River Poets Journal
Special Edition - 2012
The Hopeless Romantic

A Collection of Poems, Prose, Fiction & Art
on The Idiosyncrasies of Love

The Garden of Pere Lathuille, 1879 by Edouard Manet

2012 Volume 6 Issue 1 $20.00
### Fiction/Prose

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*The Kiss by Francesco Hayez*
Dear Poets and Writers,

Being a hopeless romantic, the idea for this special themed edition was easily born.

I envisioned I would receive a good number of submissions, but I was in no way prepared for the deluge of submissions River Poets Journal actually received.

It has been an entertaining and poignant journey of reading for this editor. The selection process was long and difficult as so many submissions were well-written. At final preference, the poems and stories for this issue were selected for most closely fitting the theme.

After the initial delay, I further held up releasing this edition as re-scheduled, aiming to release it on Valentine’s Day which seems most appropriate.

It is inspiring to learn that romance, even if lost, fading, or unrequited, is still alive, despite all odds in this often jaded and cynical world.

The poems and stories published in this very special issue are dedicated to those “Hopeless Romantics” everywhere.

May the romance in your life flourish.

Judith Lawrence, Editor

Second Saturday of every Month
Lindenwold Library
310 East Linden Avenue
Lindenwold, NJ
1:00 - 3:00 PM
Open to New Members

Readings and Group Critique for Poetry, Fiction, Non-fiction, Plays, Essays, Memoir, and Children’s Stories

Please Note

River Poets Journal is now published semi-annually, the Spring/Summer issue and the Fall/Winter issue.

The Special Edition of River Poets Journal is still published annually. The theme for 2013 will be announced in June of 2012 on the website.

Now accepting stories under 5,000 words for submissions.

Artists or Photographers - please submit themed samples of your work.

Upcoming Publications in 2012

The Spring/Summer issue of River Poets Journal is scheduled for May 2012 publication. Submissions are open for this issue until April 30.

Napkin Poems - short-short pocket poems published annually on River Poets Journal website during Poetry Month - April 1st to April 30 - Submissions open March 1 through April 15.

55 Word Stories Chapbook - 55 words - no more - no less - does not include title. Submissions open June 1st - deadline - August 31.
River Poets Journal Submission Guidelines

**River Poets Journal Accepts:**

- New and Established Writers
- Poetry - 3 to 6 poems
- Short Stories - under 5,000 words
- Flash Fiction - under 3,000 words
- Essays - under 500 words
- Short Memoir - under 1,000 words
- Excerpts from novels that can stand on their own - under 3,000 words preferred
- Art (illustrations and paintings) or Photography
- Simultaneous and previously published “exceptional” poems are accepted as long as we know where poems are being considered or have appeared.

**We prefer:**

- Work that inspires, excites, feeds the imagination, rich in imagery; work that is memorable.
- Work that is submitted in the body of an email or as a word attachment, but will accept work through snail mail if the writer does not use a computer. Unselected snail mail submissions are returned if Author requests and SASE is provided with sufficient postage.
- When submitting work, please provide a short bio. Listing all your published work is not required.
- Previously being published is not a requirement for publication in our Journal. We love new writers with great potential.
- Send work in simple format, Times New Roman, Arial, Georgia 12 pt font, single spaced.

**We do not accept:**

- Unsolicited reviews
- Pornographic and blatantly vulgar language
- Clichéd or over-sentimental poems or stories

**Response time is:**

3 to 6 months depending on time of year work is submitted. All submissions are thoroughly read.

**River Poets Journal Print Edition:**

$20.00 per issue plus media postage cost. Note: International shipping cost is $8.00. For ordering multiple copies, please email me for exact cost to avoid overpaying postage. Payment accepted through Paypal, Money Order or Check. Please do not send cash.

**Contributor Copies:** River Poets Journal issues are free in PDF format online for easy access. We do not offer free contributor print copies with the exception of the featured poet, and featured artist/photographer, as the printing cost would be too prohibitive for a small press.
MY FIRST KISS WASN’T WITH
RICKY NEWLANDER THE 15 YEAR OLD DEAF BROTHER OF MY BEST FRIEND--
--THOUGH IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN.

