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SWEATER WEATHER MAGAZINE

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Evening Ritual
Kenneth Pobo

Before he turns in, Jerry puts his face on. Jeff is bored. After twenty-three years, he knows every angle of Jerry's face. He blows Jerry a kiss which lands on a watchband. Jerry needs no make-up, blush, eye liner, or lipstick. It's the whole face. He takes out the eyes, worn, with bags beneath, and replaces them with fresh ones, brown not blue. And the mouth, goodbye to that pinched look. Marilyn Monroe could live in this mouth. The receding hairline, in the trash. He musses a full head of hair.

The next day Jerry does this to his soul. He can rearrange whoever he is, remake it with sparkles and onions. A highway with exits to fast-food joints becomes a forest where ferns elect owls to lead a summer choir. Moss gambles with pebbles. A dark forest, fabulous, where a birch tree mambos with only the most sumptuous creek.

The new self fills in quickly. Jerry keeps it to himself, even from Jeff. He sleeps with the window open to hear crickets. Fireflies invite him to a den in mid-air. Their lights are tiny New York City's hovering over purple buddleia blooms. Jerry, at last, is fully himself. A new kind of coming out—to the wind, the shed door's clackety-clap, a skunk brushing up against the bottom of the green garbage can before heading under a shy rhododendron.

About the Author

Kenneth Pobo won the 2014 Blue Light Press Book Award for *Bend of Quiet*. They published it in 2015. His work has appeared in: *The Queer South* (anthology), *Indiana Review*, *Mudfish*, *The Fiddlehead*, and elsewhere.

Miranda
Kayleigh Sabo

I first met Miranda when she was in my Psychology class. She was the tall, pretty girl who always answered every question. She had a voice like honey and skin like soft velvet. She's the only person from college I'm still friends with, and I have wanted to kiss her since I was eighteen.

I finally tell her when we're in her kitchen, making wontons from a Pinterest recipe. She laughs, her head tilted back, her eyes squeezed shut. "You mean that, Sara?" she asks. She looks at me, her eyes bright, her cheeks pink. "You like me?" She brushes her wavy hair behind her ear with one hand. She has little gold rings on each of her fingers.

I fell in love with Miranda freshman year, on a Tuesday. It was snowing and she was warm. She was always warm. "I mean it."

Miranda grins. She puts her hands on my shoulders, and they become my only anchor to reality. She leans close, so close her freckled nose bumps into mine. "I'll kiss you." She laughs. "I'll kiss you a million times."

"Really?" My voice cracks and I'm overwhelmed with embarrassment. During my final senior exams, I thought more about her lips than anything else. I wonder how she'd feel, knowing that now. I wonder if it would make her smile.

"Really." Miranda is radiating pure joy. "Let me prove it," she says, and she closes the distance between us.

About the Author

Kayleigh is a graduate of Kutztown University who works in the publishing business. She lives in Arizona with three dogs. Her work can be followed on Tumblr at shotdunyun.tumblr.com.

Theater Exercise: Invisible Ladder
Caroline Cao

"There're pretty girls and boys up there. So climb!" barked the director of the Vagina Monologues. We balanced on tippy toes like rookie ballerinas, embracing toward the stage lights.

"There's a ladder ring. Climb!"

I touch an invisible ladder ring.

"Reach for a pretty boy."

Boys are easier to like. The ratio of my preferences is 10 boys to 1 girl. Yet, boys are a majority of dim bulbs. Quentin is not a dim bulb. He's still got half of his watts.

"Reach for a pretty girl."

The girls shine brighter, flaring the most kilowatts. Vanessa, let me reach toward you.

I pretend to feel cold metal on my palm.

"You're climbing a ladder to those pretty girls and boys. Because they consented and you want them!"

Beneath the lights, I think of Vanessa's rejection.

"Sorry, Carol, just so you know, I'm 100% heterosexual."

I think of other blurred faces. The One must be up there.

I grab a phantom ladder rung.

Then I see Natasha's face in a light.

Vanessa is not the first. Natasha was the first. Not first love. Not first crush. First crush with a vagina.

Natasha, neither into vaginas nor penises. Asexual. "She can't be." Mom said.

"But she is! Asexual. They exist you know!" I had told her.

If I'll only amount to The Friend or A Friend, I'll look to other lights.

I cling to a rung. I'm closer to new lights.

I am elevated.

About the Author

Caroline Cao is enjoying Earth life so far in Houston, TX, so much that she calls herself a Houstonian Earthling. She enjoys plenty of this planet's activities, including but not limited to, writing sci-fic, crafting screenplays, going on Netflix binges, or experimenting with ramen noodles.



Organic
by Iris N. Schwartz

He is filthy
rich with love.
It caramelizes
on his tongue, envelopes
vowels and consonants,
secreting sugar in air.

He finds his way
around your doubts,
your shoulders,
your thighs,

his lips recurrent
lightning, thunder.
They sear and roar
on all ground
on which they alight.

He is
shitake, crimini,
porcini—delicate,
dirt-like, raw.

You are peat
from which he sprouts,
lush. (His scent
is everywhere.)

You are warm, sweet, moist,
fen, bog, moor. With him
you are
elemental: nascent
vegetal, animal earth.

Progress
by Iris N. Schwartz

In my grandma's iridescent fruit bowl
(from America, not the old country)
three irradiated kiwi sit,
 day after day, never ripening:
 hard, bristly, nestled
 in the speckled arms of bananas.
I bought the bananas
from the Russians down the hill.
I purchased the kiwis at Key Food.
 In Minsk, it wasn't Frankenfruit
 that did you in, it was pogroms.

About the Author

Iris N. Schwartz is a fiction writer, as well as a Pushcart-Prize-nominated poet. Most recently her work has appeared in *Grabbing the Apple: An Anthology of Poems by New York Women Writers*; and in such journals as *The Gambler*, *Gravel*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *MUSH/MUM Journal*.



That Was The Cutest Damn Furry Little Hippo!

By Fishspit

There I was . . . in that goddamned van. It didn't go nowhere. It started . . . sure . . . but it didn't go nowhere. It sat there in a parking lot, and I lived in it. I was out of drugs, liquor, money, and hope. Nobody would have anything to do with me. I sure had done it up good . . . my drunken escapades. At first they were funny . . . people enjoyed me. I got invited over to pretty girls' houses . . . they'd find out that I lived in a van and they'd say, "Oh, poor Fishspit!" And they'd get all kittenish . . . I'd get a supper and often a bed to sleep in. Sometimes even a bed with a girl in it! Oh boy! One time I even got a bed to sleep in with two girls in it! You don't get that every day!

But slowly, but surely, I became a pariah. People learned that I was a thug in a body that smiled, and that showed a sweet exterior. But when you got to get scratch to drink booze every day . . . and maybe a few rocks to fill the glass tube . . . well . . . you sure don't act like you ought to. Stealing everything that wasn't glued down was easy at first. People don't miss a thing or two. But when half the house starts to disappear . . . well . . . people sure take a notice of that. Slowly but surely, I became the biggest outcast around. Judas had nothing on me! Guy Fawkes? More images were lit up of me than Guy could ever hope to achieve! Outcast for sure.

Sitting in that van . . . well . . . it just wasn't worth it anymore. It was time to kiss the old boy with the scythe . . . go chase the kicks in heaven. So I went on down to the laundry mat at the Putty Put Apartments and cut a length of hose off the one they left outside, to water the petunias Miss Polly Possibility (the landlord) was so fond on. I was in a rather glum mood, of course, so I squished a petunia or two . . . my last gift to this evil world before I got into Charon's boat. I knew Charon was gonna whack me with that oar pretty hard. He didn't like me either. I was doomed.

I took my stretch of hose back to the van. Since the van still started, and the engine still ran, this wasn't gonna be such a bad way to get the hell off this place. I had a mattress in the back of the van. The seats were gone . . . and that mattress was pretty comfortable . . . except for the smell . . . from the piss stains . . . when I got high on bottles of Tussin I couldn't move . . . so I'd go ahead and just empty myself in my trousers. But it really wasn't such a bad place to die in . . . laying there with the hose in the window . . . from the exhaust pipe on into the crack . . . the window down an inch . . . lay on down . . . close the eyes . . . and wait for the eternal snooze.

I talk a bit casually about all this. But in reality I was terrified. I was lonely and miserable. I wanted to live . . . I truly did . . . but I had nothing left.

I wish I'd had a cat . . . that'd have kept me going . . . but I had nothing but my misery and pain . . . and that most awful of all things: shame. Jesus I had shame. When I sobered up I felt such shame I was like Elijah . . . trying to find a place to hide from God! A place to curl up and never be seen again. I was terrified . . . what if there were a hell. I sure was a candidate! The old boy downstairs would certainly accept my application.

But it was over. I was a useless human being and it was time. As I walked back to my van I cried like a baby. "Why me God?" I opened the door of the van and sat on the mattress, and cried and cried. But it was time. I turned back around and scrounged among the piles of moldy crap in the van for some paper and a pencil. I wanted to write a little goodbye . . . a little something to tell all the people what a perfidious bitch life had been . . . and what a clambake of assholes everyone was . . . no denying it . . . the pack of pollywogging, pernicious, pansy-pop-a-pollies! I finally got pencil and paper. When I turned back around I saw movement. I looked up and there was something down there at the end of the parking lot. "It must be a cat," I figured. But no . . . it had a different gait . . . it had a funny gait . . . like it wasn't real comfortable with the action . . . like it would rather be plopped on the ground in a snooze. But it kept trucking on toward me on them little stump legs. Damn his body was close to the ground. It looked like he was huffing.

The damned thing was coming right toward me. I was a little concerned. Sure I was gonna off myself. But . . . well . . . I wasn't much for wild animals . . . and the way this little fellow was huffing toward me . . . I figured he must be hungry. I was a lot bigger than the damned thing . . . but that didn't mean much . . . a Rottweiler can off you in a blink of an eye.

It sure was coming my way . . . closer and closer. It was pretty small . . . about the size of a cat. I couldn't figure out what the thing was! But here it came! No stopping this little peckerwood! It was determined!

Closer and closer . . . and pretty soon I was like "What? I swear that that gobwaller looks just like a hippo!" Good golly Miss Molly! It was a hippo! I swear to your reader! I don't know how to make you believe! I have had many folks laugh at me when I tell my little tale. But reader! Sure I have told enough lies to take the black off of hell . . . but this time I am not telling a phat one. I'll get on my knees for you reader . . . right now . . . yes . . . I'm going down . . . I'm on my knees reader! I do it to show you how serious I am! It was a little hippo! I was there! I saw it! I did! I don't know how I can make you believe! If I lie may my mama turn into a turtle! It was a little hippo! But . . . well . . . don't laugh at me please my peruser . . . please . . . this is so important to me . . . when that chubby little fellow got close enough, I realized it was a fuzzy little hippo! He had hair! Short hair! Just a fuzz of hair. He, or she, was huffing up . . . chubby and fuzzy . . . making his little way straight to me . . . and I mean it . . . it was huffing hard. It was obvious this creature did better snoozing . . . but . . . well . . . it was a hippo! A fuzzy hippo! Please stop it! Don't do that to me reader! I am spilling my guts out to you! Not for you to toss me around as a fool . . . a lying fool. No! This is a tale of a saving! That little, furry hippo huffed right up to me! I was flumdidddled! I mean when a furry hippo comes up to you, it just sort of leaves you a little boggledebipped! The damn thing stopped in front of me. Good god! It was the cutest thing I had ever seen! What a sweet little hippo face! That little hippo mouth so serious! The little ears . . . with a few hairs that stuck out like outcasts . . . like me. Oh good lord it was the most precious thing I had ever seen. Cute! You want cute? You can show me a million darling babies! You can show me a white baby bunny! You can show me a kitten that mews like an angel! None! None! No . . . they just don't measure up!

I can't catch the cuteness reader! No! I'm sorry! There are no words! And reader . . . I must remind you . . . this is no piece of fiction! No . . . remember! Remember! I was dying! I was at the end! My god! How can I make you believe?! I see you! I can see the eyes roll! I know I've lied! I am a sinner! But this sinner is on his knees begging you to believe!

It was a hippo! A furry little hippo!

And the eyes! That was the final gift! Because I know it was a gift from god! God had come to save me! Through this little hippo! Those eyes! The sadness in them! I knew those eyes! I knew that sadness! That was the sadness Jesus had in his eyes as he approached the cross! The sadness of absolute compassion for a people that were hunting him down! Sadness for a world that chose inhumanity!

Those eyes were sad . . . but they were so full of love . . . I knew I was loved! I was loved! By something! By this little hippo? Yes! But it was more than that! I knew I was loved by the universe! I felt it! This hippo had brought me redemption! Oh I cried! I cried like a baby! (I hope the hippo wasn't female. I don't like to cry in front of a female).

I thanked the hippo with all my being . . . then I cried and cried. The hippo turned and made its trek homeward. Oh it was the cutest goddamned thing you ever saw! His little legs carrying that fat, fuzzy body off. He crossed the parking lot and went into the woods.

I was saved! I tossed the hose! I didn't know how I was going to make it with nothing, but I knew I could make it! That wonderful cute being!

I was saved!

About the Author

Fishspit isn't much of a writer. He spends his days listening to records and playing with his cat Pip; hoping that his muse will drop by. His muse is an Italian gal living in Portland. Without his muse, he couldn't write diddly.

WATER MARKED by Katarina Boudreaux

The radio personality's voice is annoying. Mark turns it down and looks again at the address on the house.

2727 Fauborg. Mark checks the address on the email, then turns the ignition of the car off.

The house is appealing, and he decides that yellow could be a good color to live in. The shutters are blue, and barely hanging on to their antique hinges. They remind him of the sky in Kansas.

Mark looks in the rear view mirror. He's never been to Kansas, but he imagines the sky is brilliant.

He is seven minutes early for the showing, and he considers driving around the block a few more times. No point in looking eager, or desperate. After consideration, he decides instead to get out and walk the block instead.

Mark takes a deep breath. He is feeling particularly strong. Today was the first time he had really tasted the coffee that he drank.

He starts to waver on walking the block. It's always dangerous to walk new areas in the city since the crime wave has begun rising again. Not that crime had ever really ebbed; it had just flowed until it had recently begun flooding.

He opens the car door, and puts both feet on the cement. "Time to start living again. And for a walk," Mark says out loud to convince himself. He stands in one swift motion, then shuts the car door and locks it with the remote.

It's a nice day, and he doesn't feel tense like he has the past few months. The breakup with Belle had been hard. Tragic, even. And though he plays it cool when his friends tease him about being left by a princess, he knows that in a way, they are right.

He takes several deep breaths and tries to really stand up straight. "Progress has been made," Mark says softly and sweeps his arm through the air. Absence is no longer making his heart grow fonder.

"Action," Mark says and decides to cover the block in a clockwise fashion. He puts his hands in his pockets and sets a casual but firm pace.

No one is out, as it is hot. The sun is directly overhead and Mark squints and wonders where he left his sunglasses and hat. Since he is fair, he always feels like the sun rises with the sole intent to burn his flesh.

"Positive," Mark reminds himself out loud. "Thinking positive." He notices that many of the houses have pretty gardens in the front. One is particularly well kept, with Angel Trumpets carelessly strewn across an awning.

Which he knows the name of because of Belle.

"Stop it," he whispers and continues walking. He notices a naked child standing behind the screen door of the blue house on the corner.

"Not a bad idea in this kind of heat," Mark comments and turns the corner. "Could be anywhere. But I'm not."

A man with a Panama hat and a fake suntan is walking his small, yipping dog. Mark nods to him in passing. Two ostrich feathers stick out randomly from the man's hat. Mark is surprised when the man stops and tips it towards him.

“Casing the block, stranger?” Panama hat man asks. “You don’t seem the criminal type. But could be.”

Mark blinks several times in confusion, then shakes his head. “No, no. Looking at a house. 2727. To purchase, I mean.”

“That house had termites. They’ll probably come on back,” the Panama hat man says. “If not, it’ll flood. Always does.”

“Termites?” Mark asks.

“They eat the world,” Panama hat man says. “One bite at a time.”

Mark starts to ask a question, but Panama hat man begins humming “Deep River” and shuffles around him. Mark watches Panama hat man walk down the street.

“Termites,” Mark muses. He isn’t sure what to think, as in the South, every house has termites at some point, but after treatment, there isn’t a problem.

But water...now that is a different problem. Mark sniffs and decides to look at the flood zone map after he completes his preliminary canvassing of the neighborhood.

The next block is unimpressive, and an abandoned warehouse marks the edge of the following corner. The graffiti decorating it is bright and boldly drawn. Mark slows down a moment to read some of the verbiage.

“Death to the Oppressor. This means you,” Mark reads slowly. He decides that he can support that statement, and he pictures Belle with her tilted nose and tangled hair after they had crawled under the house to find J.J.

“This is going to be a good day. A house buying day. Stop that,” Mark says firmly to himself. He presses the image of Belle out of his mind again, and turns the final corner. It was time to move on and find a new home and a new life. Like his father had told him after she’d left, it was a good thing he hadn’t married her and then realized she was a runner.

“Fabulous thing,” Mark says bitterly and heads back up Faubourg. As he nears his car, he notices that a black Jeep with a tire rack and a splash of red paint is parked in front of his economical Jetta.

Mark freezes with one foot in the air as if taking the next step would tie his fate into the depths of damnation.

“Mark,” a voice says from his right. The voice drifts over him and wraps him up in a cloud of past and present. He recognizes it as Belle’s voice, the Belle whom is no longer in his life, and yet the voice is here, present, now.

Mark takes the step and looks up. A female figure, slight and ethereal, is standing in front of the house he is viewing at noon. “Belle,” he says calmly and walks the remaining yards to the front of the home.

She is as beautiful as he remembered, and though it has only been 3 months, 22 days, and several hours, minutes, and seconds since he had last seen her, her hair seems lighter and possibly shinier. The dress she is wearing is flowered and flowy. It is exactly the kind of dress that she always chose to wear in the summertime.

“You look well,” Belle says and runs the fingers of her right hand through her hair. “Better than I expected.”

Mark cringes. "Thank you. I feel well," he manages to choke out. He is not feeling well at the moment; he feels as if his heart has been ripped out of his chest again to lie beating on the grass in front of 2727 Fauborg. But he refuses to tell Belle the truth. He gestures at the house. "Are you looking at this property?"

"Yes, I am," Belle says.

Mark notices that her eyes are maybe not as bright as he remembers, and she doesn't have on lip gloss. "This house?" he asks again.

Belle shifts her weight, and Mark looks away when she smiles the half smile that had precipitated their first date.

"I'm standing in front of it, so yes," Belle says flatly.

"So am I," Mark responds. He notices something odd about her mouth, and he thinks that a wrinkle has begun to furrow near the corner.

"Hello! I do love clients who are punctual."

