

ISSUE 1.4: WEBS

WRETCHED CREATIONS

MAGAZINE



LYNN FINGER, J.R. ALLEN , KRISTIN GARTH,
STU WATSON , ADAM CHABOT

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Letter from the editor:

Hello again: readers, contributors, future authors, and anyone else that peeks at the letters I've chosen to include in each issue. Today I want to talk about the theme of this issue. When I picked it I was very much set on a literal translation of it. I was thinking of spider webs and things that branched off from that, and in fact the first story I selected for the issue was the first story you will find in the pages that follow, "For the Spiders."

Then I put submissions on hiatus to help focus on things that were happening at the time, and when I came back I found that the submissions *were not* literal, and had found a way to branch out into a thousand different types and styles and definitions of webs. Honestly, I love it, but I do wonder if this issue came together as... cohesively as I had wanted it to. I tried, and I wouldn't have chosen any other stories for it, but I do think it might appear a bit random.

Perhaps that's just the thing about themes and having them rotate so often. Or maybe it's a symptom of WCM being so new still. Or it's just my ADHD hyper-excited brain not focusing hard enough to draw stiff lines. It's really hard to tell. Maybe it doesn't matter at all.

What I do know is that there are some really, really fantastic stories in this issue, and I can not wait for you to read them. So instead of taking up any more of your time, I will let you go.

Go on. Do the thing

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For the Spiders

By: Stuart Watson

Syl had settled into a long, steamy shower. Kev had poured a scotch. He set it on the coffee table, sat down, and that's when he heard her scream. Of all the possible screams — delight, surprise, phobic fear, mortal terror — Syl's led straight to the gasping, stuttering vocalizations of someone confronted by some acute object of dread.

Kev jumped up, banged the coffee table. His scotch rocks lifted into the air, then crashed back down, spilling booze across his copies of Moto Madness and Hefty. Dirt bikes and dirty girls.

"Damn!" he screamed. "Woman! — " he yelled, lunging toward the bathroom " — what in the hell is going on?"

She was panting, gasping, totally freaked. She was backed against the stall, trying to elevate even as she looked at her feet.

"Spider!" she cried. "Get it out! Get the goddamned thing out of here. It's gonna kill me!"

"Take a deep breath, babe," he said. "It's just a spider. Not likely to kill you."

She stopped her dance. She looked at him through the steamed up shower door.

"You are a fucking idiot, aren't you? You know how much I hate spiders?"

"Forgot," he said. "Been a little busy."

Two years in the can will cloud your memory. He could feel his anger starting up, at the waste of it all, down in his nuts, then working its way up. He took a deep breath, reached out, opened the shower door.

She looked really good. A mannequin would look good now, after time at county. He just stopped, stared, taking in the glory of the female body. If somebody had asked him what he missed most about his time away, he would've had to think. He was glad it put a space between him and the meth, which was just getting its hooks in

when he went down. But what he missed most wasn't meth. It was Syl, for sure.

"Quit staring," she said. "It won't help."

She looked to her feet. She had shut the water off, so the spider was struggling to regain his footing.

Kev squatted down, leaned closer. "Damn," he said, "first time I've seen a black widow in a while."

Syl dove past him, out of the stall, about clocking him with her knee.

"Shit, girl, like to kill me," he said, rubbing his forehead.

He reached around the edge of the stall, grabbed a wad of toilet tissue and captured the spider. It went down the toilet without a fight.

"I checked the stall before I got in," Syl said, from beneath a towel. "Wasn't nothing there."

He knew she probably had. To her, the only good bug was a dead bug. Four brands of insect spray under the sink. Fly strips hanging by every window. Roach Motels under the counters. She didn't like bugs in the least, but she had figured out how to achieve a sort of coexistence with most. She would exist. They would not.

Spiders, on the other hand, were not bugs. To Syl, they were pure creeping evil.

"Maybe it flew in," Kev said. "On, like, a really small drone."

"Keep that up, you ain't getting nothing tonight. Or, tomorrow morning."

"Wow," he said, "cut off for as long as ... you can stand it? What's that, like an eighteen-hour curfew?"

