

Title of Magazine: **Failbetter.com**

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Editor: Thom Didato & Andrew Day

What They Publish: New fiction in the form of short stories, novellas, and self-contained novel excerpts; as well as poetry, visual art, and selected author interviews.

Submission Guidelines: The site features work that is fresh, personal, previously unpublished, and that carries a strong sense of individual voice. They accept only one story per submission, which should be pasted into the body of an email and sent to [submissions@failbetter.com](mailto:submissions@failbetter.com), with “Submission” as the subject line. Simultaneous submissions are welcome.

Description of Publication: The site has a fairly utilitarian feel, nothing too bright or flash. A single piece of originally-published visual art appears in a central block on the main page, but other than that, eye-catching graphics are hard to come by. Links to poems, stories, and interviews are aligned in columns on the side, with free access to past issues. Prose contributors generally carry with them some accolades already — most have been previously published, or otherwise have awards to their name. The magazine is free, and likewise, the authors are unpaid. Although they do run an annual novella contest with a prize of \$500 and that is free to enter. *Failbetter* publishes four issues per year, two to four fiction authors per issue.

Prose Per Issue/Annum: About four to five stories per issue, sixteen to twenty stories per year.

Prose Review:

“A Woman in Shades,” excerpted from C.E. Poverman’s new novel *Love by Drowning*, is a plainspoken, realist story that tells of Val, a man whose life has become systemically pressured by a series of piling uncertainties. From his dying father to his detached son, Michael, Val’s life slowly seems to be slipping out of his hands, awash with questions and curious waiting-games. The story opens with Val heading to a Walgreen’s for toothpaste and popsicles, where in a brightly lit isle he spots — or at least, thinks he spots — a mysterious woman by the name of Lee Anne. He chases her out of the store, but she disappears into a car before he can verify her identity. This event spirals Val into a cycle of worry: why would she be here? what does she want? was it really her to begin with? Throughout the next few pages, it’s revealed that Val and Lee Anne have some kind of intimate history, which she keeps alive by sending him anonymous postcards. For some reason, Val keeps these postcards hidden from his wife, Kazz. The story ends with Val preparing to fly east to visit his sick father, when Kazz uncovers the postcards. She poses the question, “Are you with Michael and me anymore?” Val assures her that he is, but for some reason, decides to take the postcards with him on his journey.

Told in a prosaic style with the occasional poetic upsurge, “A Woman in Shades” does an excellent job of capturing what it feels like to slowly lose control of the life around you. Told in a limited third-person using fragmented staccato sentences, Poverman evokes Val’s desire to grasp things and hold them down, bring some kind of consistency to his life. When he describes the mysterious lady’s car as “White. Late model. Indistinct. Maybe a Chevy or Ford. The glass tinted dark black,” the broken snapshots show Val’s need for clarity, which greatly contrasts with the uncertainties of his life. Or another example: when he looks at the mysterious picture of the deceased “Davis,” whose identity we know only in relation to Val’s sense of self-blame, Val sees “Davis. His hair

blown back in the wind. The smile. Triumph and contempt.” These sentences are hammered like nails into a plank of wood, one after the other, as if trying to hold something in place. Through this heightened focus, Poverman causes everything to slow down, causing mysteries to become even stranger. Details are always given without explanation, and as a result, Val’s movement throughout the story is always tense and foggy, trying desperately to see his way through, but never quite sure where he’s stepping.

“The District of B\*\*\*,” excerpted from Fred McGavran’s novel *Dead Soldiers by Nikolai Gogol*, is a lush, poetic story of historical fiction, rife with magical elements. Told in third-person omniscient (though composed by a first-person narrator), this excerpt portrays the overarching life of the insular Russian district of B\*\*\*, tucked safely away in the mountains, as the lives of counts, countesses, ladies, military aristocrats, and townspeople become affected by the Tsar’s declaration to “pen the raging demon Bonaparte.” A grand-sweeping portraiture of everything from phantom carriages to mystical rivers, this is more a story about place than characters.

This is the sort of story in which “the people” is equivalent to a single protagonist. Throughout the story, McGavran uses far-reaching statements such as “some people glimpsed sunlight reflected on an underground stream; others saw devils chasing the damned over steaming rocks; still others reported strange writing on the walls of a subterranean palace” to illustrate life in the district of B\*\*\*. His camera is a floating eyeball, able to dip and turn and twist through whatever mind or crevice it wants in this tucked-away town. The godlike distance lends a sense of authority, adding to the folktale quality, and conducive to its more magical elements. Time moves quickly over long stretches, hopping from character to character, through a montage of scattered scenes. By the end, this story is less of an individual narrative, more of a compiled mosaic.

Rating: 6. This site seems to publish well-established authors, which lends it a kind of prestige, while also remaining open to new voices and fresh concepts. In terms of style, they seem to publish relatively across the board, some of it realist, others experimental. The design isn’t all that sharp, pretty bland in fact. But it’s practical and easy to navigate, and features authors’ bios with links to their Websites. Very much a writer-friendly design.