I can’t remember his eyes or his hair
but his mouth, I remember his mouth—
I remember the eyeteeth that hung just a bit lower than the rest,
and how, when he smiled, he looked just a bit evil—
the tip of his bottom lip, almost too full,
like liquid under the magic of surface tension
and how his mouth, moving to match the whip of his hands,
would make a sound so raw and hungry--
I would feel him in my belly
prying through my chest bone
making me want to touch his lips,
to feel the words as they drowned
in his throat.

--Some days, it took all morning to find ways to
tug him far enough, small pulls of annoyance and teasing
to create the crack, the flaw, the rage--
he would run us down the stairs,
leaping three, then two steps, around the landing,
and down into the kitchen behind his mother,
--his eyes wide and black with frustration,
fisted hands pumping at his side, holding the anger,
the curb of his jaw line flexing self control.

It was from behind their mother, a small and passionate woman,
that I loved him most. She would scold him for the anger,
--a palm chopping stop!, index cutting her palm, what?
he; a peace sign slapping his forehead, stupid, stupid, stupid—
a drawn thumb down his chin, sister
thumb and pinky to his temple, cow

My first kiss should have been on those lips,
my mouth to his, sipping out
embrangled word and tongue and sound--
sealing his mouth, the lips that twisted “o”s and “m”s,
distorting the words he needed
and settling his hands.

©Lorraine Henrie Lins
The End of Them

My friend lives in a mailbox,
licks the cancelled stamp of her heart,
red flag raised.
No one picks her up.
She draws maps
of all the places the men she once met
are still waiting.
She practices their conversations
and gestures at the gym;
they grow like muscles.
She joined a cartel,
kidnapped his memory,
carved out the heart
and stuffed it in the mouth,
hung it from a bridge
where tomorrow begins.
She threw open a door,
stepped out onto a crowded dock,
the hands of the horizon
folding clouds into the shape of ships.
She keeps asking Which one is mine?
She dreamed she was a child
hit crossing the tracks,
only seeing where she wanted to go,
chased by a mean dog.
She woke up
not knowing who or where she was,
her body broken in unimaginable ways
by the terrible train of time.
She said she couldn’t move.
I want to teach her to walk,
use a fork and the remote.
I begin by holding a mirror up to her face
tell her to repeat her name,
but she only calls to the small reflection
standing in the distance,
asking him to come back,
to stay.

©Andy Macera

Visit

One time when my door
was suddenly cracked open
(understand this is a metaphor
for what happened years ago)
the fresh air that rushed in
stoked the embers, still aglow.
They flared up into flames and burned
a world. I didn’t know
how not to blaze,
not then,
but have since learned,
with bated breath and window locks,
how to control incoming ox-
ygen, remembering well the fiery days.

Now my door has been
unlatched and cracked again
and you appear,
with a gust of wind. But as we’re older,
no longer awed by oxygen,
I understand the sudden tear
that wells and trickles down my face:
As if the keeper of an inn
were sprinkling coals in the fireplace
so that they do not burn too bright
too hot too wild too fast
but rather smolder
and last
all night.

©James B. Nicola

Dance at Bougival by Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Argon

These were the days when I grew out my beard. I had built my log house and I intended to live in it. At night I brewed beer. I brought a clear stein to school and from it I drank water all day. The students gossiped, as students do. I looked for love but instead I found a nest of mice in my engine block and then their cache of dog food behind the water heater. The house smelled like lamb meal and rice for weeks. I didn't find love and I made the silly mistake of seeing women in the lab equipment. Once I saw a woman with shapely buttocks and a fine thigh narrowing into a Barbie's leg, but it was only a retort. I kept looking until I corked together two cold fingers incorrectly and gases sublimed into the lab. We evacuated, and then the building emptied. The students loved it. They thought I loved it, too, said, "He flooded us out! Nearly killed us all!" They left me breathless but I thought I should have saved the stein, or the retort, or the love.