"I'm not taking no more showers until you can guarantee me there won't be no spiders in there. Hear me?"

"I know something about that. Had us some three hundred pound spiders in stir."

He and Syl met as freshmen running cross country, whippets in stride, holding hands on the trip bus, then sneaking off beneath the bleachers before calling for a ride home. The first time, staring into the dark, she said "Let's use the pole vault pads" and giggled.

Kev usually caught a ride. His mom was long gone, his dad likely sopping beer at The Short Stop.

There was one good thing about his time at county. It was close. Syl visited twice a week. "Are you OK?" she would start.

"Filthy," he said. "Absolutely, disgustingly filthy."

"I smell you. Don't they let you shower? How can you sleep?"

"To hell with showers. If I smell like shit, nobody gonna tap my skanky ass."

His crust became his shield. Two years without a shower makes for a nasty piece of work. After his release, Syl made him shower three times before she would sleep with him.

Now, doing maintenance for the fruit packing lines, he found himself smiling all the time, happy as hell to be in a place where spiders were his biggest problem. He just didn't want to look like a fool, raising an alarm about a single spider in Syl's shower.

"Look around?" he said, waving his hand at the bathroom. "It's not like they're ubiquitous." He paused a second, saw her giving him the look. "But I'll call. See what they can do to make sure it don't become a ubiquitous situation."

Ubiquitous was his new favorite word. He liked it because it made him sound like he had been places, if not everywhere, then enough places to hold his own in a conversation. Being seen as traveled, that was the goal, so he wasn't seen as not being traveled.

He called the irrigation district office in the morning. They owned the building, where he and Syl rented their studio upstairs from an auto parts store and a room where the district had a pump. The space also held their hot water heater.

"Can I help you?" Cindy said.

"We got a black widow spider in our shower stall last night, when Syl was in there, and it about panicked her into a cataleptic fit."

"A what?"

"You know. Nude. In the shower. She got pretty upset. I killed the spider, but maybe you can tell me if ... there's gonna be more? Is that, like a feature of the place? Included with the rent? Like water and electric?"

"Spiders?" Cindy said. "Not included. They don't work for us. Clock in in the morning, head out with a list of places to infect."

"You're just a riot, aren't you? Can you send somebody out? To check the crevices?"

"I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

It sounded like she meant something else, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions, having been away for so long. He said he would appreciate it. She said she would have someone there the next morning.

That evening, Syl dumping a packet of powder into some sizzling ground beef, he stepped into the bathroom and stripped for the shower. The best thing about parole was the chance to take a hot shower whenever he wanted, without putting his pucker at risk. In the little apartment, he felt like he was making up for lost time. Sometimes, he would take two or three showers a day.

After he got the temperature dialed, he stepped under the nozzle, tilted his head back and let the hot water drain over him. He closed his eyes, soaped his hair, rinsed again. He bent forward to soap his legs when he glanced down and saw the spiders. They were emerging from the drain, crawling through the strainer, spilling out and across the shower pan. Each and every one of them, to his eye, black widows by the dozens.

He turned, grabbed the hand-held shower nozzle and aimed it at his feet as he started stomping on the spiders, washing their crushed guts toward the drain until the invaders stopped emerging.

Holy Christ, he thought. Are they living in the plumbing? Do they have a city down there?

He didn't tell Syl. He didn't want to freak her out, or she wouldn't sleep.

He called Cindy again, first thing, in the morning. "You gotta get out here now," he said. "There's spiders everywhere."

He was upstairs eating corn flakes when their guys showed up. He heard a truck door slam below, and then voices. He looked out the window and there they were, two guys, one fat, one skinny. Was it always like that, the way they got paired up?

They stood on either side of a large crew cab pickup. On top, it had a setup with lights around painted letters. Incident Response.

Kev told Syl he was going downstairs to help them assess the incident.

"You the guy with the spider?" the fat one said. "This is Willy — " he pointed to the skinny guy " — and I'm Chudd."

Kev told them what happened.

"Why did you call us? This sounds like animal control."

"Spiders ain't animals," Kev said. "That's like dogs and cats. My girl, she had a black widow in the shower. It's your building. Thought you could investigate. Before it becomes ubiquitous."