Mark and Belle both turn and look at the realtor lumbering up the steps. She is overweight by more pounds than Mark would like to speculate counting, and her hair is coiled on top of her head like a bed of snakes. He does not know exactly what color her voluminous dress is, but the color magenta comes to mind.

"Hello," Mark says. Belle's voice echoes his.

"Well, it's a beautiful day to see a beautiful home, isn't it?" the realtor says. "I'm Kathy. You must be Belle."

Belle shakes the realtor's hand. Kathy looks at Mark expectantly, so Mark extends his hand and says "Mark. I called and spoke to your assistant Blane. He scheduled this viewing for me."

Kathy takes his hand and shakes it firmly. "Oh, Blane. Such a good little seller," Kathy says and pats Mark's shoulder. "Not the best communicator."

"I can come back at another..."

"No, no indeed," Kathy says and cuts Mark off. "You are here, and I am ready to sell this house. It deserves to be sold."

Kathy turns to the home and strikes a dramatic pose. "As you notice, the front of the house is situated far enough from the street so that you can sit out at night and watch the sunset."

Kathy indicates the sun, then directs Mark's attention to the chairs on the porch. "Wouldn't that be cozy? Romantic, even?"

"Yes," Mark says hollowly. Belle is looking at his shoes, and he knows that he should have worn the brown ones instead of the black ones. A trickle of sweat begins under his left arm, and Mark clears his throat uncomfortably.

"Also, the door is protected by bars with an intact screen. One can never be too careful in this day and age," Kathy says and looks pointedly at Belle. "Security is next to Godliness for a young lady."

"That's true," Belle responds and touches the side of the home. "One has to feel safe in order to grow."

Mark feels the accusation in Belle's words, but he trains his eyes on Kathy. Belle had started talking about buying a house and having a family, and he just hadn't been ready. His job was in oil, and it was never secure, and he didn't want to have the extra burden of providing for more than himself.

"Beautiful containers for gardening," Kathy says and opens the front door. "One could grow a complete array of spices. Things do grow here. Shall we go in? Please notice the woodwork and the fresh paint job."

Belle follows Kathy into the home but Mark lingers at the door. He considers just walking to his car and leaving, but decides not to. He doesn't want Belle to win, although he doesn't know what battle it is that he is fighting.

Or who he is really fighting against.

Mark walks through the door and catches Kathy's comment about the windows.

"...child locks for future additions to the family," Kathy concludes. "All that romance can only lead to one thing. Or two."

Belle is bent over and looking at the locks, and Mark has to force himself to look away. The dress she is wearing clings just the way every dress she ever wore clung, and he feels a stab of loss pulse through his body.

"The layout is exceptional, as you don't normally find a lavish sunroom in the front of these old shotguns," Kathy says. "These closets were added for storage, all hand crafted from original cyprus."

"Some things are worth crafting," Belle comments and walks past Kathy and Mark into the hallway.

"Isn't that just so," Kathy says. "I couldn't say it better myself. Please notice..."

Kathy's voice trails off, and Mark examines the child locks. He has never really known what to do with children, as he is an only child. They seem so fragile.

"Please join us," Kathy says. "You don't want to be a lagger."

Mark straightens up and shrugs his shoulders. "Incredible craftsmanship," he mutters and walks in front of Kathy down the hallway. "Just admiring."

"The previous owners added this hallway so two small rooms could be created," Kathy says confidently. "One side was for his projects, and the other for hers. Isn't that wonderful?"

A wave of nausea hits Mark, and he nods his head in the affirmative and looks at the floorboards leading to the two separate, empty spaces.

"That is a lovely idea," Belle says softly. "That way, both people have their own area to work in."

"Exactly," Kathy says and claps her hands. "I can tell this floor plan is speaking to you! Wait until you see the kitchen!"

Mark is one hundred and ten percent sure he does not want to see the kitchen, but he trails behind Kathy obediently. He and Belle had spent many hours in the kitchen, as she liked inventing new recipes. He liked watching her cook. He loved eating her creations more.

But Belle had always moved with a sense of magic about her, and Mark misses that the most. Everything she did was like art in motion, and when she cooked, Mark could almost see her as a series of paintings.

"It's so perfect," Belle exclaims and Mark looks at her. She is standing next to the double kitchen sink and looking out the windows.

"Can't you just see yourself enjoying food in this space?" Kathy says and winks at Mark.

Mark can tell that Kathy believes that Belle is sold on the property and she is just keeping Mark in the game in case financing falls through. However, Mark knows Belle well enough, or at least he did know her well enough, to know that Belle would say positive things even if the place was a dump.

"The countertops are all marble. The colors were hand picked by the last owner," Kathy comments. She encourages Mark to touch one by showing him how smooth it is underneath her fingers. "Just feel that!"

Mark lets his fingers trail across the rich, gold marble, and he can almost feel it animate and become like Belle's flesh. He remembers the first time that she really laughed in front of him, and how it made him feel as if a present had just been given to him that no one else would ever have.

"Notice that there is plenty of cabinet space," Belle says and then smiles at Kathy. "Some one liked to cook."

Mark notices that Belle never looks at him. She is clearly over him.

Mark steels himself and decides that he has a right to view this house just as much as she does. "Is the stove gas?" he asks in a confident voice.

"Yes, I'm so glad you asked," Kathy replies. "Questions always have answers in this realtor's book. The appliances are brand new, updated just last year. Top of the line. Just open that refrigerator."

Mark walks to the refrigerator and opens it. It is spacious and well organized and there is a filtered water dispenser nestled inside the door.

"Isn't that just first class?" Kathy asks and smiles widely at Mark.

"Economical," Mark comments and shuts the refrigerator door. "No need for a water filter."

Belle laughs her fake laugh that sounds like metal balls rolling on the ground. "Really sleek lines, very first class."

Mark feels his cheeks flush, and he wishes that his complexion wasn't fair for the millionth time in his life.

"Let me show you the bedroom," Kathy says. "It's a revelation."

There have been many moments of revelation in Mark's life, and he is pretty sure that this will not be another one of them.

Belle claps her hands. "What's the color scheme?"

“Wait until you see it,” Kathy says and squeezes down the hall.

Belle follows her eagerly, but Mark lingers in the kitchen so he can watch Belle walk away...again. He notices that there is a large bruise on her right calf. It is half moon shaped, and he tries to imagine what she could have run into or been hit with to cause the shape when he realizes that it is a tattoo.

“A tattoo,” Mark says out loud and pushes himself away from the refrigerator. For a moment, it feels as if he is pushing himself away from everything real he has ever known. Belle had hated his single tattoo. She had begged him to have it removed, and now...

Mark hears Kathy’s voice begin to rumble followed by Belle’s tinkling laugh. Mark takes a deep breath and shuffles across the tiled floor.

“...and the brilliance of the floor plan allows you to watch the sun rise...and set!” Kathy finishes saying and then looks at Mark. “Oh, I didn’t realize you weren’t right behind us.”

Kathy’s lying, but Mark does not contradict her. He nods and looks at the windows and then the floor. The room is empty, but he imagines Belle in it, curled up in a four poster bed with sheets over her head. He remembers two years of lazy Sundays that were shoeless and paper filled.

“And there’s plenty of space for a crib,” Belle says and walks the room pensively as if she is planning out the furniture already.

“Plenty,” Kathy says. “Absolutely.”

Mark watches Kathy fold her fingers on top of her massive belly. She almost gleams as Belle peers out of the windows.

“Any questions?” Kathy asks and looks at Mark.

Mark notices that Kathy looks away before he can reply. She has written him out of the picture and is certain that Belle will make an offer on the house. It seems Belle has written him out of the picture as well, months ago.

He looks down, as is his habit when he feels uncomfortable. He notices the tell tale signs of water repair along the floorboard, and he can see that the floor is not level. “What’s the flood zone?” Mark asks carefully as he watches Belle cross the floor one more time.

“Who cares, Mark?” Belle asks. “It’s about the feel of the house.”

Mark doesn’t reply, but he notices that ultra talkative Kathy doesn’t answer his question.

“Let’s take a peek at the bathroom,” Kathy says and directs Belle’s attention to the door on the East side of the room. “Jack and Jill sinks!”

Belle goes with Kathy, and Mark walks to the window facing the West. His geography isn’t stellar, but he is pretty sure now that the house is solidly in a flood zone. The listing hadn’t mentioned it, or Mark wouldn’t have bothered to take his lunch looking at a house doomed to flood.

Mark wanders toward the bathroom, and he overhears Kathy explaining how the claw foot tub is over one hundred years old. Mark watches Belle’s calf flex. His attention is riveted on the tattoo dancing across it.

"You got a tattoo," Mark blurts out. "You hate tattoos." He doesn't mean for his voice to sound accusatory, but he knows that it does.

"Yes, I did," Belle responds but does not look up from examining the closet space in the bathroom. "People change. Grow. Or at least some people do."

Kathy looks at Mark, then at Belle. "Do you two know each other? I mean, I thought you were looking at the house separately....wait, you aren't John are you?"

Mark feels the base of his spine begin to tingle. "I am not."

Kathy smiles. "Well for a moment there, I thought I'd bungled it all up. Okay, on to the second bedroom."

Belle bounces across his field of vision and follows Kathy. He notices that her hair is a little shorter on the sides, and he wonders if John has tattoos.

Mark reads his wrist tattoo. "Breathe." He follows after the two women in a contemplative haze.

"...several closets for toys or clothes, or if it is a guest bedroom, plenty of space for suitcases and other storage," Kathy finishes and then smiles.

Mark smiles back at her. He doesn't care if Belle has a tattoo, he decides, as his name is not John and she had left him, Mark, for dead.

"It's perfect," Belle says and looks at Mark.

His face purposefully blank, Mark turns from Belle and remembers waking up to find that his fever was through the roof and his throat was on fire. Mark had taken so much anti-cough medicine that he was sure he had damaged his liver.

Belle had left sometime in the middle of that night. He had found a note the next morning. Dehydration had set in sometime that afternoon, and he had been hospitalized. But he had called as soon as he could talk.

He had called once a day for 72 days, and she had never answered.

"I think I'd like to make an offer," Belle says. "I mean, we would like to make an offer."

Belle says the second part of the sentence calmly, and Mark turns back around. He smiles at her and then at Kathy. "It seems you have a buyer."

"You don't want it to do you?" Belle asks. "I mean it's just you, and we need bigger space, and this is reasonable."

Mark smiles again. He counts back to the day that Belle left, and then counts forward. So many thoughts cloud his mind, then clarity snaps into place. "I think you should have it."

Turning, Mark walks out of the house, and out into the heat of the sunlight. The number 72 is fresh in his mind. It is not a very large number in comparison to many things. He swings the door of his car open and gets into it.

As he pulls the door closed behind him, he tries to name 72 animals in rapid succession. He can't, and eventually, he divides the number by 7 and knows that ten weeks plus had passed without her answering.

“Let her have her house,” Mark says resolutely. “Let her swim in it.” And for the first time in 3 months, 22 days, and several hours, minutes, and seconds, he feels how cold the air is coming from his car’s vents.

About the Author

Katarina Boudreaux is a writer, musician, composer, tango dancer, and teacher -- a shaper of word, sound, and mind. She returned to New Orleans after circuitous journeying. Her chapbook “Anatomy Lessons” is available from Flutter Press. Her play “Awake at 4:30” is a finalist in the 2016 Tennessee Williams Festival.

www.katarinaboudreaux.com



Invasion
by Bekah Steimel

The restricted airspace
of monogamy
penetrated
by a foreign kiss
touching down
on homeland lips
the alteration
of even a failed occupation
uproots
the planted flag
and replaces it
with the emotional anarchy
that governs
the overthrown heart
of even the proudest patriot

Rib Cage
by Bekah Steimel

This city shrinks when you're in it
Coincidentally,
so do my ribs
I become very aware of my caged heart
that otherwise
beats simply and without complication
my pulse is no longer yours to regulate
to quicken
to slow in the afterglow
with cigarettes and silence
No, my anatomy is no longer your chemistry set
to melt or explode
the cadence of my composition
is written by another
Even so,
You've got this absentee poet
picking up her pen
and you've got my simple heart
pacing
in its rib cage

To Better Suit You and Comply
by Bekah Steimel

legs are mowed
stray hairs weeded
seedless, dead things planted
and tended
for your enjoyment
Mother Nature accepts
such rules, too
when she can't run
and spill away
to better suit you and comply
except this time
it's called landscaping

About the Author

Bekah Steimel is a poet aspiring to be a better poet. Her recent publications include Crab Fat Magazine, The Yellow Chair Review and East Jasmine Review. She lives in St. Louis and can be found online at bekahsteimel.com and followed on Twitter and Instagram @BekahSteimel.

LOST GLOVE

by Rob Hill

Griff often hung around the slimeways of the Combat Zone, selling narcotic chewing gum to minors and undercover cops. The cops rarely bothered to arrest him anymore. They just dished him out a ticket and moved along. Sometimes if it was a slow night they robbed him of his wares, which always crushed his spirits. This time was no different. They stole his stash of gum and stuffed him in a nearby trash can. It took him fifteen minutes to wriggle free. He went home reeking of dead salad.

He shared a lopsided apartment with a girl named Martyr above a transvestite motorcycle bar in the Bay Village. They used to be fairly intimate until the decay set in. Now they didn't do much together except for the occasional night out for bowling.

Thursday she showed him the lumps in her neck. He thought they felt like eggs forming under the skin. She was unhappy about this and poked at her bowl of Rice Krispies until they grew soggy. Griff lay on the futon with his head hanging upside down off the edge and imagined what it would be like if gravity reversed and he was able to walk on the ceiling. They listened to the radiator gorging on metal birds.

"It's cold," Griff mentioned without much commitment.

Martyr ran her hand over the eggs in her neck. "I'm sorry I sold your jacket."

"It's okay. I'll find another one."

"I was hungry."

"I know."

There was a rheumatic candle on the coffeetable. Griff trained his thoughts on it, trying to move it telekinetically. Nothing happened. He couldn't figure out which muscle to flex.

"I'm going out," he said.

"You can borrow my jacket if you'd like."

"Thanks."

He went down to the bridge and stared at the pondwater, wondering what it would be like to abandon a capsizing ship on a cold Baltic night. The straggly accordion boy wasn't at his post on the far side of the bridge, like some wheezing minstrel troll. Leaning over the stone rail he spotted something small and dark near the water's edge. He left the bridge and scuffled down to the object. It was a single glove. The left hand, begrimed with dirt. He felt sorry for it. He took it down the street to a laundromat and fed it gently to a washing machine. There was a girl watching her laundry going round and round in a noisy dryer. She looked like she was gleaning her future from it. She wore a funny round hat with a bow on it. She had a lavender aura. He watched her for a little bit, then went over.

"You look like Daisy Buchanan," he said.

She looked up at him with a rosy smile. "I don't know who that is."

He regarded her with wonder. "Are you sure you belong in this decade?"

They talked of sparrows and matchboxes. When his washer died, he transferred his left hand glove to the dryer next to hers. He loved the smell of laundry. It was his third favorite smell in the whole world.

They sat watching her underwear go round. All the dryer barrels rotated clockwise. When the buzzer announced her clothes were dry, she scooped them into a crayon red dufflebag and told him she had to go practice her cello. He asked if he might come along and listen. She thought about it for a moment—finger to lips and eyes heavenward—then decided it would be alright. He took the glove from the dryer, interrupting its cycle. Though it was still a little moist, he slid it over his left hand. He helped carry her laundry to a tiny practice room above a discount jukebox retailer. The room was strewn with sheet music and peacock feathers. She lit a red

candle and placed it in the center of the floor, then began rosining her bow. Griff slouched on a beanbag in the corner and listened to her run through a repertoire of Schubert.

Cello was his favorite symphonic instrument. The musky wooden sound conjured images of a dancing golem. It had a very sensible tonality—as though it was not prone to vanity or foolhardiness. He felt he could depend on the cello. He listened until his eyelids grew heavy and he nodded off.

She tapped him on the shoulder gently to wake him. "I finished my practice," she told him. He rubbed his eyes and reoriented himself.

"I need to be getting home," he said. "Martyr will wonder what happened to me."

"You shouldn't go back there," she told him sadly. "Something bad will happen."

"I know, but it's where I belong."

He started the long walk home. It was much colder than before. He shivered, hands buried deep in pockets. The glove felt good on his left hand. He was glad he had found it. He turned up the narrow road that led home. Inside Martyr lay inert on the floor. The eggs in her neck had hatched and the newborns were nowhere to be seen.

About the Author

Rob Hill was born in Flint, Michigan, of all places, and currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared recently in *Armchair/Shotgun*, Akashic Books, Eunoia Review, Bitterzoet, and *Scrutiny*. He occasionally posts rags and bones at hellospider.wordpress.com.



Untitled
by R. Bremner

Her unwritten glamor floods unknowingly off the page,
a visit to the root itches, that lissome Moghul clings,
some psychotic shredded burden splatters into a life of its own
but who will protect the sprightly flicker, who can huddle
into the null, and not dare censor the uncensorable
that soars over such lucrative spellbinding jargon?
(for Lyn Lifshin)

Untitled
by R. Bremner

Out of the past comes more blazing truth
(like a gumwrapped knife in my gut)
than I can handle so I must kill it before it
multiplies, before it burns my present
and seizes my future, so I reach out and
catch its tail and send it hurtling to where I
don't know, past, present or future.
I only know it smells good, like cherries and
freshly washed clothes, not unpleasant or
boring, like rain leaking through the roof or
garlic-ginger paste, it smells good enough that
I think I may be safe from it, but I don't
know for sure.

About the Author

R. Bremner, of Glen Ridge via Lyndhurst, NJ, USA, is a former cab driver, truck unloader, security guard, computer programmer, and vice-president at Citibank. He writes of dead kings and many things he can't define, incense, peppermints, and the color of time. He was in the very first issue of Passaic Review, along with Allen Ginsberg, International Poetry Review, and many others. Look for his very inexpensive eBooks *You You are once again the stranger*, *Poems for the Narrow*, and *Stories of Love and Hate*,

Vacant
By Kendra McConnell

The exterior structure of the house stood in the middle of two and a half acres of rural farmland. It was the color of grass in the fall in the June dusk; hunter green mixed with muddy brown. Up close, the paint was cracking and peeling with years of neglect. The steps that lead up to the vibrant, apple-red door crumbled at the edges. I stood in the evening light, just marveling at this structure, this house. I had never been here before, but there was an overwhelming sensation of déjà vu that pulled me closer to the house, to the door.

I walked in through the red door, my fingers curled around the rusted metal handle; the dark wood floors creaked under my feet. There was no other light available in the house but that of the rising crescent moon streaming through the window. I pulled out the little flashlight I carried with me. Shinning the light in front of me, the house was empty of furniture, abandoned by the look of it. Vacant.