These were the days when I trimmed my beard. For a full year she trapped crickets under old steins and then slipped coasters underneath to revel at the end of her nose in the glossy pronotum. "Doctor," she would say and I would reply, "Doctor." "We'll move," she said, "to Sweden, and I'll study black darters, the smallest dragonflies in the British Isles, did you know, and you may go to that little village where they quarried all those new elements. We love fish. We'll learn Swedish!" I was convinced but she prized my hand from its stein and placed it on her breast. She flinched and I knew my hand was cold; the stein was full of ice. I was convinced but I had this and that, which required my attendance: my students, my department, my dogs, my faculty senate seat, my beer. She went anyway and she waited, until April 16 or 17, because I didn't understand the time difference. She leaped off a bridge, it seemed. I was unclear for several weeks and flew once to Sweden. I buried her at sea, between the fjords. Retorts became glass again. I shaved away my beard. And the students said, of my water, Hey, hey, clear beer, Doc, why don't you teach me that trick.

©Tony Colella

The Pocahontas Forgiveness Goes Viral

You generated coal light from your gait as easily as the new sun crawls through a sleepy forest, without worry over hot spillage, or who might be horribly blinded or grossly revealed or given visions in that rare moment of wet earth and ancient sky becoming one nation. You wore always a warm candle in your face. You could summon the Mother's absolute love from a buried stone simply by holding out your palms. All things poured desire toward Matoaka if you wished and sparkled through you flowing like so many days into all time and also no time as you liked. This stunned every wild thing to the molten core of his being. And so many plotted then to end your monstrous reign and capture your one and only animal spirit to use as the ultimate weapon against spirit itself. Such a creature stirs awake the Great Neck Within to want to destroy the known universe with a mighty thrust of its horns. It's not your fault alone. We cannot shake the smell of your sweet beautiful closeness without being torn apart by a biting sadness like a bear's jaws crunching our silky skulls into stardust and fevered dreaming forever.

©Darryl Price
Crazy Rainbow

1.

The anodized sun laid out on a granite countertop, Then sliced into triangles like a sausage pizza…
Everywhere, absolutely everywhere you look—
Beneath sofa cushions, nestled in the limbs
Of maples, in the froth from a wolf’s thick tongue,
Embedded in sea mist that soars when waves
Crash upon monstrous sandstone cliffs
At Drake’s Bay—in all these places,
Indeed in every place a woman looms.

2.

You hold my hand and we walk upon ruins
Of the San Francisco Sutro Baths. In their day
The baths were magnificent, with several huge
Glass domes and giant indoor swimming pools.
Here stylish women swam. The most daring
Propelled from a high dive. But today we’re
Completely exposed at the edge of the Pacific:
Salt scent, cormorants, knotted kelp, urchins,
Crazy gulls. The faint cries of a few seals float
From off in the distance. A fierce arctic wind
Nearly blows us off the crumbling cement
Foundations. Later that evening we relax
At the King George with wine and tabloids.
A bearded man guffaws, probing deep
Into the soul of his Blackberry. Your
Stomach aches. Maybe from the Pinot Noir.
Maybe because of the gastric bypass you had.

3.

The neighbor in the apartment in back of me
Has a little plastic pool that he keeps filled
For the benefit of a mass of roaming ducks.
He feeds them crackers and stale bread heels,
Their cacophonous cackles of utmost ecstasy
Reach heaven, reverberate back, and then up
To heaven again. The ducks mess my patio,
But Daphne insists they’re worth the trouble.
She and daughter Blanche have come to watch
A hot new video on my 61 inch high def t.v.

4.

The highway narrow and winding.
It sallies through thickest timber land
Where Sierra and Cascade ranges marry.
You can glimpse Lassen volcano
At alternate switchbacks, almost smell
Sulfur spewing from its plethoric fumaroles.
Approaching Susanville the road widens,
Bordered by towering monoliths—
Fir and knotty pine that seem stratospheric,
So high do they stretch
Into the dense layer of clouds.
Once past Susanville you have reached
The immense Nevada plateau:
No more majestic mountains.
Take the highway to Reno and you’ll see
On the left the massive dry Honey Lake bed
Sprawled for miles like a planetary pancake,
Golden brown and luscious.
The tall grasses and roving chaparral constitute
Rich, delicious syrup. As the sun sets a dramatic
Rainbow appears along the high ridge of the Sierra,
Followed by a thunder shower that almost shatters
The windshield…She went and shattered your heart,
Even though you showered her with love’s fumaroles,
Bought her pancakes and painted her a rainbow.