Chudd sucked on a toothpick. He adjusted his overalls, then pivoted slowly sideways and shoved a key into the lock on the door to the pump room. When he opened the door, a small wave of water gushed out. He looked back at Kev and Willy, big smile on his fat face.

"It's why we wear boots," he said, proud of himself.

He went inside, flashed a light up into the dark, poked around. Came back out and told Kev the pipe that drained his shower pan had broken loose and was spilling water everywhere. And letting spiders go wherever they wanted upstairs.

Kev went upstairs to finish his corn flakes, then came back down to watch. He heard the two inside, banging around.

"Damn!" Chudd yelled. "This is a fucking shitload of spiders. Never seen nothing like this before."

He waddled out the door, Willy in his wake.

"We gotta eradicate this illegal population," he said.

He dug into the cab of his truck, came out with a hazmat suit and a hood. Willy helped him into it. Then he pulled out a can of gasoline and stuck a funnel in the nozzle of a bug sprayer and poured in enough gas to fill it.

"Gasoline?" Kev said. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"Are you a trained spider incident responder?" Chudd asked.

"Watch it, lard ass. I got a relationship with gasoline."

Chudd looked at him like he was beneath stomping, at least not when he had an eradication to attend.

Two years back, Kev had been helping himself to a free tank of gas out in the dark near the shop at Buckles Orchards. Forty bucks

for a tank of gas? He could think of better ways to spend that. He was focused, trying not to spill, so he didn't hear the cruiser slow to a stop. He dropped the nozzle when the sheriff's deputy lit him up. The two wrestled for a bit in a puddle of gas, before the badge got a collar on Kev. Next stop, County Corrections. Never would've happened, if he hadn't been spending all his cash on crank.

Chudd grabbed the sprayer, went into the pump room. Kev watched from behind as he sprayed gas in a mist onto a massive network of webbing. As he stepped out, Willy emerged from behind the truck with a twisted torch of newspaper. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and flicked it and lit the newsprint. Then he carried it into the pump room.

Kev froze. Even he, a non-eradication specialist, knew this didn't look regulation. He knew he should run. But he wanted to watch the really big firecracker go off. No kid ever runs from the M-80.

From where he stood, he could feel the shock wave. It hit him in the chest, a thunderous WHUMP! rocking the building. It blasted Willy out the door. His flying body hit Chudd in the back, and knocked both of them flat.

Kev walked toward the door, drawn by the train wreck of it all. Inside, smoke swirled. He noticed that the top of the hot water heater had been blown off. Out of the opening, a gazillion black widow spiders poured in a tsunami of panic. They scurried here, there, up the walls, up the piping that led through the ceiling above, toward the shower pan. The blast had cracked the joists and shattered the tongue-and-groove flooring. Splinters drifted slowly down, some ridden like surfboards by spiders.

Kev watched the flow of spiders, and had the worst feeling of his life. Syl was upstairs, alone, probably wondering what had happened downstairs to send a horde of spiders erupting into their apartment.

He ran around the end of the building and charged up the stairs. The door swung loosely. He stepped inside, through a gauze of smoke. He looked to his right, where the walls of the bathroom had been blown flat on the living room floor.

The fiberglass shell of the shower was lodged in the ceiling, where the force of the eradication technique had launched it.

Small, dark, agitated objects fell from the sky. Hung from the rafters on silk strands. Gurgled forth from the hole in the floor where the shower had been, flowing like sewage across the floor. Kev glanced to the left, looking for Syl.

Oh, God!

Her face, fear magnified beyond belief, pleading and flashing his way with every turn of the cocoon into which she had been wrapped. A million spiders, spinning her like the core of a human bobbin, silk encasing her body as the millions wrapped and wrapped and rolled and rolled her toward Kev, paralyzed at the sight of it all.

From head to toe, spiders clung and crawled in a writhing embrace of Syl's captive body. Ubiquitous to the enth degree, Kev thought.

He could not know this, but each of the spiders was plunging its tiny fangs through the silk, into Syl's skin, collectively injecting enzymes that would turn her into a sack of soup. For their dinner.

