader. I'm just a 23-year-old girl who wants to leave her mark on the world.

I have a personal blog with pieces which genres vary greatly, but I do write to share them nonetheless: megambiguous.wordpress.com

Ring of Truth

By Mike Olley

In three determined strides, Paul Matlock reached the front porch of the semi-detached house and stood with his finger hovering over the doorbell. His hand shook. This was more difficult than he'd thought. He only needed to say a few words, what if it came out all wrong?

'I er... I'm conducting a survey for British Gas, do you have a couple of minutes?'
Not engaging enough.

'How do you feel about God?'
Too powerful.

'Can I have my ball back?'

Child-like, but along the right lines. In the end he should just be honest:

'I'm Paul, you gave me away forty years ago today. Hello Mum.'

He pushed the doorbell decisively. Whether the bell sounded decisive inside the house was hard to tell; the double-glazed glass porch, crammed with flowering plants, muffled any interior sound. He pressed the bell again. Still no answer. He took a step back. The curtains were drawn in the front lounge.

Inside, Margaret sat in her kitchen with a large gin and tonic, she never normally drank this early. Today was special. She felt tired. She'd taken all the pills.

Paul pushed the bell once more. Waited. Nothing. Maybe another day, maybe not. He left.

He never saw the notice that said 'Bell not working, please knock.'

Author Bio: Mike Olley writes short fiction. His work has been published in several anthologies. A designer by trade, he's also quite a good carpenter and grower of cactus plants. Originally from London, he spent a few years in Spain before a quirk of fate brought him back to live in an English seaside town.

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Only Some Things

By Daniel Soule

The old man sat in the corner of the bus stop, perched on the metal plank they called a seat. The kind of seat they, people in councils and town planning, decided it would be good to install so that people like him couldn't sleep on them, moving them on to be somewhere else, anywhere else but asleep on the bus stops at night.

It wasn't night now, though people still seemed not to notice him. Perhaps they averted their eyes because of what he represented or how he appeared.

One of the old man's hands was twisted and gnarled, like a knot in the branch of the world tree, deformed and bulbous. His other hand missed some fingers, and his neck flaked dead skin in white drifts onto his collar. Warts grew on his face, and a boil, red and angry, lay on his neck beneath an ear. His hair was unclean and flattened back with strokes of his gnarled hand.

He sat waiting.

They came in ones and twos, sometimes threes. A bus would pull up and move along with them on it and others would come.

While he waited, he thought of his brothers. In the old days, they would ride out together, visiting places near and far, going on great adventures, seeing the best and worst of it. That was life and they were a part of it. But now he rarely saw them together, though they carried on the family business in lands far away.

A mother and her toddler walked into the bus shelter. He was a beautiful little boy with curly black hair and eyes of walnut. The mother appeared not to see the old man, instead she consulted a timetable on the wall and checked her phone.

The little boy noticed the old man sitting all by himself. Children sometimes saw him, especially the little ones, when language hasn't yet divided up the world for them into this but not that, changing everything into only some things, as though the words matter and not the spaces in between.

It was at this moment that the old man's heart sank because his sister arrived. She knocked the phone from the mother's hand, who assumed she merely fumbled it. The mother bent to pick up the phone letting go of the little boy. The old man's sister, Fate, took the little boy's hand and led him to her brother, Pestilence. The little boy smiled and put his tiny perfect hand on top

of the gnarled hand of the world tree. Tears, saltier than a wailing mother's, welled in the old man's eyes and he returned a tired smile.

"I'm so sorry," said the mother, gathering her perfect little boy. She didn't look at the old man. She couldn't.

A bus pulled up and the woman and her little boy rode away, heading off to see one of the old man's brother's soon.

Author Bio: Dan was an academic but the sentences proved too long and the words too obscure. Northern Ireland is where he now lives. But he was born in England and raised in Byron's home town, which the bard hated but Dan does not. They named every other road after Byron. As yet no roads are named after Dan but several children are. He tries to write the kind of stories he wants to read and aims for readers to want to turn the page. Dan's work has featured in Number Eleven, Storgy, the Dime Show Review, Short Tale 100, Phantaxis, Devolution Z, and TheGhostStory.com

Twitter: [@Grammatologer](#)
Writing.ie: [Emerging Writer's Profile](#)
Website: [Grammatology.co.uk](#)
Facebook: [Daniel Soule](#)

The Protector

By Paul Stansbury

Luda stood peering into the deep shadows. The bright flowers and lush field grass in which she stood stopped abruptly at the base of the tall oak trees. Their thick and twisted trunks supported a canopy of leaves blocking all sunlight from the forest floor. Behind her, Maks and Anya played quietly along the creek that meandered across the meadow.