©Thomas Piekarski
in paris

one year the men all dressed in sherbet colored
summer suits of purest linen
it was the year i fell in love with a
hand model
who
wore white gloves during
dinner
removing them only to
rummage through her purse or to
place her fork gently beside
a pale green pistachio cake
as if afraid to sink the
tines deeper
though she got deeper into me
and while i am not complaining
exactly
(because how can you not love a woman
named mazarine)
i already appear to have said
too much
as the french reserve a large category
of thought for le non dit
(the unsaid)
which come to think of it might
have made a better title
for this poem
but one hopes not to be found
gauche for observing
that in paris there are
but two ages
youth & decay
and mazarine was youth and i
well
you see
so there she was that
night
with her white gloves and
faint arm hair
and that upward look
that only
young girls have
who so want to please
a girl in translation

on the edge, a yard apart or
Andrew Marvell's Comics

we're on the edge, a yard apart
i see your scars, i guess your heart.
i know, i fear this slip, this slide
i see your fear behind your pride.

i wish i had the time and skill
the art, the courage and the will
to lift the burden, chase the dark
to strike the steel that makes a spark.

if we were now still wild and young
if the songs of youth had not been sung
we might have broken down this cage
with lust or madness, sweat and rage.

we're stuck, i guess, with the longer view
that someone, either me or you
can play the angel or the clown
before our little time runs down.

there are things we have to do alone
and yet, if left all on our own
where's the grace and what's the point
of oil and perfume to anoint
our heads when hearts have turned to stone
and one is dancing all alone?

we know that we are getting old
we curse the darkness, fear the cold
shall we remember youth's desire
and -while there's light- embrace the fire?

©Lynn Hoffman

Poetry

©Gary Percesepe

Magpie, 1869 by Claude Monet
Poetry

Who Better?

Who better to return to at the end of the day?
  Can't wait to get home.
    Empty my pockets and wash my hands.

Who better to lift a glass at the start of dinner?
    Clink.
    He: "On no two consecutive days…
    She: … is the shoreline precisely the same."

Who better to shake a tail feather or slow dance, New York Style?
    Oldies are the best.
    And when I land on her backgammon blot oh, to play that long, slow back game.

Who better on the road to make it home wherever we are?
  And meeting people along the way who better to encourage me to tell an old story made new?

Who better to light a candle for a joy to share, or a sorrow?
    Her byline: respect and reverence.
    As each season brings its own, who better to gather the harvest?

©Neal Whitman

Lotus

Drape me with silk lustrous as the line of my thigh, feed me oysters champagne lapped, finger napped, cream whipped to fill my hollows.

Make cartography with your mouth, move mountains with your fingers, tongue highways down my belly moan your prayers hush in my ear you are done with her, hope these offerings will unfurl my heart.

©Linda Simoni-Wastila

Lake Chelan

There was something plainly beautiful about each of them. Together, they were beautifully plain, unadorned and true. Verbal and vocal when clothed, they turned meditative and contemplative when naked. At dusk, the street quieted, as did they, Amish-like, between the sheets. Pure in their twined silence, they were freed from embroidered fantasies. All they required was the other; the two of them bound limb to limb. Overwhelming sighs at the end. Two pairs of black rubber boots, her rain boots, his waders, overturned in the corner.

©Cherise Wolas

The Harvest at Montfoucault by Camille Pissarro

Rainy Day by Gustave Caillebotte
Death of a Romantic

_Soul_ is the first to go, followed by _Love, Longing, Desire_.
The moon is untethered, sunset mashed under a boot heel, all rainbows bled, constellations crushed.

Forget the firefly, dragonfly, butterfly, moth. Singe the ladybug’s wings, pluck the bluebird clean. Uproot twining roses, jasmine, willows that weep.

No alabaster or alpenglow, nymph pink, madder lake, Wedgewood blue. While you’re at it, 86 the ballads of Berlin, Gershwin and Kern, the Late Show, flowered china, French perfume.