Kev didn't know spiders. He didn't know that Syl had little left to fear, nothing left for the two of them, everything gone or going into the bellies of her swarm.

She lay there, spun silk, a puddle of angel food batter.

Screaming a muffled plea, fading, fading to the last of her elongated breath.

For the spiders.

Sanctuary

By: Lynn Finger

I

She builds a sanctuary for twig dolls
in the herb room, their souls drip
petals onto grey stone floor.

She holds porridge to their dry mouths & brushes
their stick hair. When her lying other,
with black hair and hard eyes, pokes his head in
& says, you can't save something

that's not alive. She turns. Eyes him
from her distance. Who says they're not?

II

Her lying other comes home from his day to find
bits of his own blunt fingernails &
dark hair pulled from the comb,

plus other hair, his lover's red hair, all over the floor.
She says, I'm weaving covers for the dolls,
they can't sleep. Their eyes are open

all the time. Their eyes seek him, from their own
distance. They look like they want to kill me, he says.
How can they, she whispers, if they're not alive?

III

They are both asleep. The dolls with their decayed paper
skirts drag into the room. Smell of bitter ash fill

the air, & they bite his throat skin, gently, with their

sharp twig mouths. Their infection grows in him, and when she wakes, she sees him next to her, a stiff twig doll with black twig hair & a desperate mouth in an "O.:
Won't his lover grieve.

His life among people erased, like a wave pulled back into itself from the wet sand, gone. She stacks him along the wall with the other twig dolls, then rolls over and returns to sleep.

If She Wishes To Know

By: Kristin Garth

Fog encircles glass houses — also
ephebic brains. Between mist and bay, eyelids
remain less than half open but follow
vibrissae, suspended in air. Form hid
inside vapor, an invisible hare,
impossible to quantify height
although wide irises stare, high as a bear's
upon hind legs contemplating a fight,
unblinking eyes, fur silver white as
twilight sky, hyacinth haze, shadow
of ear, shade of malaise makes its path
towards glass of a girl's bedroom
who must decipher this riddle on tiptoe
into a darkness if she wishes to know.

Nostalgia

By: Adam Chabot

The New England woods is ancestral darkness. Trees clutch onto secrets but these trees have deeper rooted memories of long, mundane nights, brief flashes of life, slow growths of time. I came to these woods to have my thoughts swallowed. My feet crunch over brown leaves; everything is loud and quiet, an Aristotelian contradiction of reality in which something is and isn't, an edict no sane person could refute. Something is different here.

Today, there's no horror to cover-up, no body to bury, no secret to unleash. The weight of past transgressions lingers like a web unseen but felt only beneath the open canopy of leafless trunks fingering a gray, homogenous sky. I came to remember them. There's a reason why many believe the Devil lurks here, but the woods are wild, unruly, and unkempt only because we made them so.

There's dried blood on that branch, a metal spade tangled in an overgrown shadbush, a shallow grave near the creek. I am in control here for those are my terrors. Even though foxes shriek like old women it is I who create the fear.

A Wing, a Tree, a Spider's Web

By: J.R. Allen

Six canvases—each 26' x 12'—black sheets draped over them. Thin slivers that might create a single unified image when seen together.

But that's not how this exhibit was to work.

Most of us went for the free wine and charcuterie.

We arrived at seven; the exhibit would start in an hour. We each grabbed what would be the first of several glasses of wine and stood in front of the paintings. The rules were such that we were allowed to touch them, so long as we didn't pull back the curtains draped over them. A bulky man with a pistol on his hip stood next to each painting, and some of us wondered if they, too, were part of the exhibit.

We pressed our hands against the curtain, feeling for thick brushstrokes. We felt what we thought might've been bumps or streaks of paint, but unless we saw the pieces themselves, all we could gather was abstract splotches and globs of paint. Like a Pollock or a Pousette-Dart.

Two glasses of wine in: we tried peeking behind the curtains when we thought the men weren't looking. Small glimpses, just a taste. Something tart and dry to slosh around our tongues.

But, of course, the men were always looking.