I made out a wood staircase by the right wall and a narrow hallway with peeling, pale butter-yellow walls. There was a musty smell to the air wafting around, forcing my nose to wrinkle in response. A thick layer of dirt stirred from the floors when I moved around the house. The more I explored, the more I felt that somehow I was home. That was a silly thought because I haven't had a place to call home in a very long time.

The stairs creaked and whined at me going up the staircase to the second floor. It didn't want me to disrupt the peacefulness it had had for quite some time. The house was hollow, like a pumpkin scooped clean of its harbored seeds and left to rot in the middle of nowhere. The only artifact I found was a portrait that remained hanging slightly off center on the wall in the small room, in the back of the upstairs. It was in sepia, of a solemn-looking woman wearing a gown that buttoned up to her neck and the lace trim just brushed her chin. She did not look too old, but old enough to be married for her time.

Car lights flashed and the sound of wheels crunched the gravel path took me out of the strange trance the painting held me in. I was not supposed to be here; no one was supposed to be here. I was trespassing and I needed to get out as quick as possible. I flew down the steps, taking them two at a time, the groaning of the wood boards made me feel guilty for even setting foot in the house. But something just drew me to it.

I had just closed the back door behind me when I heard the floor creak as the other intruder stepped inside. I pressed myself against the side of the house, little flecks of the greenish-brown paint rubbed off onto my clothes.

I knew that I needed to come back and look more at this house because there was something in there that called to me. I would have to wait until the intruder left to search the house again. To my left, a patch of un-kept cornstalks swayed in the gentle night breeze. I would wait there until I knew it was vacant and go back inside the house.

About the Author

Kendra McConnell is a writer from Minneapolis, MN. She likes to experiment with fiction and show the reader a story about life.



Dance Class
by Kristine Slentz

her body bends beautifully
gracious movement
pupils full of curious life
breasts breath-taking
pure lust – wanting her every stretch







Bully
By Carla Stockton

Amelia Harkins was the first person in Saranac Lake to talk to me.

In January, 1957, I had just arrived in the “little city in the Adirondacks,” in upstate New York, and I was the epitome of the “new girl,” starting school in the middle of the academic year. Between my “fancy Massachusetts accent” and my oversized presence, I was not someone the other kids wanted any part of. Newcomers were rare in that world behind the granite mountain walls, and Miss Premo, our teacher, didn’t help.

My mother hadn’t walked me into class that first day. She needed to accompany my brother to Kindergarten, and our little sister was cranky, so she just nodded toward the classroom at the top of the stairs and left me to enter my classroom ten minutes after the starting bell had rung. Ms. Premo was visibly irritated.

“Yes?” She peered down at me from atop a ladder, where she was perched, adjusting the window shade. The boys in the class were getting a kick out of staring up at her grandmother-style boxer shorts, but she didn’t seem to notice, as she stared venom down at me. “What is your business here?” She barked.

“I’m, uh, new, um, starting here today,” I stammered. “I, I, . . .”

“Where are you from, girl?”

“Longmeadow. That’s in –”

“Doesn’t matter where or what it’s in, now does it? It isn’t here. Did you bring your school records?”

“Yes, ma’am. Right here, ma’am.”

The class was breathless with anticipation as she struggled down the ladder and came to stand in front of me. I was a good foot taller than she, and the bun in her white hair was askew, telegraphing wiry wisps around her face. I noticed her shoes, mostly because I was afraid to look up; they were the brown oxford style that nuns wore in the movies, and they looked to be two different sizes. I continued to look downward and thrust the papers I was carrying out in front of me, as I muttered, “My teacher in Longmeadow Miss Smith said to tell you –”

“Never mind. I don’t need another teacher to tell me anything. I can read.”

She looked up at me, assessing my presence. I was wearing a pink dress my mother had made for me; it had a lace front and decorative buttons along the top, and it was the prettiest thing I owned. “Do you always dress like that?” Miss Premo asked. I didn’t understand the question and certainly didn’t know how to answer.

“Never mind. Can you sing?” Out of the blue, Miss Premo sat at the piano at the front of the classroom.

Despite the nonsequitur nature of this query, I was prepared to reply.

“Oh, yes, ma’am. I sang solo in the Trinity Choir, and in my school, I was –”

She plunked a tune on the ivories. “Sing that back to me.”

I did. “You can’t carry a tune, miss. I don’t know what you got away with in Longmeadow, but you won’t be singing in my classroom. Sit there.” She pointed to the very back of the room. “You’ll be out of the way.”

I slunk to the designated desk, grateful to be out of the limelight, hoping the teacher would just get on with her classroom routine and forget about me.

“I don’t have any books for you just yet, miss,” the teacher said. “You’ll have to just follow along as best as you can for now. After lunch, we’ll settle your materials. By then I’ll have time to look over your records, so I can assess where you’re best suited to be in our reading, spelling and math groups.”

I knew I shouldn’t say anything. But I had never been good at holding my tongue. “In Longmeadow, I went to accelerated reading, I was in the 6th grade speller and –”

“No high and mighty people in my classroom miss. You’ll be where I put you. “ And then, as I sighed a genuine thank you to the lord I still believed in, she turned her attention to the class and left me alone, bookless, paperless, pencil-less in my corner for the rest of the morning.

Since I had no work to do, I was free to watch what I felt like watching, to daydream or to just let my mind wander at will. At first I was entranced by the snow falling outside our window. I had never seen as much snow as was already on the ground, and I didn’t know the world could be as cold as the morning had felt inside my mother’s car, but even so, the snow kept falling, swirling, falling, and the gray air remained misty, as the barren trees swayed in the wind. After a while, though, even the snow was boring, so I turned my attention to the classroom.

The other kids looked pretty much like the kids in my old classroom. I was used to making the adjustment to being new – I was just 9, in 4th grade, and this was my fifth school. My father suffered a strange kind of wanderlust, and he had moved us eleven times since I was born. I knew the kids would think I was weird, and I also knew that I’d find a friend or two eventually. I didn’t need any more than that.

The classroom was standard too. Letters across the tops of the green blackboards that circumscribed the room, musical notes and clef signs on music paper hung on the walls around the piano, which was at the front left corner of the room. The teacher’s desk was in the center of the front of the room, large, propped on a pedestal, where a teacher could be poised to impose order even when she was sitting. And the pupil desks, with their built-in cubbies, stood in tidy rows, rigid and uniformly uncomfortable. Each row of desks had an empty one at the very back except the row that I was in; I was the only person sitting at the end of my row.

What was not like any classroom I had ever seen before was that there was, in the front right of the classroom, a special section with another desk, sequestered entirely from the rest of us. In that desk sat a little girl. Actually, I wasn’t sure at first she was a little girl. Because she was unlike any child I had ever seen before.

She sat silently, possibly reading along with the lesson or doing something altogether different; no one seemed to care, least of all the teacher. But she had her back to the rest of us, her desk turned toward the corner. In *Der Strüwwelpeter*, a storybook my grandmother often read to us, there was a picture of the Strüwwelpeter, a wildly unkempt boy with abysmal manners, facing the wall, wearing a dunce cap on his head; he had been placed there because he was deemed stupid for having neglected his studies. This person in our classroom wore no dunce cap, but she was clearly being punished. And when she suddenly, unexpectedly raised her hand, I could see what her crime was.

Her hand had no fingers. At first, when it went into the air, I thought she was making a fist, but then I realized that where there should have been fingers, there were fused, indistinct extensions of hand with only one rather sloppy separation at the center of it, almost as though her hand were a cloven foot.

“What do you want, Amelia?” Miss Premo could hardly ignore her all day though she had ignored the girl’s raised hand for a very long time.

“I have to go to the john.”

“Ask me correctly, Amelia.”

“May I please be excused to go to the john?”

“To the what, Amelia?”

“The john, Miss –“

“I have told you time and again, Amelia. It is the girls’ room.”

“May I please go to the girls’ room?”

“You may. In half an hour. It will be lunch time then, and you will just have to hold it till then.”

“But, Miss –“

“I have spoken.”

The teacher went on with her lesson. Amelia squirmed in her seat, but she stayed put. Before

long, I noticed a stream of water flowing from under her seat, and it formed a puddle near the front of Miss Premo's desk.

"Ooooh. It stinks in here," said a girl whose name I have long forgotten. "Amelia peed."

Miss Premo descended from her throne and grabbed the pointer with the chalk holder that she used to indicate the letters over the blackboard, and she hit Amelia across the back with it. "Get up, Amelia. Get up and take yourself to the principal's office."

Amelia stood, and I saw clearly why she was the subject of such abuse. She was head-to-foot an aberration: extremely small, misshapen and bent with bowed legs and a large hump protruding from her backbone. Both her hands were like the one that was raised, and her right arm was jagged, permanently bent, like a tree limb that had been blown sideways in a storm, its fracture frozen. Square-shaped and flat, her head tilted so that her hollow eyes looked at you sideways, across her concave nose. When she spoke, Amelia mumbled because her lips were curled under, the way my grandmother's did when I startled her before she'd put her teeth in for the day.

Amelia didn't argue or complain. She walked to the door, her shoes making the squish of a wet sponge, and she left. The principal brought her back to the classroom after lunch and left her for Miss Premo to examine her, make sure she was satisfied that Amelia had cleaned up enough to return to her corner at the front of the room.

That night, I tried to tell my mother about my day, but all I could manage was that I hated my new school. Knowing how reluctant I'd been to leave Longmeadow, how bereft I was at the loss of my close friend Barbara, how very much I had adored my teacher in my last school, she expected me to grouse and made light of it. What I really wanted to tell her was how abused Amelia was, how angry it made me that we all just sat there and let the wicked crone treat a child the way she did, but I couldn't.

I knew in my heart that I was guilty too. I had been relieved when Premo's attention turned to Amelia. In other times and other circumstances, I had already established a reputation for myself as a fearless child who brooked no injustice. When my brother was maltreated on the playground his first day of school last fall, I challenged the Miss Smith, the Principal, citing her arbitrary, unmotivated mistreatment of a Kindergartner. She relented and, in fact, turned out to be the best teacher I ever had. Another time, when my neighbor Kenny was crying because his brother was lost in Korea, I defended his honor against a gaggle of bullies and actually punched the leader's nose so hard it bled for an hour. But for Amelia, none of that righteous anger raised its impetuous head; I let Premo treat her whatever way she wanted to, and, worse, I was aware that I would go on doing so. After all, Amelia was hideous. Her role on this earth was to absorb the tension from my adjustment period.

The next day was pretty much just like the first. We had chorus class, and Miss Premo would not let me sing. "I told you, you can't carry a tune," she shouted at me. "You'll ruin the song for all of us." I stood quietly, determined not to cry. During spelling, she gave me the third grade speller. I could no longer hold back. "But I finished the fourth grade speller when I was in third grade, and Miss Smith had me in the s—"

"This is New York State, young lady," she squawked. "And in this classroom, you do things my way."

By lunchtime, I felt ready to disintegrate. In the lunchroom, I sat alone. The other kids shunned me. For which I was grateful. The effort to be social was way beyond my ken at that moment; I was happy to spend my lunchtime buried in a book – I was into reading biographies at that point, which licensed me to have lunch this day with Helen Keller. Suddenly, sensing rather than seeing a presence at my elbow, I looked up from my book and, to my shocked dismay, smack into the flattened visage of Amelia Harkins.

She smelled. Of what I couldn't tell. But it was a terrible smell. Something like the fluid my dad used for his cigarette lighter, but far worse. She stood there for a moment not saying

anything, just balancing her tray on her fingerless hands at the end of her twisted arms. Her dirty coveralls were drooping over her pinched little body, and the pant legs were rolled up so many times they made a thick pad between her legs.

"I gotta sit here," she said. "Nobody 'll let me sit at their table, so I got nowheres else to go."

"You stink," I blurted, aware of how horrible it was that I did and unable to control myself.

"I know." She was so matter of fact I figured she had chosen the odor as a perfume.

"Kerosene."

"What?"

"The oil my dad makes me fill the heaters with in the morning so's the kids can get out of bed. I spill it because my hands —"

"What kids?"

"My brothers and sisters. I'm the oldest. I got —"

"I'm the oldest too. My mother's pregnant, so soon —"

"Really? Jesum crow. So's my mom."

She sat, and I went back to my book. I didn't want the other kids to think I was befriending her. She ate her lunch. I ignored her. The smell abated.

Over the course of the next several weeks, Amelia and I became lunch mates. In class, four of the boys absorbed some of the horror. Ronnie Spivak and his twin Donnie, who looked nothing alike, got in trouble for being late, and she harassed them for a full day, letting both Amelia and me be. Kerry Hirt grabbed an eraser from the blackboard when she wasn't looking and threw it at Dickie Steinberg. She took them out into the hall and hit them with her pointing stick. Molly McDonough, the very model of perfect behavior, dropped her reading book, and Premo was so enraged her eyes exploded, and she shook her fists in a rampage so terrifying that Molly walked out the door and ran away home.

At lunch, I didn't mind sitting with Amelia. I had got used to her smell, to the charcoal dust that clung to her like someone's pet monkey in a silent film. She had more siblings than I had, and I had plenty; she had more chores than I did, and I had too many. Her suffering was clearly greater than mine. One time Amelia invited me to her house, and I declined; how could I accept? She never invited me again. We understood that what we shared at the lunch table was going nowhere else, but I know that we both looked forward to that lunchtime respite from utter aloneness, and we probably would have been disappointed to have anyone additional join us.

One day Amelia didn't come to school. That surprised me because she was always there, even when she was sick, because, she said, being home was worse than being with Miss Premo. A few days later, she was back, her arm in a sling, her face badly bruised. People whispered: "Her father beats her." From then on, over the course of the school year, Amelia was often absent; she would return with burn scars, a cast on her leg, her hair cut at a strange angle. When she stopped coming to school altogether, I wondered if her father had killed her.

I got used to life without Amelia in school. The other kids began to approach me. I had a fight on the railroad tracks with Irene Halstead on our way home from school one afternoon, and after that we were best friends. Molly McDonough, who was even nicer than she was polite, invited me to a birthday party, and even Sherrie Hawkes, the popular kid, walked home with me from Brownies. I didn't miss Amelia.

Then one day I saw her coming toward me on River Street. Actually, she saw me first and began to scream and wave. "Carla, hello, Carla. Over here. It's Amelia." I could not avoid her, and I had no excuse anyway. I crossed the street and said hello.

"Where ya been?" I asked.

"My mom needed me to take care of the kids, and I'm old enough to drop out so —"

"I thought you had to be 14 to do that," I marveled.

"I'm 15," Amelia asserted. "An' I had all the school I need."

I nodded, not knowing what to say. I was too forthright to make up a fast lie to make her feel

good. I could have said, “We miss you, Amelia,” but that would have been ridiculous. I had no interest in pretending to care about her. So we just stood there, shifting from foot to foot, no commonalities to bind us. Finally, I said, “I gotta go. My mother told me I have to –”

“Me too,” Amelia sighed. And she turned and walked back the way she’d come.

I didn’t watch her disappear up the slight hill toward Pine Street. Just shrugged her off and went on my way.

Years later I heard she died in a fire. Or her brother killed her. Or she ran away. Or her father got her pregnant, and she died in childbirth. No one knew what happened to Amelia.

That’s a lie. I knew. We killed her. All of us. But especially me.

About the Author

In May 2016, Carla Stockton earned her M.F.A. in Nonfiction Creative Writing and Literary Translation at Columbia University's School of the Arts. She is the mother of three, grandmother of two, writer, theater director, filmmaker, teacher, and traveler. *Too Much of Nothing*, her first book recounting her experiences as an older woman re-entering the youth-dominated arena of higher education and publishing, is in process, and her translation of *King Gordogan*, by Radovan Ivšič goes out to publishers this fall. Stockton's work can be read in a number of online magazines and journals, including *The Toast* and *The Guardian*, as well as at her blogsite carlastockton.me or in *GET REAL*, the bi-weekly column she writes for the *Columbia Journal* online.



Becoming
by Laura Cain

When he sleeps, he rumbles
Little sounds escaping his lips
Sometimes loud, thunderous sounds
Accompanied by so many movements
His body still at work
Electricity moving through his veins
The two combined
Like thunder and lightning
My thunderstorm, becoming one

Longing
by Laura Cain

I long to be another
Mysterious, the trace of cinnamon upon her lips
Her silhouette filled with the allure of a mountain range
Full of strength and adventure.
In her touch is the ground beneath your feet, leaves drifting through your fingertips
Each breath holds the power of the wind blowing through trees
Moving leaves, moving branches
Her smile is the coolness of the snow
So beautiful, but harmful if your touch lingers too long

I long to be another, one who captures the universe I love

Coffee Shop Thoughts
by Laura Cain

Quiet days in coffee shops
Thoughtful moments
Lipstick marks on a disposable cup
Light music and light talking
These are the days I'm okay
These are the days I watch strangers and imagine the lives they lead
The families they go home to
The clean houses, messy apartments
A cooking dinner, a take out number
Each person living a life unknown to us
Filled with happy times, moments of wonder
These are the days I'm okay

Noticing
By Laura Cain

When you spend enough time in the same coffee shop
You notice people
He, he draws
Sketchbook in hand each time he walks through that door
Always the side door

He, he reads
Book and banana in hand
All black clothing
Sunglasses on

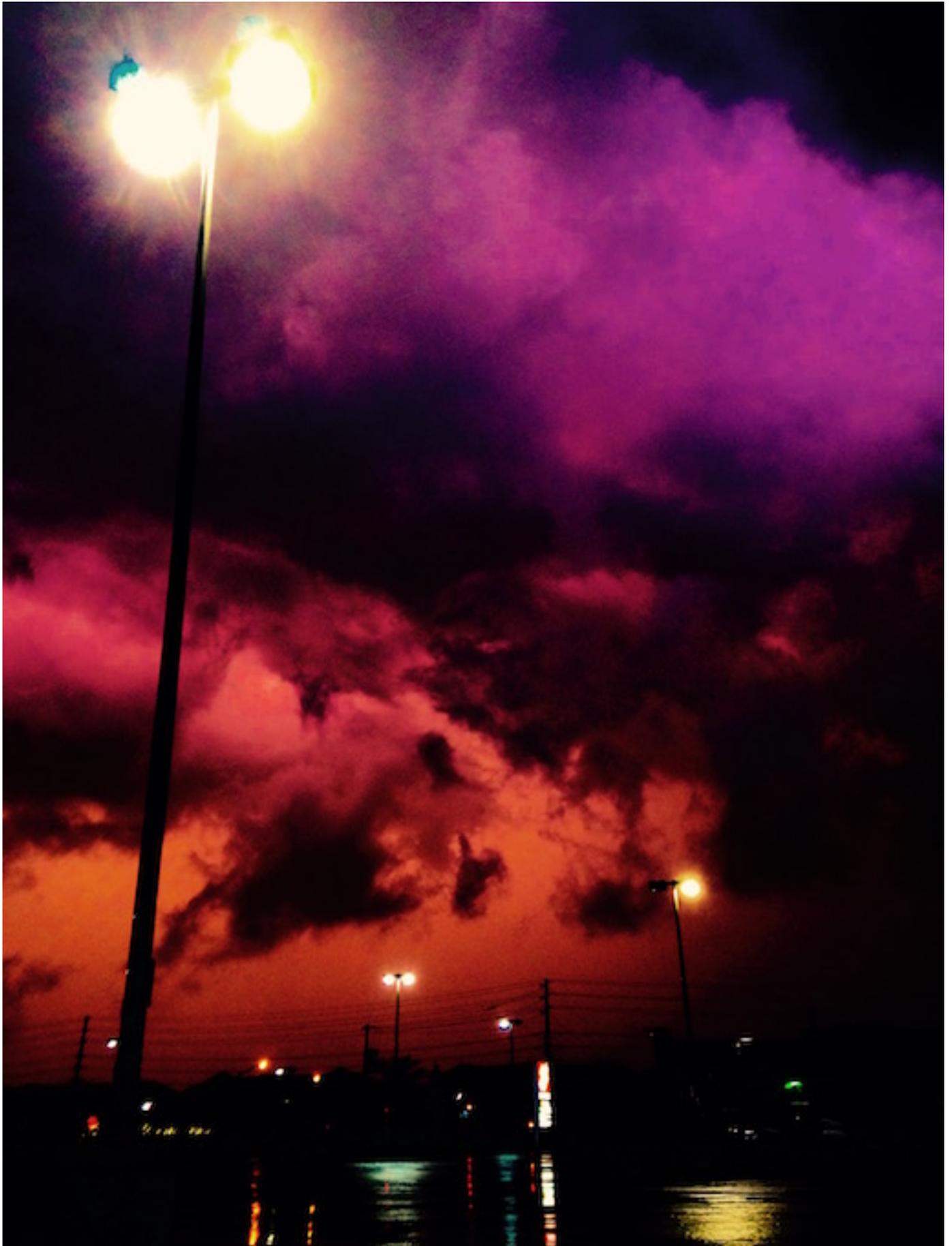
She, she works
Large black coffee
Laptop and notebook
Undivided attention

I, I write
Notebook and pen
Vanilla chai as fuel

I, I watch
From my seat I can see everything
Everyone

About the Author

Laura Caine is a current high school student with a passion for writing and adventure. She has been writing poetry for seven years, but also enjoys writing other forms of fiction. Other pastimes of hers include lacrosse, hiking, and spending time with her boyfriend and cat.