Day rolls into night, unquestioned.
There is Fire, Air, Water, Earth.
And Truth, perfect and terrible, cut in a mirror which is no longer a looking glass, swallowed whole down my throat which is not a golden flute.

©Denise Rue

The Lovers

With the sound of rain
The darkness doubles upon all
The lovers of the world shattered
On beds, breast-to-breast, the memory
Of body beyond them. Gone from here, Their vigilant bones fear nothing but the slow fill Of falling night, the empty weight of insurrection, Spotting rain. Forever wishing they were Somehow better, but not, they never stop loving What part they were, what root they are, What poetry they could be. They never Stop loving the moment that was Almost them. Tonight, for all nights, For all weather, for all time, for all place, For all lovers unto the end of memory And rain and bone, they wake, they cling.

©GTimothy Gordon

Finally

Damn it, I _will_ say it!
Coarse, left-field though it may be, it _shall_ emerge, damn the old don’ts!

The cloak will abandon the adam’s apple and rumple to the floor. The rapier will make its tinny clatter. The ballet tights, the spangly tunic, and Cyrano’s plume will fly off. Someone catch the lute before it rifts.

I will willingly, willfully denude myself to just one sloppy blood-rare whomping worn-out soft-boiled heart.

It’s still “signed, sealed, delivered”. There’s nothing for it. But both hands free.

I love.

I love.

Almost into infinity.

©Maude Larke
Empty, Changed

The thrush outside the window mocks me with a crow call.
Church bells out on Main Street ring oppressive drone.
The chair feet wobble strange against the hardwood floor.
The moonlight, low and yellow, taints the table top.
The neighbor’s dog complains in hexes of his bitch.
The world is empty, changed, without your words, your smile.

© Stan Galloway

Inside of My House

Someday you are going to walk into my house
I will make you baked chicken and a green salad
with Italian tomatoes and Feta cheese
I will show you the pictures of me when I looked
like my daughter except my hair was the color
of mahogany and hers is the color of wheat
You can read my books of poetry
I will read my poetry to you
I will make you a big pot of Snicker doodle
so we can drink coffee out on my deck before
I take you down to the harbor where the lake twinkles
under a Strawberry Moon
Yes, this is my house and you will see my picture
of Flaming June and my atlas of the world
I will turn on the light in my replica lighthouse
so we can cuddle on the couch
In the bedroom, in my house you can dive into
my quilt that smells like vanilla or my French perfume
You can take off my green camisole
and kiss the insides of my elbows, then my knees
I'll let you sweat all over me until
we float away on an invisible river
here inside my house.

© Rosalie Sanara Petrouske
On Second Thought

Looking back
you were not the perfect prince,
as a love crushed young girl
once described you,
or even the great intellectual
I had imagined you.

As a matter of fact
you were occasionally—
do I dare say—illiterate.

Often caddish
when it suited your purpose,
easily disarming the
next casualty selected,
cold and aloof when
warmth was expected.

Yet all in all
you were a rocket flare,
short lived,
but spectacular,
memorable in so many ways
even now in my dusky days.

I have to smile
when thoughts of you
waffle in through memories scent,
and Yves St Laurent hangs
too closely in the air,
or the thrust of a
patrician chin appears
on another prince
directing his full attention
on an unwary woman
sliding rapidly into
imagination's snare.

Parapet

I told him I had missed a shooting star
and he brought me a firefly in a jar
I laughed and thought, that's just how some men are...

A summer fling, I told myself, at most,
as we held hands along the moonlit coast.

For in those days, my life was hit-or-miss.
Vacation made it easy to dismiss
the earnestness inherent in his kiss.

I helped him build a castle in the sand
though I knew full well it would never stand.

What is romance, but playing make believe?
And charming men are all prone to deceive.
Yes, I was young, but I was not naive.

And when the tide rolled in, my sole response
was amicable, breezy nonchalance.

I bid him a good-natured au-revoir,
yet to this day, my soul still hangs ajar.
I sigh and yearn. That's how some women are...

Parapet

©Caroline Zarlengo Spoto

Birds of a feather

A café au lait under a Berkeley sun
students like birds fluttering a spring-speckled patio
a bustle of wings, a shimmy to settle
and nibble with sly indifference
whatever morsel of oblique desire
falls nearby.