We speculated about the paintings over our third glass of wine: "It's always a nude," we said, the confidence and the wine both turning our cheeks rosy. Some of us twirled the stems of our glasses and postulated that, perhaps, it was a political statement, but we quickly reminded ourselves that everything is a political statement. "The size of these paintings? They've got to be landscapes," we said, gesturing at their mass with a jerk of our thumbs. "You know that Duchamp piece? L.H.O.O.Q.? I bet it's like that," some of us

joked, and the rest imagined Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* where each of the figures had tiny handlebar mustaches. We all giggled and leaned on one another, a little dizzy.

"Of course," we said, our glasses empty, "these could all just be blank canvases." There was a brief moment where we paused and thought about that possibility. Of course, it could be nothing—who wouldn't expect that? We washed the thought down with red.

We felt hot and the room spun in slow, delightful anticipation. No curator came to speak, no announcement came over the PA.

Each of us made last guesses to ourselves as to what the works would be—Klee-esque sketches in the style of the Lascaux cave paintings, multimedia works upcycling garbage to make a statement on climate change, steampunk nightmares that were half-human, half-clockwork. We cautioned guesses as though we might will the work into being.

Gasps as the curtain dropped and all went dark. Some of us thought we saw a corner of the piece in the last flash of light.

"Beautiful," "wow," we shouted, but none of us could agree as to what we saw. A wing? A tree? A spider's web?

Some of us took a step forward in the dark and stumbled into another person and apologized.

Then all went silent. A voice came over the sound system and started to describe the piece, but none of us were listening. We couldn't even make out a word.

We were taken by how dark the exhibit was. Pure, infinite black. We stretched out our arms and couldn't tell where the skin stopped and the darkness began. We all drowned in an ocean of darkness.

Then, the painting was covered again and the lights turned on.

Biographies:

On the backside of a long journalism career, Stu Watson now devotes his energies exclusively to poetry, essay and short fiction. His work reflects a love of human diversity, and a twisted view of reality.

Watson loves writing that pushes narrative technique, everything from Raymond Carver to the Barthelmes (Donald and Frederick), Flannery O'Connor to Joy Williams, Charles Bukowski to William Kotzwinkle, Barry Hannah to Eudora Welty. He doesn't try to emulate them, but admits that, like all the voices in the world, they certainly must infect his writing.

Watson's own work daily decorated miles of newsprint, and has appeared most recently in The Maine Review, Two Hawks Quarterly, Revolution John and Wanderlust Journal.



Lynn Finger's (she/her) poetry has appeared in Ekphrastic Review, 8Poems, Perhappened, Twin Pies, Book of Matches, Drunk Monkeys and is forthcoming in Resurrection Mag. Lynn is an editor at Harpy Hybrid Review and works with a group that mentors writers in prison. Follow Lynn on Twitter @sweetfirefly2



Kristin Garth is a Pushcart, Rhysling nominated stalker. She is a Best of the Net 2020 finalist. Her sonnets have stalked journals like Glass, Yes, Five:2:One, Luna Luna and more. She is the author of 20 books of poetry including Candy Cigarette Womanchild Noir (Hedgehog Poetry Press), Flutter Southern Gothic Fever Dream (TwistiT Press), and Girlarium (Fahmidan Journal). She is the

founder of Pink Plastic House a tiny journal and co-founder of Performance Anxiety, an online poetry reading series. Follow her on Twitter: (@lolaandjolie) and her website kristingarh.com



Adam Chabot is the English Department Chair at Kents Hill School, a private, independent high school in central Maine where he teaches English and Creative Writing. His work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in Agapanthus Collective, Words & Whispers, 433 Magazine, and elsewhere. He can be found on Twitter @adam_chabot.



J.R. Allen (he/him/his) is an MFA student at Miami University in Ohio. His favorite horror movies are The Babadook and The VVitch, and he thinks everyone should watch Over the Garden Wall. He is a fiction editor at Great Lakes Review, and his work can be found in Daily Drunk Magazine, Chaotic Merge Magazine, No Contact Magazine, and elsewhere. You can follow him on Twitter @JRAllenwrites and on Instagram @jrallenwrites.

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