Chromium Dreams by Ross Burton

Raymond had been the cook in Denny's Diner for 10 years now. From his small kitchen he could see the whole restaurant, and he knew all the regulars, their first names and what they ordered. He started preparing Vince's two eggs, sunny side up, two rashers of bacon and side of hash browns a few minutes before his normal time of arrival, so it was ready for him when he sat down at the table by the door. This wasn't as much about customer service, more to keep him straight, and to make sure that the orders didn't stack up when they were busy. Because of the way he worked, and the fact that most of their customers were regulars, his kitchen never got too busy, which suited Ray just fine.

He'd got the job after returning from Afghanistan minus his left foot, partly compensated for by a Government issue prosthetic number; like all Government issue products, however, it wasn't the best and he had a shuffling gait that he'd now got used to. The owner of Denny's, a small, hard-bitten woman called Joanne, had given him the job partly, he thought, out of pity. He had paid back her decision many times over; he was never away from the place, partly because the job came with accommodation, a one room and shower out back, and partly because he had nowhere else to go. As well as the fake foot, he had come back from the war with, as he thought of it, a party in his head. The party didn't give him much peace unless he was working or dulled the noise with Ballantyne's whisky.

He had his dreams though. Chromium plated dreams of owning the diner, running it his way and taking the proceeds rather than the meagre salary Joanne paid him. The dreams came to him when he was slipping into the oblivion that passed for sleep, or in the half-life of waking; he was never sure which. They followed a similar pattern where he was on the other side of the serving hatch, in the diner itself, but it had changed too; the cracked plastic seats had been replaced with red leather, and the tables had a neat gold rim round them. Each table had a little jukebox and the ketchup bottles, salt, pepper and sugar shakers gleamed. The customers were different too: well-dressed, prosperous looking families occupied the tables and filled the place with conversation and laughter. The clothes they wore, and their hairstyles, were straight out of the 50s, which gave him a hint of where his dreams came from: a shared American ideal, looking back to a mythical time when things were better, and Uncle Sam could give any country he chose a licking without breaking sweat. And without getting his foot blown off.

Today, however, he was in the kitchen, frying bacon and eggs, one sunny side up, one over easy, for two overweight state troopers who were sitting at the counter, drinking coffee and flirting with Denise, the waitress who shared his life from 7 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon. Their order slid onto plates and placed in the hatch, he could relax, and he awarded himself a 5 minute break. He asked Denise for a coffee, and took it out the back door, where his coffee break chair sat in the one place that got the sun in the morning. While he drank his coffee and smoked a roll-up he recalled last night's dream. As usual, he had been in charge, but this time he had a vision of himself, as the boss, watching a young man in a singlet vest and apron frying eggs in the kitchen – his kitchen. This was the first time that he recalled dreaming about someone else doing his job, and it made him slightly uneasy. Was he the young man? From what he recalled of the dream he moved easily enough round the kitchen, without limping. Was the young man himself, pre-Afghanistan, or did it mean that he was on his way out?

Denise's call brought him back to earth. Four orders for scrambled eggs, two with bacon, two without. He sighed, pinched the end of his roll-up with nicotine stained fingers, and limped back inside, his chromium plated dreams dissolving in the steam of his kitchen.

About the Author

Ross Burton in his 50s and live in Stirling, Scotland, with his wife, three children and a cat. He writes in a variety of genres that coincides with his interests: crime, humour, science fiction, contemporary/romance. He's tried my hand at poetry but it's not for him.

Hope in Shades of Gray
by Karen Over

The Right Reverend Victor Doulton shuddered at the sight of the black border surrounding the small advertisement in the New York paper.

"Notice to travelers embarking upon the Lusitania. A state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany..."

He should be putting the last of his belongings into his valise, making sure his steamer trunk was secure. Calling the concierge, arranging for transportation to the Cunard pier, to the ship that would take him home to an England at war. Not that his archbishop would be particularly happy to see him. The village parishes in which they tried parking him, quietly out of the way, inevitably required someone with twice Victor's years, and quite less than half his wit. Therefore, Victor was sent sailing round an increasingly violent world on various mission visits. Canterbury would no doubt be as pleased with a report sent by post as one delivered in person. Unable to delay the inevitable, Victor reached for the telephone.

It rang as he placed his hand upon it. Jumping nearly out of his skin, he barely saved the instrument from toppling off the table.

"Reverend Doulton."

"A telegram has arrived for you, Reverend. Shall I have it sent up?"

"Yes, please. Oh, and a pot of tea as well, please."

It was a change of orders. Victor felt it as surely as he felt the hand of doom descending at the sight of that warning against the ship meant to be taking him back across the sea. Taking his time, he poured and drank a cup of strong, sweet tea before opening the telegram.

A hoped for blessing, it was indeed from the archbishop. Victor allowed himself a sharp, barking laugh as he read the message, terse in its thrifty wording. Canterbury had found a way to unload him, after all.

Atlantic too dangerous. San Francisco needs you. Report bishop no later than two weeks.

Canterbury

Victor had been to San Francisco twice before, during trips to the Hawaiian islands and to Hong Kong. Both times his archbishop had been surprised that he'd returned alive. Indeed, his second time through, the city had been in the midst of a great construction boom, rebuilding itself in the aftermath of a terrible earthquake and fire. No doubt, Canterbury thought they were posting him to the end of the earth, to a place no one else wanted to go. To a parish they thought, in their arrogance, would be thrilled by the prospect of getting a priest directly from the Mother Church.

But wasn't that the dream of St. Paul, to spread the gospel to the end of the earth? Victor smiled, all of his morning fears about sailing on the Lusitania now vanished. After finishing his pot of tea, he called down to the concierge to order a more substantial breakfast, and to change his travel arrangements. Two weeks. This wasn't Canada he'd be crossing. The Americans had built a veritable spider's web of railroads. Victor thought he could cross the continent in less than ten days, even while giving himself the luxury of a few nights in hotels along the way.

After breakfast, Victor dressed with care and took a motor taxi to Grand Central terminal. A prolonged conversation with a station agent saw him booked through to St. Louis. A few telegrams later, he had rooms reserved at a good hotel near the station. After treating himself to a dinner at Delmonico's, Victor Doulton put himself and his worldly belongings on a train bound for Chicago and St. Louis.

Crossing Utah, some six days into his journey, Victor began hearing whispers of disaster. Some new German atrocity. Arriving in San Francisco the next day, the headlines of the papers screamed the dire news. The Lusitania had been torpedoed off the Old Head of Kinsale. Heeling over on her side, she had sunk in only fifteen minutes, within sight of the small Irish fishing port.

Though small craft had put out immediately, the loss of life had been terrible, and all the more so because the Huns had given no warning.

Only that black-bordered notice in the New York paper, the one which had so filled Victor with dread.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

What else could he say? What else could he pray? So much death, yet here he was, alive and about to take up a new posting. The Right Reverend Victor Doulton, the Anglican no one wanted. Episcopalian, now that he was in America, apparently to stay.

The bishop of San Francisco poured them each a glass of wine, puffing at a fat cigar while measuring Victor with a steady gaze. Taking the cigar from his mouth, he carefully sculpted the glowing end against a crystal ashtray.

"Have a taste for young boys, do you, Father Doulton?"

"No, Your Grace."

"But you've never married. Preach against the war? Get too openly involved in politics?"

"No, Your Grace."

Again, Victor felt the piercing gaze.

"Meddle with the wrong man's son and heir, perhaps? Like Oscar Wilde?"

"Nothing so... public, Your Grace."

The bishop, much to Victor's amazement, roared with laughter.

"Son, if you're not careful, you'll have my job someday. Welcome to the Episcopal Diocese of San Francisco, may God help us all. A finer gallery of rogues you'll never find. Now don't get me wrong, son. I don't give a tinker's damn what you do behind your own locked door. That's between you and the Almighty. But if it comes out in public, and there's an element in this fair city that delights in trumpeting such things, I'll hand them the rope to hang you."

Reaching into his desk, he handed Victor a gilt-edged business card.

"You didn't get this from me."

Walking down Mason Street on a sunny afternoon, Victor spotted the address on the card he'd been given. Chez Nuit appeared to be nothing more sinister than a fine dining establishment. Indeed, a glance through the lightly curtained front windows showed several families enjoying a late luncheon, as well as smaller tables of businessmen, or ladies having tea after a day's shopping. Nevertheless, Victor did not enter Chez Nuit for the first time until he'd been invited by one of his parishioners, a man of impeccable reputation. By then he had been given three more of the gilt-edged cards, all by men of equally high social positions, all beyond reproach.

Despite his new bishop's impression, Victor had never given in to his deepest longings. That he was now suspect stemmed from an incident early in his career. A well-placed young lady, whose attentions he inadvertently spurned, set out to prove he was not a real man. Through a great deal of bribery, she very nearly succeeded.

Finally, during Advent, a different card bearing the name of Chez Nuit was presented to him. A Christmas gift from an old married couple, it was a reservation for dinner and breakfast in a private room.

"Take a night off, Father Doulton, and relax. You've earned it. The missus and I can personally vouch for the place. One or two little retreats, every now and then over the three years since they opened, and our marriage is better than ever."

Still unable to trust his nerve, Victor had walked the dark, fog-shrouded streets. Alternately brooding and praying, he tried to fathom the choices set before him. The first hints of dawn found him on Mason Street, sipping bitter coffee in a small cafe across from the shuttered

restaurant. A man stepped out of a nondescript door, just below street level, at the far corner of the rooming house next to Chez Nuit. The man was well down the street before Victor realized who it was, and where that small, discreet door must have led. Not to any room in the building above it, for Victor was quite familiar with the man's residence. Smiling to himself, Victor accepted this as a positive sign.

He'd just seen the bishop leaving a brothel. That was proof enough he could trust the place. Taking himself back to his own rectory, Victor slept, in preparation for a grand evening out.

The room glowed silver in the changing light. Dawn came seeping gently through heavy curtains, apologetically bringing this night to an end. Victor didn't want to go. All of his rationalizations, all the waiting, the cultivating of contacts and the taking of enough time to be certain of the place, all proved well worth this moment. This terrible epiphany could never have taken place in some sordid crib occupied by a faceless urchin. Nigel, the well cared for young man lying beside him, for all his youth and beauty, was deliciously experienced in the ways of pleasure, knowing exactly what to do at exactly the right moment.

Hardly surprising that Chez Nuit held such a high reputation amongst Victor's wealthiest, and most discerning, parishioners.

So this was the mystery. The priest rolled over in the silk sheets, catching his breath, staring at the ceiling. Everything he'd been taught in seminary about this unspeakable sin was obviously the product of ignorance and fear, designed to perpetuate future generations of ignorance and fear. Victor had gained much compassion, these last few hours, for those who came to him feeling driven to confess their weaknesses. There were moments when Victor was very glad indeed that the Church was not God.

Something disturbed his reverie. Perhaps it was a catch in his companion's breathing, or a subtle vibration in the tangled bedding. In that stillness just before the break of dawn, when he was most often touched by things spiritual, Victor realized this beautiful young man was silently crying, and that he could put into words what they were both feeling.

"You weep, because the night we've shared was beautiful."

Nigel froze. Almost he turned toward the priest. Instead, he huddled into himself, his answer a mere whisper.

"But it's over. I'll never get it back."

Victor dared a featherlight touch of comfort. As Nigel shifted slightly, bringing their bodies into close contact, Victor spoke softly.

"No. Neither of us will. Nothing lasts forever. Creation was never meant to be static. Every moment must end, must evolve into every moment. Don't weep for what has been, Nigel. Dry your tears, and go joyfully into what will be."

"I'm afraid of the darkness..."

"I know. What you must remember is this. Nothing, no darkness, no person, has power over you unless you grant it."

Victor pushed himself up in the bed, turning Nigel toward him, gathering him into an embrace.

"You have seen the depth of the Abyss, Nigel. I don't know where or why - only that in the end you pulled back from the brink. I sense that the moment of your decision was terrible, and came at great cost. Never before have I seen so awful a thing in one so young. And yet you continue turning back to the Light. Will you hear my confession, beautiful child?"

"But I'm not..."

"A priest? I would never confess this to a priest, because my own ordination would be stripped from me. No, I will confess to you because you are closer to God than any priest I've ever known. That is why I finally let down my guard in this room and allowed the desires I've

fought down all my life to surface. I fought them because the world calls them evil, though I've never believed that. But I've seen how the world has twisted men who are drawn to each other, until they've been corrupted. I've seen us cast ourselves into the Abyss because we believed that was our destiny. Because we believe what the world screams into our minds, instead of what God whispers into our hearts. Now I will confess to you my heresy. I do not accept the world's pronouncement that I am unnatural. I am homosexual, and I am a beloved child of God. And I envy you Nigel, bitterly, that you are able to live as the beautiful child of God that you are. I know you fear the Darkness. I fear it, too. Yet we walk through it every day, and for me that makes the Light all the more precious. Now I'll confess another heresy, perhaps even greater than the first. Nothing I learned in seminary ever brought me as close to God's love as the moment we just shared. And I think I know why. Those dried up old men, in that crumbling, weed choked college have never truly appreciated God's Light. They can't, because they've never dared to step into the Darkness. They've never dared a single peek at it. They've spent their lives living in the shadows. Muddy, dingy gray areas full of white lies and meaningless sex and loveless marriages all committed because the world expects itself to behave in a certain manner, and expects these so-called men of God to tell them that's how God wants them to be. That God will somehow reward them in Heaven for taking His precious gift of life and living it in unfulfilled misery."

Curled against the priest's chest, Nigel looked up, a spark of something ancient flashing for a brief moment in his dark eyes. Again, his voice was barely a whisper, the thoughts he conveyed seeming to sound directly in the priest's own mind.

"My mother used to say my father was descended from the Fair Folk - faeries. At which point my stepfather would wink at us boys and say that Mother ought to know a faerie when she saw one, being a Welsh witch herself. The three of them believed each other's curses and lived accordingly. They sometimes said I was bastard born for this - to be used for a night and abandoned with the dawn. That may be true, but I don't believe this is all I am, because I won't be pretty forever. Someone might break my nose or burn my face tomorrow. I'll wake up and have to deal with it, and somehow God will help me do that. Though if God is really merciful, I won't wake up at all."

"Of course our earthly beauty fades. We are but dust, after all. It is our spirits which make us foul or fair, through the choices we make. The beauty of your spirit, Nigel, will always shine. You don't believe in the immortality of the soul?"

The only answer the priest received was Nigel's shivering body curling even tighter against his own, as if no amount of love or warmth could defeat the chill gripping the young man's soul. Again, Victor felt the presence of that Darkness, the yawning Abyss stretching itself, reaching for Nigel on some level he could only guess at. Holding him close, Victor gently stroked the tangle of black hair until it lay smooth against the sallow forehead, feeling some malevolent force slowly lose the grip it had been trying to gain.

He left the Beautiful One sleeping quietly.

A sandy-haired valet prepared Victor's bath, helped him dress, then served his breakfast.

"Thank you, Jason. Do you work in the restaurant?"

"I look after Nigel, sir. And see to the needs of his guests. Did you have a pleasant night, sir?"

"Exquisite."

A muffled whimpering sounded from the other side of the sliding doors between the boudoir and the small dining room. Both men glanced anxiously toward the sound. Jason bowed slightly toward Victor.

"If you will excuse me, sir."

"Yes of course. Let me know if I can be of help."

Jason paused in the doorway, turning back with a slight frown until he saw the genuine concern in Victor's eyes.

"Thank you, sir."

As the valet slipped through the doors, Victor turned back to his breakfast. He could just hear Jason's voice, a low, soothing murmur. Moments later, all was still. Then the unflappable valet was back at Victor's elbow, clearing empty plates and pouring more of the excellent tea. Yet Victor detected a certain tension in Jason's bearing, a slight hint of despair in his eyes.

"I meant what I said, Jason. I value your professional discretion. Therefore, I am more than willing to offer you mine. He takes a great deal of caring for, this young man. I don't know what it is that haunts him, but I can see that you do. Perhaps it haunts you, as well?"

"Not in the same way." The valet's face had gone gray, his blue eyes dulled almost to the same color. Victor gestured to the chair beside his. After a moment's hesitation, Jason sat.