“Make sure Maks and Anya are safe.” mother had said as Luda stepped from the cottage porch. It was a task she took seriously.

She knew the beast was there. Babushka had told her of Zicgaforja lurking deep in the shadows of the forest. Even the village woodcutter with his broad, double bladed axe for protection avoided this forest. Behind the trees in the darkness, long dead leaves rustled on the forest floor. Is that the faint, dark scent of the creature floating on the wood’s cold, damp breath? It chased away the fragile warmth of the Spring sun, sending a chill through her. Regardless, she stood her ground, eyes never turning away.

While the children played blissfully, Luda stood between them and the waiting evil. She held her staff at the ready by her side. The beast was patient, waiting for its prey to come within range – muscles tensed, poised to attack with ripping teeth and tearing claws.

Mother’s call came rolling over the meadow, breaking her concentration. Maks and Anya jumped up from their play, setting off toward home. Luda turned with one last intent stare into the dark recesses of the woods and called out in smug defiance, “Lucky for you Zicgaforja, Mama has called us for supper.” With that, she threw the twig she had been holding into the shadows and turned to join her brother and sister in a race back to the cottage.

Author Bio: Paul Stansbury is a life long native of Kentucky. He is the author of “Down By the Creek – Ripples and Reflections” and “Little Green Men?” His stories have appeared in a number of print anthologies as well as a variety of online publications. Now retired, he lives in Danville, Kentucky.

Absolution

By Trinity

Miss Tedder's arm ached. But she bore it with a mixture of stoicism and grim satisfaction; the girl had deserved a slippering, and Miss Tedder had administered a thorough punishment. With a faint nostalgia for the days when children could be struck with impunity before the local education authority poked its nose into the affairs of religious schools, Miss Tedder crossed the path that led from the schoolyard to the church next door.

It was a beautiful building, served faithfully by brothers from the Franciscan order, but Miss Tedder was blind to earthly aesthetics; she sought the comfort and justification of the confessional box, and this morning she had felt that need keenly.

The curtain to the confessional was drawn back; she had timed it right, then! She could unburden herself right away, and be back before the lunch break was over. Settling into place with a grunt, she glanced through the ornate metal grill that separated her from the brother hearing her confession. The church was dimly lit, and her eyes weren't what they once were, but Miss Tedder had no preferred confessor. Absolution was what she sought.

She murmured the confessional words rapidly, in a perfunctory tone that betrayed no thought for their meaning; "Forgive me father, for I have sinned." They were a formula, an incantation that was necessary to sanction her actions and bring self-justification.

She shared what she had come to say, confident that the brother would agree with her, and enable the hatred that flowed through Miss Tedder, the absence of compassion that she miscalled discipline.

"She is a difficult child. Quiet, always watching me. Most insolent!"

She continued her tirade against the twelve-year-old girl she had just beaten, for having the temerity to attend school with a button missing from her blouse. The child was slovenly, a reflection of her dissolute family. Her father wasn't even a Catholic! Miss Tedder had dug out all tough roots remaining from the place where her heart should be and felt no hypocrisy when she lied to herself that her hatred of the child had no sectarian basis.

The child was always watching from her large dark eyes. Plain spinsterish Miss Tedder felt the sting of judgement. She had dragged the girl to the toilets once, ordering her to wash the disgusting eye make up from her face. The child had obeyed, crying that she didn't have any make up. The dark ring around her lashes could not be scrubbed away. Miss Tedder thought of this but said nothing. She waited, impatient for absolution, but her confessor was silent.

From across the courtyard, Miss Tedder heard the school bell herald the end of lunch; she had tarried too long, and her need was met. Perhaps confession hadn't been necessary; the brother

had given her no penance, no act of contrition. He understood and approved her actions! Miss Tedder rose from the wooden bench, polished by generations of sinful backsides, and hurried back towards the school, where no doubt the children were making the most of her absence.

As she opened the door to leave the church, a sombre-habited figure emerged from a side door. Brother Everard returned to the confessional box, tea in hand. He called to Miss Tedder but she had already left the church. Perhaps it was a sin, but Brother Everard smiled and allowed himself a quiet sigh of relief.

Author Bio: Trinity has no social media presence but is grateful for the opportunity to share stories online.