"You're English, sir, so I know you've made the North Atlantic crossing at least once, and probably more. Nigel and I both served on that run. For the White Star Line. I see you understand, sir. I was on Olympic, that night in 1912, but Nigel, he had transferred over. I liked Olympic just fine, even under a new captain, but others thought Nigel was one of the lucky ones. Then her wireless started tapping out SOS. Then she... went silent. Except for the wailing of all those lost souls. In our heads, you know, we who somehow escaped it. That business back in the spring, with the Lusitania getting torpedoed, all those headlines, vilifying everything and everyone German. We've all made new lives here in America. We have good friends who immigrated years ago and are well established here, yet people expect us to be at each other's throats, right here in San Francisco, because the countries we left behind are at war."

Victor could feel the tension leaving Jason as the story escaped the confines of his soul. At last, he began to understand the mystery of his own escape from a watery grave.

"I think I know just a little bit about how you feel, Jason. If I had not been diverted to San Francisco at the very last minute, I would have sailed on the Lusitania. I am alive, as are you and Nigel, and we are left wondering why. Why us, when so many others, so many innocents, have perished?"

"I can give you an answer, Jason, but you might not understand it, or appreciate it. I'm not yet certain I understand it myself."

"I'll take that risk, sir."

As Victor began speaking, he saw Jason's eyes lift to focus on something behind him. Victor heard his own, exact words being spoken to him and Jason both, Nigel's voice in chorus with his.

"God isn't finished with us yet."

Two years later, the Right Reverend Victor Doulton was about to celebrate the Christmas Eucharist when a sibilant whisper, circulating the cathedral, captured his attention. Peering out from his position in the processional line as they waited to enter the sanctuary, he thought he noticed the cause.

Captain and Mrs. Carstairs had arrived, the young officer resplendent in a Royal Navy dress uniform. They were accompanied by two other men, one of them supported by both an ebony walking stick, and the sandy-haired companion at his side. This would be the wounded cousin, then. The one who had been so ill, recently. The one who had not been able to bear remaining in England, where even the faintest sounds of coastal batteries left him a trembling wreck. Shell shock, the doctors called it. Even as Victor watched, the sudden sharp bang of a nearby car backfiring caused the man to flinch violently. Yet he had risked a North Atlantic crossing - or had he hoped a German U-boat might end his torment?

But as the movement put the young man's face into profile, Victor could hardly believe his eyes. Surely this was Nigel, with whom he'd shared so much at Chez Nuit? For the sandy-haired man at his side, guiding him into a pew, was definitely the valet, Jason. As the processional

hymn began, Victor put the young man out of his mind. He would have his answer soon enough, when the Carstairs family came forward to receive communion.

And it was Nigel, coming forward with the support of Captain Carstairs, while Jason escorted Mrs. Carstairs. Yet as they knelt at the chancel rail, Victor could see a livid red scar down the left side of Nigel's face. It had come, then, the much dreaded disfigurement. But someone cared enough to get him out of Chez Nuit, and Jason was still looking after him. As the family returned to their pew, Victor's memory suddenly made the connection. Mrs. Carstairs was the cousin of Mrs. Flynn, wife of the proprietor of Chez Nuit. And seeing Nigel side by side with Captain Carstairs, there was a decided family resemblance there, as well. Perhaps the two young Englishmen really were cousins, somehow. He recalled something Nigel had said, that night, about being illegitimate. Surviving a shipwreck could also explain his shattered nerves. There was also no doubt, seeing Nigel up close, that he had been terribly ill. In fact, Victor suspected he was not yet fully recovered.

As he spoke the ritual words, and Nigel gave the ritual response, Victor felt Nigel's fingers close, ever so slightly, round his own as he placed the host on Nigel's upturned palm. Recognition confirmed and acknowledged. Victor was moving back along the rail as Nigel rose, aided by his cousin. Their eye contact was brief, but what Victor saw, in spite of the fear and pain, was a subdued joy.

God was not yet finished with Nigel, and Nigel accepted that his life was taking an unexpected turn. Victor was not surprised to see them slip quietly out during the closing hymn, not with Nigel leaning so heavily on Jason's arm. Nor was he surprised when one of the ushers, on his way out for the night, handed him a note.

"From Captain Carstairs, Father. He asked me to tell you he would have made the invitation in person, but Mr. Hamilton was tiring badly. They thought it best to leave ahead of the crowd."

"Yes, thank you. Yes, the young man is obviously not yet recovered. If anyone can recover from such a thing. I fear we're likely to see more such cases, before this dreadful war is over."

"Cases, Father?"

"Shell shock, of course. That backfiring car nearly sent him under a pew, poor fellow. They say the bombardments go on almost constantly. That the living have to share the trenches with the dead, for they have no chance to remove the bodies for burial. I've friends who are now British Army chaplains, you see."

"Ah, yes. Of course. It's just that, well, Father, there are one or two families with sons about to go over, that thought you might have been a bit more, shall I say, patriotic, with your homily."

"I have a higher allegiance, sir, than that to any land or government, be it the kingdom of my birth, or the nation I now call my home. We are all, as I said in my homily, children of God. Good night. Merry Christmas."

Well, that's putting your foot firmly in the shit, Victor old boy. I guess God isn't finished with me yet, either, and he's made me shepherd of a contentious flock of sheep. Nothing for it but to see if Captain Carstairs is going to sink me any deeper.

The note simply stated that Carstairs House would be open on Christmas evening, between the hours of eight and eleven, for any friends who cared to drop by for sherry and plum pudding. The Right Reverend Victor Doulton thought that a lovely idea.

The faint sounds of laughter, of music and conversation, could be heard from the festively lit windows of Carstairs House. It was Jason who opened the front door, just as Victor was about to knock. Rather than being startled, Victor smiled. Somehow, he knew that Nigel, knowing who was coming up the front steps, sent Jason to fetch him.

"Father Doulton, do come in. Things are a bit lively there in the front parlor, but if you'll follow me to the back parlor, I think I can find you a place to sit down. I'm sure you've had a long

day."

"Rather. But well worth the effort. I must say it's been some time since I tasted a traditional English plum pudding."

Jason grinned.

"I've kept one back, just for us. Let me pour you a sherry, and I'll fetch it out."

Ensnared in a comfortable chair, sipping a fine dry sherry, Victor was soon rewarded by the sight of bright blue flames dancing on the surface of one of the most succulent looking puddings he'd ever seen. When the brandy had burned off, Jason divided the pudding onto three plates. Only then did Nigel lean forward out of the shadows, taking a plate and a glass of sherry.

"Thank you for coming, Victor. I had hoped to contact you before turning up at church like that, but my move here to Carstairs House didn't go entirely as planned. I hope I didn't startle you."

"If I appeared so, it was only out of concern for you, Nigel. You are still obviously ill. As you are also, obviously, the cousin of Captain Carstairs. I found the resemblance rather striking."

"Well, as you may recall from our first meeting, my family connection with Captain Carstairs is somewhat irregular. But we've worked it out. I wanted to talk to you tonight simply for our mutual reassurance. I expect the discretion of Chez Nuit to still hold. I honestly don't want to lose you as a friend, Victor, but I can't allow any trepidation on your part to endanger my cousin's reputation."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Nigel. Why would I wish to jeopardize the one safe, sympathetic household I can visit as who I really am?"

Nigel's smile almost managed to hide the scar, but Victor could see that the movement caused him pain. Still, the young man was chuckling softly.

"After that homily you delivered last night, I can certainly understand that. They've no idea what they've sent their boys into, and it won't be until the wounded begin coming home that they'll even get a vague picture. They'll be expecting heroes, and they'll be getting shattered men. Men who will, nevertheless, attempt to be heroic, to live up to the expectations of the families who will, once this war finally ends, be desperate for life to go back to the way it was before."

"But that can never happen. And it will be even harder for the men who come back whole. Like us, they'll be wondering why their friends are dead or maimed, while they've come through. You're right. They'll need something more than the intangible idea of the grace of God."

"Such as the idea that God isn't finished with them yet? Tell me, Victor, what do you think of the methods of Dr. Freud?"

"Applied to cases of shell shock? I think it could be dangerous. This dream interpretation relies on symbolism, and I don't think anyone can interpret another's dreams, unless they've been through the same experiences, and can recognize the symbolism specific to those experiences. I can see where the talking might help, though."

Nigel's head tilted to one side, his face thoughtful, dark eyes focused inward.

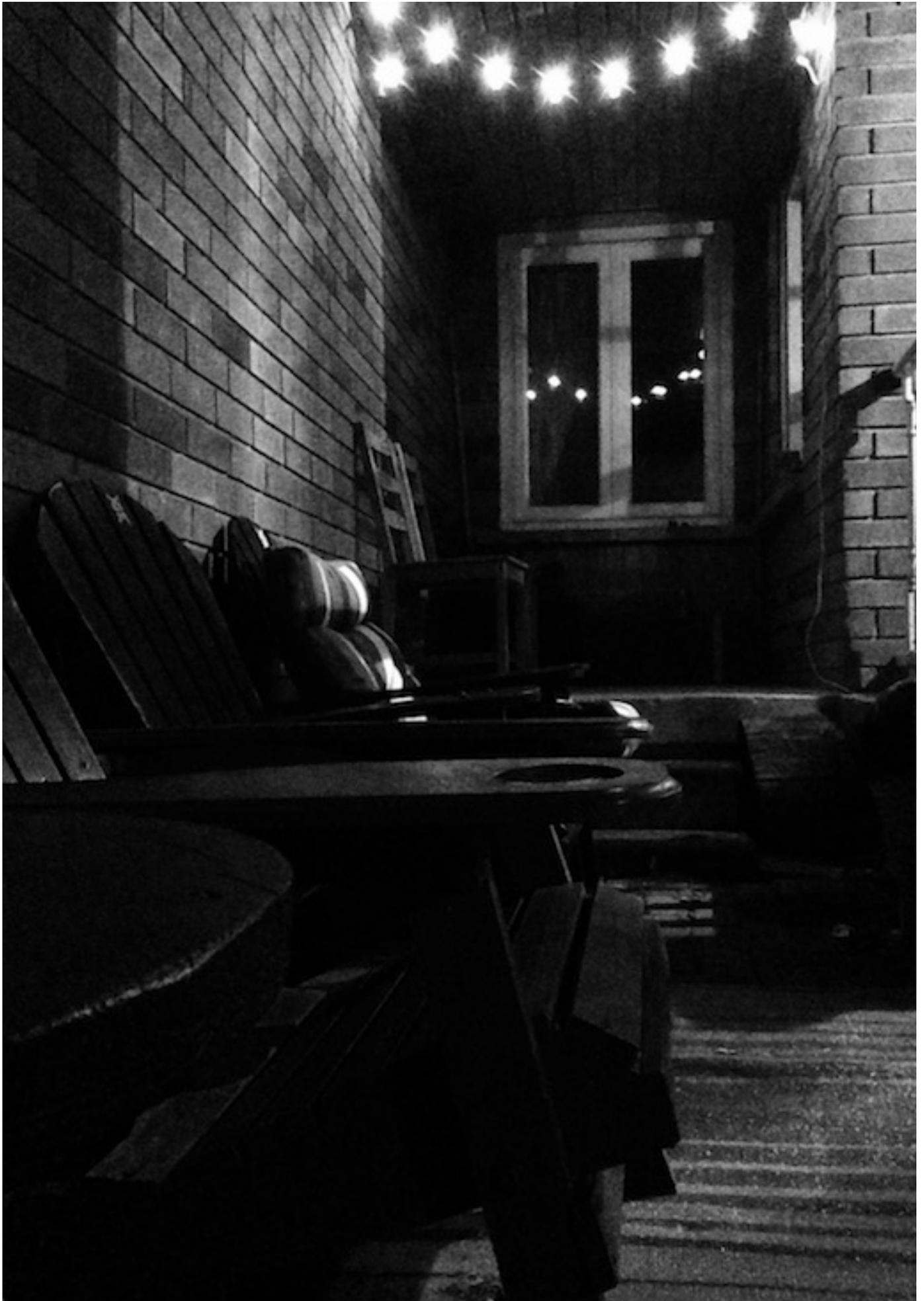
"The walk through the Darkness, in order to regain the Light. Having a guide on such a journey might, indeed, prove invaluable. It would have to be someone who knows the way, don't you think? Someone who doesn't dance round the issues, because of their own fears."

"I think, Nigel, that you have quite possibly discovered your new path. Your new purpose. You are someone who knows the way through the Darkness."

"Well, I'll tell you Victor. These last few weeks, I've had time to think about those gray areas you once spoke of to me. And about the Light of the soul. About shades of gray. Between Darkness and Light, there's that dull gray of fear. But there's also silver. Like the moon rising in the dark of night. Or the sun behind storm clouds. My whole life has become a gray area, full of shadowy things none of us dare speak about. Funny though, how the difference between fear and hope lies in how you choose to see the shades of gray."

About the Author

Karen Ovér is currently living and writing in New York City, after fifteen years in Austin, Texas. Her work has appeared in *Collective Fallout*, various regional publications, and is available at amazon.com



MY WIFE LEFT ME FOR A LOCKSMITH
by Colin James

There are two bars at The Ritz.

One is attended by tall old men

dressed only in white gloves and polished severity.

The other bar is a couple of stools

politically arranged around a simple oak desk.

They both serve the same Scotch.

I now guiltily gravitate to the latter.

There is no one tending this bar.

A busboy passes through periodically.

He checks his pockets,

adjusts a ridiculous bow tie.

About the Author

Colin James has a chapbook of poems, *A Thoroughness Not Deprived Of Absurdity*, from http://www.pskisporch.com/?page_id=139



Apparition
by Sudhanshu Chopra

Ashes sprawl the Earth with hint of life
That was
On ripples of ritual, water
Wings of froth
And strength of memory and sediment
To touch carefully
The gossamer horizon that hangs
Into
Another season—finders keepers
Plain destiny nothing else—
While others await, patiently, renaissance, wreckage
New generation
Different but the same
Lot like love
That made him vulnerable
Not to what lasted the longest
But what kept coming back

About the Author

Sudhanshu Chopra is a 25-year old engineering graduate and an aspiring writer and poet. He likes to read; can write a bit as well; and tends to skip introductions altogether because they make him feel awkward.

Homeless
by Sanjoy Dutt

A thick coil of smoke from the steam engine was visible in the far horizon. The train loaded with coal for the power plant came closer. The train slowed down on the tracks as it climbed up the hill. We had to risk our lives to climb onto the moving train, fill our sacks and drop them before the train moved too far away. My sister ran alongside the train below and collected our bags. The coal kept our ovens burning and traded to buy food. There were many children like us. I was ten and my sister eleven.

My father was a respected school teacher and our family was happy in Dhaka. One day I heard my father and uncle talking about the changes Bangladesh, in those days called East Pakistan, was going through. 'Razakar's', the pro-Pakistani volunteers, along the Pakistani Army unleashed a reign of terror against the freedom fighters.

"The country is too unstable, I am thinking about leaving." My uncle told Dad. "Razakar's are destroying temples and raping Hindu women with the help of the Army. It's getting worse every day. I am moving to India soon. Come with us."

My Father was sentimental and did not want to leave. He told my uncle, "I am not prepared to leave my country and my ancestor's house."

Within a few days, my uncle and many others sold all they had and left for India. Things got worse with each passing day. News of mass killing and rape by the army was heard every day. Anyone associated with the liberation movement was tracked down and killed.

One day, my father returned home with a horrific look on his face. The Razakar's came with the soldiers and pulled all the teachers and students out accused of supporting the liberation movement. They were forced to dig their own graves before they were killed. The others ordered to bury them. That day father was nervous about our family's security and changed his mind. It was too late.

There was no time to sell our house; we took what we could carry. After a tiring journey in the rain, we reached the Indian border. We had to pay heavy bribes to the security forces to let us slip by and left with little money to start a new life in India. There were thousands just like us.

We went to a refugee camp close to the Indo-Bangladesh border. At the camp, thickly populated with migrants, there was no drinking water, electricity or sanitation facilities. The rains and dirt brought flies and mosquitoes. Soon a cholera epidemic broke out in the camp and hundreds died including my father. The vaccines and good water from charity groups arrived, but too late for him.

Our resources were shrinking each day, mom had to take up work as a laborer in a brick factory. The nearest school was seven miles away and there was no money to buy books or pay school fees. My sister and I went to work, stealing coal from the trains, to support our expenses.

A year later our country was liberated, but it was no joy for us. We continued to live a life in poverty as we did not have money to make the journey back home.

One summer night my sister came down with a fever. We had to wait until morning to see the doctor. The doctor examined her and told us she had Diphtheria and advised Mom to take

her to Calcutta. We hurried back to the camp to borrow money for the train to the big city. We were on our way to the railway station when she died.

One day I was at the railway station with some boys when I saw an old neighbor, Anil, from Bangladesh. He recognized me and walked with me to our camp. He could not meet Mom as she was at work, but before leaving, he promised to return again with my uncle. We were cut off from our relatives when Dad stayed back in Bangladesh. The hardship of the refugee camp made us forget their existence.

That weekend Anil came back with my uncle. After hearing our miseries, my uncle broke down in tears, "I told my brother many times to come with me." Uncle took us with him to Calcutta. I was admitted in a school and my mother attended nursing, classes. Life got easier.

Twenty-seven years later, we are back in Bangladesh on Indian papers. We wanted to see our old house. Everything has changed. My mother had a hard time recognizing our old house. She stood there silently her eyes full of tears. An old man called out to my mother, "Are you not the Mukherjee master's wife?"

My mother looked at the man for a moment before recognizing him, "Tariq Bhai! How are you?"

Mom introduced me to Tariq as my father's old classmate and best friend.

Tariq Bhai broke down in tears when he heard about our hardship in India and how my father died without treatment. "It wouldn't have been any better here," He said.

Later Tariq described how our house was looted and burned, but he saved one thing and hoped to return it to us some day. He handed over a framed picture of our family. All smiling; all home. It was the best gift we ever got from Bangladesh.

About the Author

An engineer, and a linguist, Sanjoy is very passionate about traveling to historical places and has written travelogues and short stories for various magazines like The Statesman, Grihosova, Flash Fiction Magazine, Indus Woman Writing, Ashvamegh, The Red Morgue, Dreaming Big, to name a few.



Harvest End
by Ben Nardolilli

The first fig grows,
gets bigger,
falls off the tree
and is eaten
or rots,
no matter
if it grew first
or last on the branch,
either way it dies
though I suppose
the fig hopes
to be eaten
if it has to fall at all

Options I Come With
by Ben Nardolilli

Distributed for a trade,
here I am, make use
and misuse of me,
other outlets
once circulated me
until I thought the economy
was just another ride,
what a terrible view!
I know that is not
how things really are,
and the marketplace is not
a place to laugh through,
whatever you want
me to do or redo,
I can redouble it in no time,
just make sure it is me
who is making
or unmaking what you want
or do not want
to buy or sell or give
away to a choice consumer.

Trimmed and Burning
by Ben Nardolilli

Sweat falling down to the ground,
I reach to the earth and pile up some dirt
In my hands and rub into a ball,
Feeling the wetness of myself, a product
Of my fear and stress in my hands.

Immediately I think of a kiln,
I want the process of molding to continue
Until I manufacture an artifact,
Something heated until frozen in place,
An item made with the raw material of me.

Uncapped
By Ben Nardolilli

My teeth-whitening paste has gotten loose
And is brightening up the day,
Even though the day does not need it,
We used to just have the sun
And that was all we needed to see clearly.

Like a pale snake it rolls across the horizon,
All around, the shadows
Are being scrubbed away and the darkness
Is being brushed away until gone,
A minty wind licks away everything earthy.

I am not immune from the clean-up either,
I shed houses and clothes,
Cover my skin in mud and weave sticks
Into my hair to get back to nature,
Yet the paste still comes and scrubs me clean.

About the Author

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, Danse Macabre, The 22 Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, fwriktion, Inwood Indiana, Pear Noir, The Minetta Review, and Yes Poetry. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish a novel.



Devon
by Michael Wong

There was a pause as the two men looked over each other over their coffees. Mocha. Black. The sound of a group of teenagers in the back laughing.

“Ray...” said a deep voice. It made Ray’s spine shiver. It also made him feel... it wasn’t quite safe. It felt different. Dangerous. Somehow it made it feel safe. Did it make sense that something dangerous felt safe?

“Look, Devon. I’m not exactly ready for a relationship. I’ve never been in one.”

“We could always start small?”

Ray frowned. “How small?”

“How about a date?”

Devon grinned. It was wild, and too handsome. One of the problems with Devon was that he was simply too handsome. Devon always told people that he was ugly, that he had terrible teeth and acne and was overweight. If he really had all these things, then it would have been fine. However he didn’t. He had wonderfully straight teeth, a clear complexion and was naturally fit. It made Ray uneasy, and Ray didn’t want to think about why he felt uneasy about it.

Ray’s head felt dizzy. “Um...”

“How’s next Tuesday?”

“I have something to do.”

“Skip it. Live a little. Have some fun.”

“No!”

Devon frowned. It was a very handsome frown. His handsomeness had its way of getting to you, into your head, and luckily for Devon, his personality was handsome as well.

“Ray. I love you. I love you because, well. You’re interesting. You’re-”

“I’m going to cut you off right there. How can you say you love me when you barely know me?”

“You’re just so wonderful, Ray. Every time I see you, my heart beats faster and when I think of you and just, oh Ray. I don’t think you know how much I love you. Even when you sit there and sip your mocha and look at me with your eyes.”

Ray sipped his mocha.

Ray’s average-looking eyes looked Devon in his handsome brown eyes. Ray fought off the dizziness he felt in his head, and tried to think clearly, past the fog flooding his mind. “You’re handsome. You’re wonderful and rich. You scare me.”

Devon smiled, his teeth flashing. "Do you like it?"

Ray's eyes blinked. How could this man have teeth this white? "Of course I like it, everybody likes it. That doesn't mean you have any substance. You're perfect. You're so perfect, you're perfectly boring."

"I'm not boring, I read books, and I love art, and I have, well, I have so many things that I do that are interesting."

Ray sipped his mocha.

Devon tried smiling. It faltered under Ray's gaze.

"Look, Ray, I just. I love you. I don't know why. I see you and I just feel like, you're everything. I know it's crazy, but I can't help but feel like, we're just... meant to be. You know me. I would never hurt you. I will do everything for you, and take care of you, and also let you be who you need to be. I just. I just love you."

Ray frowned.

"What about me do you like?"

Devon bounced back. "Well, I like how you sit around and you read things, once I found out about what you read, I read them too, and I like how you think about things so much, and I like how your hair looks in the sun and-"

"Shut up."

"What?"

"I'm leaving."

"Wait what???"

Ray could almost hear the question marks in that last remark. He could hear the unsaid questions that were hidden in that 'Wait what????'. Questions like, 'Wait what? I said everything right! You're supposed to fall in love with me after that!', and 'Wait what? Everybody else likes me, why don't you like me?', and of course the only question that mattered:

'Wait what? I love you, why don't you love me?'

Ray stormed away from the coffee shop. Devon had too many problems, too many things to fix. How could one person fix all the things that were wrong with Devon? Devon had no self-awareness, no clue about the charmed life he had, no idea that people could have lives outside of himself. Devon was selfish but pretended not to be. Devon was handsome but pretended to be ugly. Devon was proud but pretended to be humble. Devon told himself so many lies that he started to believe them. He also started to think that other people would believe them too. The thing about Devon was, sooner or later, everything would revolve around him, and there would be no room for other people. Just Devon in his misunderstood perfect imperfection. All tell and no show. The worst part was that Devon never thought that it could be him who was causing all

the problems. He never understood anybody else, not truly. He just had one wish, to find love, and he wanted it so bad that he forgot about everybody else's wishes.

Some people don't wish for love. They work for it. Those people tend to succeed.

Devon stood outside the shop, looking forlorn and misunderstood and above it all, perfectly handsome.

About the Author

MWHY writes semi-anonymously in his home in Toronto when the moon is gibbous and the cats are prowling for trouble. This is his first submission to a magazine.

Delilah
by Allison Epstein

He feels his father's indifference like a cramp in his stomach.

He's no longer a child, not anymore—there's no reason to think about any of this. Sometimes he wonders if "childhood" was a thing other people had, like lake houses or great-aunts who wrote you checks in birthday cards that came three weeks too late.

Here, in this third-story studio apartment, snowflakes lazily beating the frost-slick window, the last thing he should be thinking of is his father.

But still. A call. Chrissakes, he's not ambitious, a text, even. These days, radio silence is always intentional. Even Starbucks wished him a happy birthday.

A paperback copy of *Infinite Jest* winks at him from its sideways home on the windowsill. Its laminate-slick cover glints with reflected streetlight, with the snow drifting onto the sidewalk along Racine. He sets a sweating bottle of out-of-season Oberon atop the book. It leaves a ring, will ripple the pages if he ever decides to open them.

The orange streetlight drenches the budding snowdrifts.

A text.

He has never been good at not thinking.

Leaning over the kitchen sink, he rests his elbows on porcelain. Cigarette ash rains pumice dust on the drain. Mark likes to tell him smoking is a vulgar habit.

Vulgarity luxuriates in his veins.

The phone in his pocket has rung twice since seven thirty. Once, Grace, happy birthday get out here we're all at the bar come out Delilah's don't be a prick come. The second time, Mark, telling him to come see Dad before the hospital closed for the night.

He lets the winking firefly cigarette dangle between his fingertips, considering. The roads are too icy to drive. Delilah's is on the corner of Diversey and Lincoln. Fifteen minutes, if he makes the train.

He sweeps on his coat and closes the door, leaving the cigarette flickering in the sink.

#

Delilah's.

From the other side of the bar, he feels her interest trickle hot down his throat. Smooth sparking amber filtered through liquid eyeliner. Whisky inhaled from a distance. He tosses it around his throat, catches the savor, edges it back.

Dark jeans and a black silk top. Ice-pick heels. She brought no coat. Out of politeness, he pulls her into the bathroom, presses her back against the stall door, sinks his lips into her hungry kiss.

Why wait for the train? Not in weather like this.

She is married—he sees her ring.

She is twice his age—he saw her driver's license when he slipped open her wallet, helped himself to two twenties while she ordered him a drink.

She is rich—he sees her ring and her wallet.

She kisses him like a wolf howling at the wind. He is either the rabbit or the gun.

He feels her brand sizzle across his back, fingernails biting flesh. He lets her do what she will, and stands on the corner leaning his cigarette into her lighter when it's over.

Delilah.

#

The phone in his pocket vibrates as he shaves in front of the bathroom mirror at five forty-five the next morning. The razor slips, hot pain and hotter anger. He swears under his breath.

Delilah—not her name, but what else can he call her?—rolls over in bed, turns her face to the wall, ignores him. He worries the phone into his hand.

Mark.

He does not answer, even though his brother never calls. And if he does, not twice in two days.

When the second buzz comes bearing voicemail, he's looking at his face in the mirror, dabbing at the blood with the back of his hand. In the bedroom, not-Delilah snores, slaps at the alarm he forgot to turn off.

Through the window, the sidewalk disappears under the snow.

#

He feels his father's death like the loss of cancer. He stands taller now, but he has grown used to the texture of mutated cells.

He stands on the opposite side of the church from Mark, who cries like it belongs in the Special Skills section of his résumé.

When they lower the casket into the frozen earth, he lights a cigarette.

Vulgarity thrives in graveyards.

With low expectations, one can never disappoint.

About the Author

Allison Epstein is a twenty-something writer and editor living in Chicago. Her fiction and essays have been published in *Ugly Sapling*, *200 CCs*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Adios Barbie*. She hasn't made it through a conversation without quoting the musical *Hamilton* since September 2015.



Empty Skies
by Richard King Perkins II

When weary angels rest their heads
they dream a simple apotheosis;
the resonance of your voice,
the dangerous array of your fibers and filaments.

When they waken,
it's as unreal brutes—
and their eyes are softly burning suns,
stunned by moon-stabbed hearts.

They thought they had found eternal love
and limitless joy
in all that was holy
until they imagined you into their sleepy midst

and discovered lament
and that there was not time enough
left in the universe
to undo their previous mistaken devotion.

Last Man, Self-Portrait
by Richard King Perkins II

You are singular, releasing anatomy, the ear
and the ancillary clouds of hair; the female,
raucous in your leaving, has left, engorged,
sated, sacrificed a social butterfly, its past self
equally beautiful. You, once confiscated,
departed petal-like, and later reduced to your
Neanderthal genes. A terrible morass. I'll let you
carry it. Everything grows acceptable; captured
in black chitin, arms a retracted mollusk, denying
ancient February, its opaque upending. That
darkness; a Rhesus-extinct, monomaniacal pleasure.
Temptation doesn't show up unannounced. It strokes
me like only I can manage myself. Her cosmic
incorporeality becomes accessible; Ice water
and sera, soul-releaser of inhuman angst here
in my eyes. You're a black mirror, cold to the touch.
Silence indemnifies your savior, an essential organ
left over from the retrofit. Listen to its arrival
in vapid, yellow steaming. I give you everything.
My once indomitable ego determines the sperm
of kind contrivance; the mountain of Mars,
the wet-dream. One method to renounce the accolades:
a rogue's bow of sterility, neutron star, black hole,
taming a seahorse. Deliverance. You understate
an archaic manifesto. Shrinking fetters awash,
the mantle's ordered peace, conciliatory unification
dividing itself in an eternal mojo-less moment.
Common in hiding, thighs girded in mammalian
reproduction.

Teardrop of Flame
by Richard King Perkins II

A night without heat—
only a single teardrop of flame.

We hoped it was branches
scraping the house

like spiders on an arm;
guttural beasts leaving footprints

in a fallen atmosphere,
a mosaic unlocking beauty
or a misallocation of strength

delving into
worlds intentionally lost.

Your notion of affinity makes me thumbless,
pushing at my throat;

wounds deeper than acknowledgement
uploaded to my electric grotto—
an infection in my muggy soul.

Intimate purely within me
I think I'll sit this one out.

Footprints may find water bubbling
beneath the slanted sand,

where any integration of sky
could heal me

but I let them swim, watch them drown—
a blessing; a chivalry;

you may try
but I'd rather be the one to break me
from the inside out

myself.

Elsewhere
by Richard King Perkins II

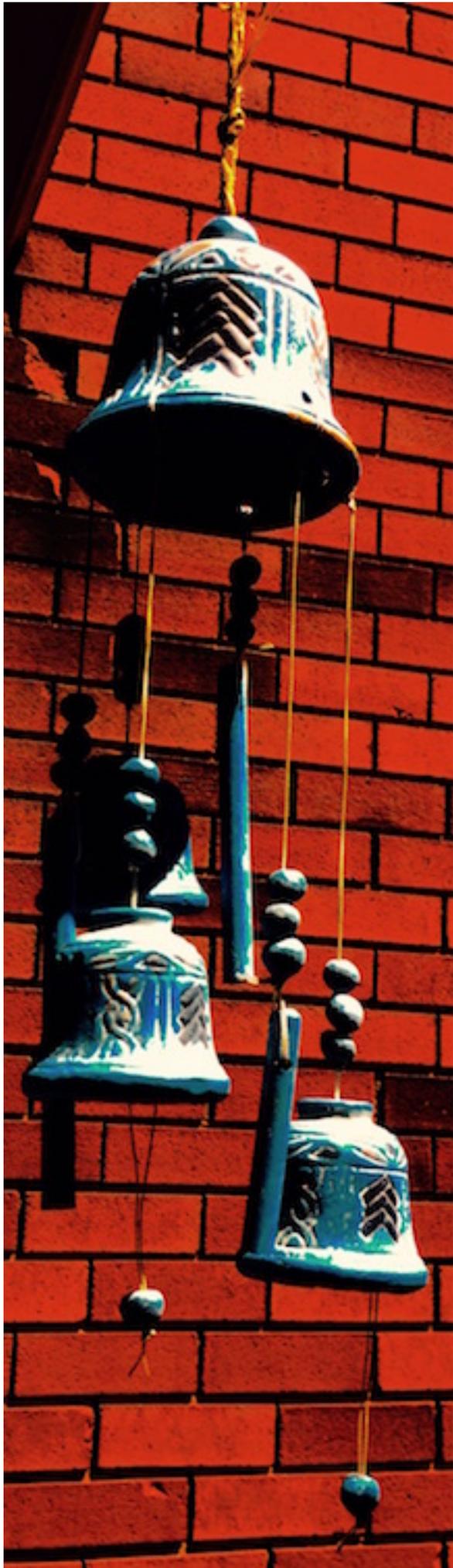
Let me entice,
let me speak to you
for five minutes
and we'll be walking the periphery
between light and birth
and someplace else.

If I could look upon you
for thirty seconds
or maybe a few seconds more
we'd be intimates
without artistic redemption

beyond blame and the errors of sin
in a turned down bed
along the northern bank
of an east-west river
where there's a first time
for every love that should-have-been.

About the Author

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL, USA with his wife, Vickie and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee whose work has appeared in more than a thousand publications.



PROPERTY VALUES RISE, NEIGHBORHOOD GETS A FACELIFT

by Kelsey May

BRIDGE

LANE

FULTON

STOCKING

~~full to the brim and still adding more~~

leftover meat markets holding on by their hooves
everyone else handed bills and told to suitcase up
here come the breweries and ~~make room for shopping~~

resident income irrelevant
profit a more golden ticket than luck

just ~~we'll~~ saddle the taxpayers with debts
they can't scrounge for, shuck their throats
with financial grief –

can't afford the rent? should

have gone to school sooner, should have loaned
your hands to the DeVos family,

now water
is all you can hear flooding your front porch.
cuffed your body

to the bottom of the fish ladder.

for only the next decade or so

before West Michigan becomes the new Gold Coast,
outlook good. lake effect snow the only chilling

realization that Snyder could stomach between
swallows of winged-Chases, chasing Flint water

with Dasani permissions we don't need rights
only to *be* right.

what's the real cause of gentrification?
what does this say about home and place?

more new neighbors residing
on these avenues
Martha Collins?

this poem needs interviews from residents.

KITE CATCHER
by Kelsey May

Clouds hang like asterisks over the tops of buildings
Here we sit, inside on this glorious day Working
on some project or other, humanity divided
along fault lines overpasses steeped in graffiti
whispering secrets like "You only live once"
"Make this day count – you can only dream about
tomorrow if you're not using today"

A kite soars ragged, a shark in the sky, teething
on cumulus clouds, playing tag with pigeons
The way I heard it some guy was responsible
for the kite, maneuvering it more delicately than a sailboat
at high tide worshipping the way light catches
on the corners of skyscrapers, visible only from
his exact place on the sidewalk below

SPIDERS IN SPINNING SKIRTS

by Kelsey May

The spiders spin between darkness and midnight. They tell time by counting crooks on their hairy legs. They spin

with voices lifted, until their orbit is a yellowed egg yolk flipped upside down like a tulip's face. This communal

time of day is repetitive, reassuring, regular. The spiders are emptied of their sufferings, they are staying

up past their bedtime to finish what they started. They are cloaks of glorious silk. They are ancient ritual, power in a

text. They grow dizzy but not weary. They are whirling dervish enthusiasts. They will not board until the dock

is being drawn. Their hands are loud and plain. This action is worship, this action is familiar. They chant and spin:

"Allahuh Akbar." They kneel in bumper-to-bumper traffic and press their eight-eyed foreheads to the gravel.

They crawl hemisphere to hemisphere in the corners of my mind. They are not interested in play; they are first light.

They are full-hearts. These spiders are reaching toward grace and finding it in the tantric twirling of angels.

PERHAPS THE GODS WANTED US TO BE WILDFLOWERS

by Kelsey May

*"I can't leave earth tonight I pleaded.
We always say not yet to the gods,
who get irritable when they can't kill us."*

Jim Harrison

Perhaps the gods want us to be wildflowers.

Perhaps our hearts were meant to grow thistles
and parade around fields like beauty queens, pageant contestants.
Perhaps this isn't a bad thing. After all,

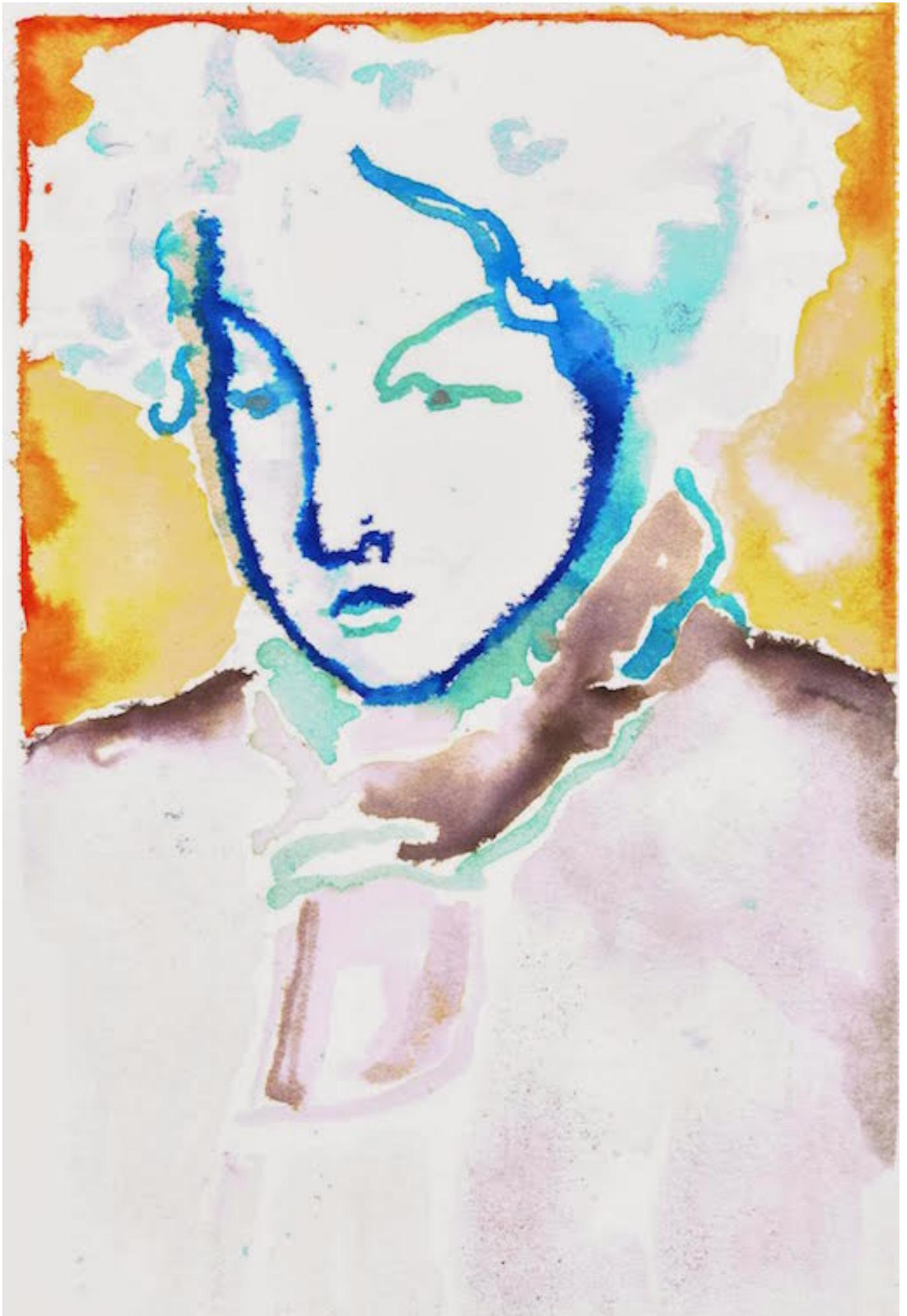
the gods are trustworthy folk. Their knowledge is vast,
like coloring outside the lines vast. Like how rainbows exist
in darkness and are called, in human words, lunar, breathless,
moonbows. Didn't you know that my mouth

is full of color? I'm talking violets, shades of lily, flared hibiscus.

Perhaps we weren't intended to process atomism
or bend time in photographic flashes. Perhaps we
always were rooted to riverstones and always will be wildflowers.

About the Author

Kelsey May's poetry has recently appeared in The Maine Review, Pine Hills Review, Barking Sycamores, and damselfly press and is forthcoming in NonBinary Review. She has also received numerous grants and awards, including a nomination for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. She loves paninis and reading novels about Central America.



Nikolai
by Jenenean McBrearty

Nikolai's defection wasn't noticed until three days after the Boyevy cast off from San Diego's Pier 5. Alex kept it a secret by standing double watches, but, eventually, the crew was order to muster top side when the cook reported he hadn't seen Nikolai at mess. "He loves my onion soup—so where is he when I serve it last night? Cabbage soup, he doesn't like, but onion?"

"The sea was rough last night," Alex told Captain Kosmol. "I don't remember him coming back from his watch. I thought I must have fallen asleep when he came in."

"He's definitely gone," Kosmol said. "We've searched the ship."

"Overboard, perhaps," Alex said sadly. He took an empty bottle of Seagram's from his pocket and handed it to Kosmol. "I found this under his mattress."

"Had he a drinking problem?" Kosmol said.

"I don't know, Sir. He lost his mother last year. She was the only family he had."

Kosmol stared at the amber bottle. "Well, there's no one to write to then. I'll notify Moscow. Man lost at sea."

Alex wanted to smile. He trained his eyes on the bulkhead above Captain Kosmol's head and forced himself to think of Nikolai coming back to the ship after his mother's funeral. That memory produced a tear. "Anything else, Sir?"

"No. I'll make an announcement before afternoon mess. You're dismissed."

Quickly, Alex wiped the tear away. Kosmol saw it, but said nothing. It was rumored Nikolai had tendencies. The boy was probably better off dead.

Nikolai Borodin was an inconvenient fact. He'd turned up at HQ claiming political asylum just when the Iron Curtain was glasnost-ed and Commander Stevens was waiting for Washington to tell him what to do. "If it's all the same, I say we copter him back to the battleship he sailed in on and let the Russians deal with him," he'd told Admiral Bently.

"I see a PR nightmare riding our way, Stevens," Bently said. "Was he hung over? Maybe we can convince the Russians he had too much to drink and feel asleep in the arms of San Diego hooker. He speak any English?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

Stevens had the Shore Patrol bring the sailor to his office. He damn sure didn't look like a stow-away. Squared away. Pressed and polished. "You clean him up, Lt. Carver?" Stevens whispered to the officer who accompanied Nikolai and the SP to his North Island office.

"He was like that when he walked through the gate this morning, Sir."

"Hunh. Well, what does he want? Did he say?"

"He said he wanted to talk to the Captain in charge."

"Not very bright is he?" Nikolai was standing at ease before the Commander's desk, hypnotized by the swaying palm trees that graced the yards of the administration building, casting undulating shadows on a huge white anchor that adorned the flag stone area. Stevens came around the desk and locked eyes with him. "Please, sit down."

The SP put his hand on Nikolai's shoulder and pressed him down. He settled into the blue and white cotton chair, almost invisible in his blue and white uniform.

"You missed your ship, Son," Stevens said. "But I think we can square things with Captain Kosmol." He'd dined with the Captain at the Admiral Kidd Club the last night of the much media-covered visit. "We'll fly you to Hawaii. Take you out to the ship by copter. We'll catch you up to your shipmates."

Nikolai shook his head no. "The angel, I stay," he said in broken English.

"What's he talking about, Carver?" Stevens said.

"Escort Nikolai to the lounge and get him a soda, Seaman," Carver said, and sighed heavily before taking a seat when they'd gone. "He went to a club. Drank a quart of vodka. Went to the head and—you're gonna think this is funny—he says a guy dressed in a long white robe with long blonde hair came in while he was takin' a leak and took him to heaven, you might say."

"Oh Christ. Don't tell me. Hillcrest. The Aladdin."

"That'd be the one, Sir." Stevens gave Carver a doleful smile. "Borodin's Ukrainian," Carver said. "Twenty-three going on thirteen. Says he'll make a good American sailor. Shit for brains."

"Anybody talk to this Angel?"

Carver opened a leather case and pulled out his notes. "She's Gerald Neider from Wisconsin. Goes by the name of Mona. Friends say she's got a soft spot for sailors 'cause her father's a fisherman. All the girls thought our Nikolai was 'dreamy', Sir." Carver look up and saw Stevens' swivel chair was facing the windows. He could see his reflection, his head half hidden by an embracing, steadying, hand.

"Go on, Lieutenant," he said.

"Seaman Borodin says God wants him to stay in America and be free. If he goes back to Russia, he'll be killed now that he's a ladies' man. Loosely translated. We never asked, but some just tell." Stevens groaned. "You want the shrink to talk to him?"

"No," Stevens turned his chair around. "We'd better handle this quick and clean as we can. The last thing we need is an international incident. Call the Russian Embassy and tell them we've caught a spy, but we'll overlook it if they will. Teshenko will understand."

Carver closed his leather case. "I see a gulag in that boy's future. Is there a way to, you know, make sure they go easy on the kid? Intoxication defense. Freedom can be intoxicating."

"It's their call, Carver. They don't want bad publicity anymore than we do. You ever think we'd see a Russian battleship tied up at a San Diego pier? Thirty years after we're eye-ball to nuclear eye-ball over Cuba and now we're the best of uneasy friends." Stevens held out a photograph to Carver of himself and Captain Kosmol standing in front of crossed flags hung on the wall of the dining room. They were smiling two-martini smiles. Kosmol held a small shopping bag with Nordstrom's emblazoned on the side. Nothing overcomes ideology as quickly as abundance and generosity.

"Tomorrow may be different, Sir," Carver said, handing the photo back to Stevens.

"Maybe. Maybe. So think of Nikolai Borodin as the first casualty of the next Cold War."

Alex woke up in the hallway. He remembered getting his pay from the cab company and walking into the Ice Palace and ordering Smirnoff. It was his birthday. He thought so anyway. Solandra was going to meet him there for dinner. He heard a lap, lap, lapping sound, like calm waves caressing the sides of the ship as it lay at anchor in some South Sea port—someplace warm—as he stood watch on the forecastle. But when his eyes finally focused, he saw Solandra's cat in the window, licking milk from her blue bowl.

He grabbed the doorknob and pulled himself up. Had Solandra come to the bar after all and found him drunk again? He wasn't inside the apartment and that wasn't a good sign. "One more time and I'm leaving you, Alexi," she'd said. Maybe this time she meant it. He rapped lightly on the door. She had to be there. No one else would feed that useless cat.

Somehow, he managed to insert his key in the lock. He was shivering, he told himself, when he knew it was the vodka shaking his mind. He was now officially middle-aged. Forty. Time to get sober. Time to stop thinking about onion soup and long nights standing watch alone on the deck, and regretting he didn't jump ship in San Diego with Nikolai. Sweet Nikolai the believer in dreams; his sheltering arms as strong as his faith and his lips that smiled through kisses.

"We can stay here in America, Alex," he'd said. "We'll buy a cab like the one that brought

us through Coronado and across the bridge. Then two. Then three. We'll have our own company."

"And where will we get the money? Tell me, Nikolai. We have rubles not dollars and neither of us speaks good English. You think God is going to just give us money?"

"We can get green cards. Mona will help us. I know she will." No. He hoped she would help. Hope—the opiate of the American people.

Alex staggered to the bedroom. Solandra was gone but her clothes and make-up were still where she kept them—neatly arranged in her drawer, on her shelf in the bathroom. Maybe he'd made it to the hallway after she left for work. Or maybe she stepped over him without noticing.

He laid on the bed and held her folded nightgown to his face, feeling her body, smelling her scent, and wishing they'd walk out on the apartment house porch one morning and find themselves looking at white sand and undulating palms. "I have a rich friend in America," he told his comrades. "Someday, I'll find Nikolai. He'll help us," he told Solandra. "I helped him escape." All these years he'd pretended he'd done something wonderful. Something akin to climbing over the Berlin Wall or rescuing trapped submariners. But Nikolai was the brave one. Once again, he fell asleep dreaming of the magic lamp that would that could undo the past.

About the Author

Jenean McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, who taught Political Science and Sociology. Her fiction, poetry, and photographs have been published in over a hundred and sixty print and on-line journal. She won the Eastern Kentucky English Department Award for graduate Non-fiction in 2011, and She won a Silver Pen Award in 2015 for her noir short story: Red's Not your Color. Her serials Raphael Redcloak: Guardian of the Arts (chosen by the Santa Clara County Library as an on-line YA selection), and Retrolands can be found on Jukepop.com.

The Ledge
by Robert Beveridge

The crowd stares up
at the man in the blue
pinstripe suit.
He is half-
way up the tallest
tower in the city
and is screaming
he'll jump (but the crowd
can't hear him)

No one
has called the police

When the man lands,
body parts and fluids
spattered by the four winds,
the people turn away,
nauseated, fulfilled.

Shouting the Cat
by Robert Beveridge

Pieces of mosquitoes
line the paper, leave trails
of colorless muck
for the cat to clean up.
He won't, of course. He prefers
to lie spread-eagled
on the arm of the couch
and let me dispose of body parts.

Soon he will get up
run around the apartment
stalk mosquitoes, kill them,
go back to the couch.

Morning Song
by Robert Beveridge

The shape of the mountainside
ensures the friars' voice carry
to the sea. The monastery was built
thus, to send their songs over the waves.

Our villa, below, just off
the pebbled road. Each morning
we are roused by matins
that wash over us.

Most days we rise, blend
fruit, cream, whey
and dine under the voices

but this morning, you awakened
me in darkness, took my hand
and led me out. We watched
the sun fire the kiln of morning

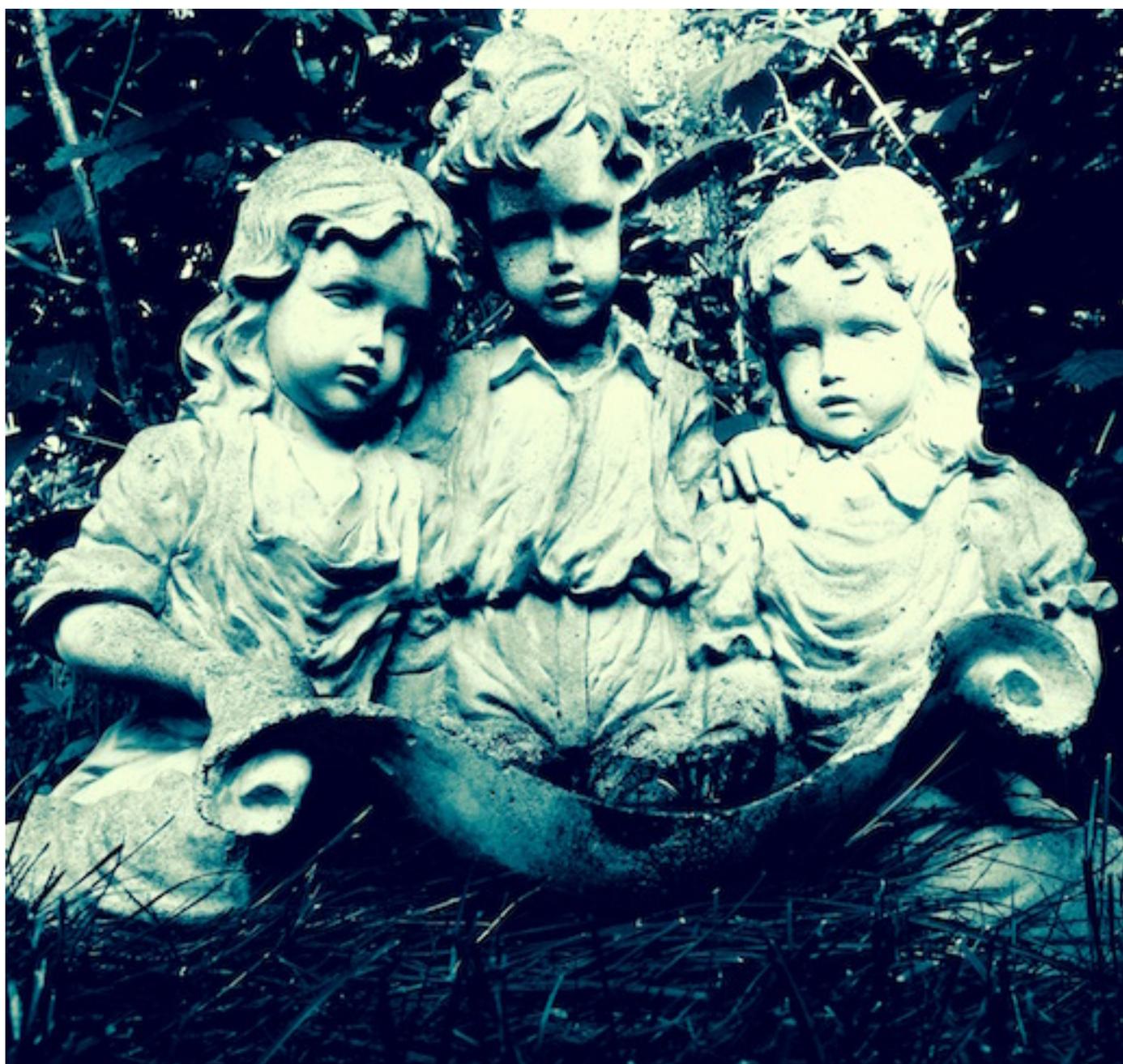
and the open throats of friars
found us naked in the waves
your back against the pebbles
mine in the air.

Please
by Robert Beveridge

The ants crawled onto his sandwich.
He did not notice, took a bite
commented on the piquancy
of the mayonnaise. His bandanna
cocked, he looked you over, eyes
under your bra, into your skirt
like a gazelle with a scalpel. You
asked him the smallest unit
of Vietnamese currency
and he could only answer
(but without breaking a sweat)
you, darling, you.

About the Author

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Chiron Review, Zombie Logic Review, and The Litterateur, among others.



Underground or The Act of Naming
by J L Higgs

The act of naming is a powerful thing. Words, names, in particular, have power. In the book of Genesis, each being God has created is brought before Adam and he names it. Through that single act, Adam gains dominion over each creature. For that reason, amongst others, God's true name remains unknown and therefore, cannot be spoken.

Hello.

You don't know me.

But I do you.

You see, I live here.

Underground.

Here dark shadows dominate light and things seen are not necessarily what they appear to be. Trust me. It's best to be careful here. There are some things best left unseen and unknown.

Have you noticed the air here? How it's cold, heavy, dank, and fetid. The rivulets of water trickling down the face of the compressed rock walls are likely the cause. But where the water comes from or where it goes, I do not know.

That incessant crystalline sound you hear is also caused by the streams of water. The sound travels great distances within the silence here. Ultimately, it's swallowed up in darkness.

Darkness?

Darkness is everywhere.

It's all pervasive.

Trust me.

Darkness is natural, but it's not like a black hole. Scientists have all kinds of theories about black holes. But they don't know black holes. To know something you have to have personal experience of it.

You know what's in black holes?

Nothing.

Nothing but you and endless eternal blackness. Black holes are deep empty waterless wall-less wells that suck you down, down, down. Inside. What's up? What's down? Who knows? In a black hole you just close your eyes, and hope, no pray, that somehow you'll find a way out.

Trust me. I know black holes.

And how do I know you?

Well, I watch you and the others who come and go here. You don't notice me. None of you do, but I'm watching. I wait. And I pass my time by naming each of you.

Her, over there, I've named Chewy. See how she mashes that gum between her teeth non-stop. Pulverizing it. Her intensity is frightening, like touching a Van der Graff generator.

That one, Saint Francis. Note the gold wire frame glasses, the fringe of hair encircling his balding head, and the contemplative look on his elfin face.

Bassett is the woman in the red and white polka dot dress. She's named for the overwhelming sadness in her downward sloping eyes.

There're others; Bullet, Old Soul, Toe Walker, Beaker, Squirtle, The Bear, Thank You Jesus, Fake Tits Liza, etc... The list has gotten quite long over the years. You're all in my ledger.

By now you're likely wondering what name I've given you.

That, you don't need to know, any more than you need to know my name.

Just remember.

The next time you're visiting here, underground.

I'll be watching.

I'll be waiting.
Trust me.

About the Author

J L Higgs is a former financial services employee. Primarily, his short stories focus on the lives of black Americans. He is a relatively new writer who has been published in the current, July edition of the Indiana Voice Journal. He will also be published in the upcoming September/Fall issue of The Writing Disorder, and the January 2017 issue of Black Elephant.

Catching Mercury
by R Gerry Fabian

Those little red balls
Roll and split
All over the place.
They are impossible
To predict.
And your love
Is even worse.

Deuteragonist Default
by R Gerry Fabian

The setup is evident
the instant you propose it.
I am the foil
for the room mate
of your current affection.

After we split the cost of a 4 star supper,
you two announce another destination
and are gone with hastened goodbyes.

Left with paltry resources,
I invite the ingenue
to a small jazz bar I frequent.

Three weeks later,
you're on the prowl
and I make love
with John Coltrane
as a guiding rhythm.

Consult Your Physician
by R Gerry Fabian

When nursing an injury
it is important
to give it time to heal.
Rest is essential.
Do not let the pain fester.
Do not brood.
Explore alternative treatments
but beware of charlatans.
Know your pain tolerance
and do not go beyond it.
Finally
if the injury is physical,
consult your physician.

About the Author

R. Gerry Fabian is a retired English instructor. He has been publishing poetry since 1972 in various poetry magazines. His web page is <https://rgerryfabian.wordpress.com> He is the editor of Raw Dog Press <https://rawdoggpress.wordpress.com> His novel, Memphis Masquerade and published poetry book, Parallels, is available at Smashwords and all other ebook stores.



RUCIO AND ROCINANTE FALLING IN LOVE
by Daniel de Cullá

Rucio is Sancho
Don Quixote is Rocinante
The twos have taught the sublime matter
Of the Hee-Haw.
That is History: do it so
liiiiii Aaaaaaaa
Aaaaaaa liiiiiiia
Although we put our noses
Not equal that them
As the same ideas.
Not cheat Rocinante and Rucio
Fit for our peculiar Hee-Haw.
Hee-Haw with the most better fervour
Because the twos give us its compasses
They, that never have been fond with Wo/Man
Who have proved for ever
To have ill-will
And bad wishes.
The twos have permitted to ride on they
Astride
Around
And have taught to us
A sublime love, penises overhead.
Don Quixote and Sancho adore Asses
Its meat is a tasty morsel to them
As to Dulcinea del Toboso
Who did dried meat with its thighs
As she have said, singing:
The Ass was the first that spoke”
Equal that Pan, the greek god
Playing flutess, as he says
Made with Ass’ funny-bone”
liiiiii
Aaaaaaaai

SHAKESPEARE'S AND CERVANTES' ASSES
by Daniel de Cullá

To the two Asses' Hee-Haw
Approach plenty of people
Hee-Haw' fellows
In England as in Spain
Before Fourth Centenary of his death
These Asses will Hee-Haw by use, in fashion
And without master of ceremonies.
The knighthood books give precepts about it:
Two girls, Literature and Rhyme
Ride the two Asses with a Verb in her arms
Heading a long procession of writers
Poets, poetry hermits, and wikckeds
Waiting it on universal history of tales and gossip
Because, thanks to Shakespeare's and Cervantes' Asses
Fine and tasteful
We know "that ever will be governments
Holding a chair of hee-haws".
Hauling from its tails
Here's coming the Quixote and don Quixote in America
Hamlet and The King Lear
Carrying an Ass' Penis celebrated by bright hills and fortunes
While very near from these
Cervantes, The One-Handed on Lepanto
Plays with his bad arm stringing a ring with lances
Cuming with pleasure
Challenging Shakespeare, agged
The Avon' Bard
Sceptical the twos and visionaries
Never believing in women
Because they were more truthful in his arse hole' s love with pupils
As the Knight Lucky
Bradaleon the Vigorous
The Knight Lucisor, the Furious, the Sylvan's
The Dark Cove's, Contumelianus, Cardenius
Thee Handsome Fellow
The Better Angel, the Sweet Swan from Avon.
Big lancers in poetry feast, and floral plays
Carry the twos Assess.
Plenty of catholic friars and anglican priests
Have hang on his breast, and hid
The god Bacchus' image.
They, the catholic friars and anglican priests
Drag a barrel as lavatory made with wickers
And covered with fig-leaves.
Behind, are coming the bosses and bankers
Followed by the plebs put in a big wine –bottle
Draged by writers and poets in back-stroke

Drumming, blowing one's top, and trumpet
 This IV Aniversay, using letters going on it
 Cleanly made with plastic branches and flowers
 Mental fucking straws
 Leaving passes over scaffolds when people mule-train
 Going besides the two Asses
 Adventurers and supporters of it
 Dreaming to fall in love with horses.
 In a ditch, in Moraine Mountain, as tired, (only You and Me know it;)

Are the Prince of Talents and the Bard of Avon
 Looking for a female cricket, saying the twos:
 "There's the Micomicona Princess
 And Terencius the Eunuchus
 As a cock-and bull story.
 -You, You, yes, You, eulogizer of the Hee-Haw
 Which You gave up, Cervantes, a very good Hee-Haw
 Shakespeare says.
 -Put away Shakespeare. I know the man very well
 And their Asses.
 The Justice is its very own.
 -As to Give to Caesar which is own's, Cervantes
 And to the Female Asses' rule
 Which is rightful in circles
 Convents and schools.
 -You'll don't give to them from Yours?
 -Yes, I did it.
 The twos stop talking for a while, and playing in unison
 In a flash:
 "Our Hee-Haw learning and our talent
 Which is coming from our Asses
 Will load with our conscience
 And don't worry for us
 To attract the eternal fire because of Hee-Haw.
 Hee-Haw, don't forget it.
 That we saw, thought, analysed
 We are very sure and self-satisfied
 Seeing who can Hee-Haw the loudest".

About the Author

Daniel de Culla (1955) is a writer, poet, and photographer. He is also a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, and others. Director of Gallo Tricolor Review, and Robespierre Review. He has participated in Festivals of Poetry, and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover and Genève .He has exposed in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving between North Hollywood, Madrid and Burgos, Spain. His address is in Burgos, just now. He has more than 70 published books.



Nausicaa
by Marianne McKenzie

Only three old men and I sat calm by the sea today.
Together we watched the waves rumble and lap greedily
at the land like salt deprived dogs.
Pale morning light left ripples all-a-glitter as our glances sailed
silent as ships, past each other on the sand.
I, in moist folds of rock and sand,
rose like a lighthouse from the stale sea water haze hovering
over the shore, and
the eager sea urchin seeker, bent atop rocks as hard and scaly
as the rattlesnake's tail,
where he had perched a perfect rosé for his spiky and sensual feast.
The professional walker, with cheeks all aglow, stopped and chugged water
like his youthful rosiness was too hot and burning for his pallid skin.
The stylish hunter posed with his terrier lounging behind,
a clone in a green khaki jacket, with the worn worm brown handle of a rifle
peeking shyly out of a burlap bag.
We all silently watched the feet of the mountain bathe themselves
so long in the sea that they slipped into the murmuring of the pastel water.

Greyhound Mags
by Marianne McKenzie

Peter and I
drank blueberry tea forged in a samovar
in a perfumed candle wax apartment,
where woodland creatures
and Italian greyhounds
were held frozen in bronze by some
manic obsession.

I could feel such heavy longings
as the Poulenc coursed through my chest,
from the leaning of a laden antler coat rack
to the bronzed bear bookends pinching
L'Histoire Baroque Volumes I-X
between their meaty paws.

My dry fingers devoured
peony candle drippings.
The table was inlaid
with raisin cookie crumbs.
Our stomachs shivered with delight
though my €1.08 offering of Speculoos biscuits
was as low brow and humble
as the poor taste of of the next neighbor's music.

By now the candle wax
had gorged itself on my crumbling hands,
and the tea required dilution.

And then I saw
our gathering was overseen by
a parroted Mozart painting
hanging in the antechamber
in pale imitation of that
which could never be the face of anyone
but my host.

Childhood By Heart
by Marianne McKenzie

The rain didn't stop
until I cut loose
my tongue from the family shard,
and laid back on the dampish riverbank
with watercress eyes
to drink you in soft, like
dew smothered branches.

It was a calm spring in the buggy rushes,
where I thought dragonflies would canter and play.
I bought a bergamot hat box because
that's what dolls like in the books.

Maria came to scuttle my childish birch boat
with the shrug of her athletic arm. We ate
pasta salad while she explained that
makeup wasn't just for work or dates,
it was forever. Boys do not like
your real face she said.
You can see that even your dolls have
eyeliner and thick curling eyelashes.

She straightened my puffy curls,
and put concealer with too much yellow in it
on one of the moles on my cheek.

We bought a frilly pink dress that showed
my shoulders off.
Some guys like that, she said.

One more peek at my no longer
oblivious face, and with crinkled eyes,
she said:
today, I gave you your first weapon.

Prats
by Marianne McKenzie

His eyes are as dull as canned lychees,
but the dull shine of his eyeglasses leave
his conversation partner with a question,
and they debate the meaning of whatever.

I never cared for the muttering of this philosophy student.
His elbow laid like imagined problems on the library table and
his head nodding in knowledgeable and righteous shock, like a dying dandelion,
waiting for angst to dry up and clog his pores like zits.

I like listening to you speak, but only because it's like the
pitter patter of a screaming and ignorant donkey
never to find a middle ground
in this jungle of opinion called 2016 where
humans screech at the terror of thought.

Far away, the car horns honk
and drift like discarded plastic
bags into your window, and
onto your dusty desk.

(stanza break)

You'll eat a mushy apple, and throw it in the trash can.
You'll go home and find your wife putty like on the couch,
and you'll retreat to your study and read. This is
your life, your lot. One day,
you'll awake to the sound of Kim Kardashian's voice on tv,
and you'll bury your head under the cover of some Camus,
and Tom Waits the day away.

About the Author

Marianne McKenzie hails from Saint Louis, Missouri. She has been commissioned to write plays for various theatres and organizations in Kansas City, Missouri, including the Fishtank Performance Studio and the Toy and Miniatures Museum of Kansas City. Marianne's publications include: the poem "Grandpa" in Number One Magazine, the research article "Olive Orchard and the Olive Trees Series by Vincent Van Gogh: A Symbolic and Religious Struggle", in the research archive at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the research article "Now and Then: The French Cultural Influence in Swedish Theatre, and the Path of Theatre in Sweden Until Modern Times" in the Lucerna Research Journal. She is currently attending the University of Missouri-Kansas City as an M.F.A. Acting student.

FRESH WOOL AND FOG
by Lana Bella

The wind in October
cuts through her felt,

pressing the escape
of late fruits and seeds

over the dangling light
of fresh wool and fog.

Through the polished
whorls gently throbbed

between symmetry and
explosion, her cold eyes

flash wet and warm in
the shadows, slipstream

over delicate curves of
betrayal's tawdry corpse.

When nothing is familiar,
not even the slobbering

wisps of dark ectoplasm
that drape themselves

across her skin like sable
fur, she carves eyes into

the rinds of the currents,
with her ego a hollow queen.

DEAR SUKI: NUMBER TEN
by Lana Bella

Dear Suki: Lake Geneva, October 9th,
this lake does not wear its autumn well
but rather like a mute swan borrowing
tongue for its throat gone iced. You run
fingers over my pyramid of willful ways,
extravagant in their need to be nothing
and everything of myself. Forever moon
expands the mirrored plane, gliding near
enough to my skin fouled red, knowing
of a body in fragments. Mitered between
sky and earth, you claw along the stairs
of my blue-lipped breaths, waiting for
trivial wisps of my touch, different and
the same, giving way to desperation as
intent fails like a ship at anchor warring
a stormy sea.

FOOD FOR THE SICK, POISON FOR THE RESTORED
by Lana Bella

When the night tossed back
neither comfort nor grace,
you flinched twelve-year-old
cheeks against cinders-dull
linoleum floor with its craggy
grains, trembling for tiny fists
of the dark, pinched and lurid,
unfamiliar yet welcoming like
night's diaspora rendering its
tyranny in cache of broken-
toothed grin.

Holograms of your body veined
where breaths staggered on in
the shoal pool of grease; adagio
of chewed up syllabic and iambs
tangled like some wrong verses
groundward the entrails. Three
inches cut into the nest of red
fire ants, your hooked fingers
picked at the human frailty of
ganglial and piled flesh, chafed
bloated and moribund among
the upchucked gangrene, food for
the sick, poison for the restored.

GIN AND MOONSHINE

by Lana Bella

she lassoed smooth-olive
tonic eyes across the cystic sky
as the evening's funk seethed
through the effete grief of
tears in gin and moonshine--
skimmed and low light,
breadth of hyaline air missed
her pelican throat like a dulled
cutlass, meeting the painted chin
that was just a ghost gradient
away from rotary angst--
she drank and throbbed madly
with rouged lips flying poison
above opiate-daffodil wings
of Gabriel Faure's Elegy, one eye
hanging dark, the other
pale-started on briar roses knifing
through the bedrock graves--

About the Author

A Pushcart nominee, Lana Bella is an author of two chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016) and *Adagio* (forthcoming from Finishing Line Press), has had her poetry and fiction featured with over 230 journals, including *California Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Gravel*, *Plainsongs*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Pure Slush*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Third Wednesday*, and elsewhere, among others. Lana resides in the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam.

A Granddaughter's Ten Commandments
by Kim Malinowski

Imagine a granddaughter's ten commandments,
baked into sweet bread, instead of chiseled in stone.
Granddaughters shalt roam the halls of the apartment complex
and then the corridors of the nursing home
doling out happiness and cheer,
no matter how dismal the situation with a bit of cinnamon.
Granddaughters shalt not tire—always in a manic state of direction
and intuition and appeasement with a bit of yeast and butter.
No matter what, it is the responsibility of the granddaughter to explain
'DNR' and shout into her grandmother's ear, "it means DO NOT RESSITATE—not
like if you're choking, but if" the granddaughter goes limp "you're like this—
ya know dead." The grandmother nods, as if getting it,
but understanding only the limpness, as if the dough does not rise.
The sweet bread states "the granddaughter shall bring coffee every morning
and sometimes in the afternoon too—
none of that decaf crap."
For that moment, death halts, as the grandmother swirls the hot coffee
between her gums and it is written that the granddaughter will not cry,
only enjoy the hot liquid with her grandmother.
Kneaded into the dough, is "the granddaughter shalt buy balloons every two weeks
and watch them dance in the breeze,
because the TV is long forgotten.
And then she shalt harass the nurses, politely, but asking every question possible,
and then asking more."
The granddaughter is to file each illness, medication, wound, procedure, consult, test,
into her mental rolodex, because granddaughters
do all of the talking to the doctors.
She shalt worry, and have nightmares, and not cry,
and still try to live life as if nothing is terribly wrong.
All of this is stated in the bread, as if rising dough and cardamom, and sugar,
swirled and loved, and browning.
And then one day, granddaughters cease to be granddaughters,
and they are given a new set of commandments, for just daughters.
These commandments are in honey and chips, written plainly for all to see.

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About the Author

Kim Malinowski earned her B.A. from West Virginia University and her M.F.A. from American University. She is currently a student of The Writers Studio. Her chapbook is forthcoming from Kind of a Hurricane Press. Her work has appeared in War, Literature, and the Arts, Melancholy Hyperbole, Souvenir, as well as others.



Another winter
by Larry D. Thacker

I've not worried much
about sleeping in the house
since they broke in

almost three years ago,
taking everything of worth
to me, those few heavy

handfuls. I haven't slept
in the house since, and put it
up for sale immediately

with not a bit of luck,
every prospective buyer
suspecting some trouble,

perhaps from the desperate
look I try to hide in my eyes.
Haunted? Why yes, it is.

In every way you might
imagine, this place it is haunted.
There was a murder here.

Things moan and creak.
There are voices that never cease.
The house is burdened

with a broken spirit
too emptied of poetry to vacate
the cave of its own heart.

Bare Branches Dream
by Larry D. Thacker

Maybe winter wins in the end,
icy pressure by the endless ton
demanding its portions, sleepy

giving, slowly but not incapable
of breaking all of us all in its
grueling path of white misery.

The tree is true-halted in thought
of the season, a long memory
of colors the sustained dream

through the ever-long cold,
the shape of half a smile
on its sudden quieted lips.

Surprised with Crystal
by Larry D. Thacker

April flakes wind-dance
Cherry Blossom trees
lining the slow night road,
street lamps lending a lit
focus invisible by day.

Early morning walk
where no one has disturbed,
my steps lead me under
these trees that were only
just giving thought to bloom.

Crystallized snow tufts
seem practice blooms caught nested
in the pronged branches.

The pink petal hints
stain the ice and snow,
having gripped and soaked all night,
and, if given necessary attention,
mirror the colors of sunrise.

Pursuit
by Larry D. Thacker

There were things I had to know.
And the only way to get there,
I figured, was to chase at them
like a man's last meal, voracious
and cruel, savoring the things
too frightening not to gorge upon
quickly, for fear of abandoning
the pursuit.

I was seduced fully, chased
around corners, waking up
hearing things leaving the room,
catching bits of conversation
in the background of the cellphone,
something clicking, clicking,
messages in the crows' morning
screams, down in car engines,
in the splash of coffee dripping
in the afternoon. In leaf crunch
and sunset colors.

They were under the bed,
suffering the same insomnia,
finally getting sleep between
the pages of books, down half
way through the unopened stack
of mail. Under footsteps. In each
page of poetry.

Down in the heart pulse of rocks.
In the sucking back of water
into mud and sand tracks along
all the river banks, footsteps
stolen by tides along the shore.
There are answers in the every
thing, waiting, elusive only
because you call them elusive
and only because
you remain afraid.

About the Author

Larry D. Thacker is a writer and artist from Tennessee. His poetry can be found or forthcoming in journals and magazines such as The Still Journal, The Southern Poetry Anthology: Tennessee, Mojave River Review, Broad River Review, Harpoon Review, Rappahannock Review, Silver Birch Press, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, AvantAppal(Achia), Sick Lit Magazine, Black Napkin Press, and Appalachian Heritage. His stories can be found in past issues of The Still Journal, Fried Chicken and Coffee, and The Emancipator. He is the author of Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia, the poetry chapbooks Voice Hunting and Memory Train, and the forthcoming full collection, Drifting in Awe. A student services higher education professional for fifteen years, he is now engaged full-time in his poetry/fiction MFA from West Virginia Wesleyan College.

WARM #145
by Darren C. Demaree

No matter
the state
of the sun,

the blossom
can never rise
between

the fingers
of the weight
of a man.

WARM #146
by Darren C. Demaree

We always talk
about dragons,

because we want
to become dragons.

WARM #147
by Darren Demaree

All hands
from the raw hut,
it's the state

of our toes
that always dictates
friend or foe.

I only have enemies
& dedicated
acolytes.

I have no plans
to find out what
my heels can do.

About the Author

Darren Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including the South Dakota Review, Meridian, New Letters, Diagram, and the Colorado Review. He is the author of five poetry collections, most recently "The Nineteen Steps Between Us" (2016, After the Pause). I am the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology and Ovenbird Poetry. He is currently living and writing in Columbus, Ohio with my wife and children.