©Janet Butler
What I Would Tell Laurie
If I Ever Met Her Again

Striding across Stony Brook campus
the other day, knapsack on back,
white hair snarled by wind,
my mind was seized by the magus of memory
-- every girl I see is you, Laurie,
bewitching after fifty years.

I can spot the freckles on your face,
your thin pursed lips never lipsticked,
almost green eyes, hair that just hung there,
short green corduroy skirt you wore
over black leotards, nail-chewed fingers
perpetually stained with purple ink.

We were serious as Swedish filmmakers:
you about Durkheim and Spencer, Jules and Jim,
and that other more needy boyfriend;
me about Sartre and finding Shelley’s thorns
if I could not make you mine alone.

After that staging of Brecht’s Mother Courage,
I exited timidly when you turned from my kiss.
That time in the Village at the Dixieland hall
all I could hear was “I Fall to Pieces”
…and I did, walking into our good prof’s office,
crying my eyes out as he laughed.

How I loved my idea of you -- shiny
unbitten apple, forbidden -- and still do,
lucky half a century later
to watch our movie on continuous loop.

Radishes

While shopping before a trip,
I picked up some notebooks,
the last of which was not very practical.
Thick, wire bound, an odd shape,
but of the variety in the bin,
this one, this one,
this one had a cover showing
rich, luscious, sensuous cherries.
And I thought,
*In this I can write my most lascivious thoughts.*
I was just recovering
from setting myself on fire
for the wrong man.

The next day,
when I unpacked my purchases
I saw
that the picture which had awakened in me
such anticipation of sinful indulgence
was not of cherries at all.
White stems and roots, a paler red.
They were radishes.
And I knew then
that all bets were off.

©Elissa Gordon

The Color of Pebbles

I saw a girl on a horse, once
Her hair was a heavy steel gray, and then red, and then black
She moved the animals ahead of her, and they
moved because she wanted them to move, and there
was no force in it, only wanting
She was old, and her touch held such wisdom that it
put babies to sleep, but she was young and rode
wildly and she rode fast, or maybe she rode in her
own time, ripely
All around her was the color of pebbles,
She could smell water
And sometimes no one could find her at all.

©Grey Johnson
Spring Has Sprung

The time is now, and spring has sprung.
Soft earth below, blue skies above,
The time is now, and we are young.
What better time to be in love?

Soft earth below, blue skies above,
What more could anyone desire?
What better time to be in love?
Our heads awhirl, our hearts afire.

What more could anyone desire?
The future is at our command.
Our heads awhirl, our hearts afire.
So here my dear, your wedding band.

The future is at our command,
I'm yours to honor and obey.
So here my dear, your wedding band.
I'm yours forever, come what may.

I'm yours to honor and obey
The time is now, and we are young
I'm yours forever, come what may.
The time is now, and spring has sprung.

©Hal O'Leary

Eight Beastly Kisses

A woman can do nothing
but what is natural:
the receiving of eight kisses
on the eve of the full moon
on the eve of the vernal equinox.

She is kissed first
as fingertips to that satin feathery tuft
of the backyard tufted titmouse—Poecile bicolor.
A pearly kiss it was, lustrous.

Then she is kissed
as with lips to the sun-warmed pelt
of a Weddell seal,
an Antarctic creature, Leptonychotes weddellii.
An opalescent kiss it was, fiery.

She is kissed
soundly by a sounding humpback, Megaptera novaeangliae,
whale of a bewhiskered beast,
of Earth’s great cold oceans.
A sapphire kiss it was, bold.

She is kissed
with the peculiar musky tongue
of a southern red-backed salamander—Plethodon serratus,
remember?—
A ruby of a kiss, wet.

She is kissed
on the mouth that very night
by green sea turtles—thrice—
the green, the beloved Chelonia mydas.
A tortoiseshell kiss it was, hard.

She is kissed
that last time, eyes opened, jaws agape,
tasting Tursiops truncatus,
her bottlenose porpoise, prince of the seas.
A diamond kiss it was, starlit.

A woman can do nothing
but what is natural:
the receiving of eight kisses
on the eve of the full moon
on the eve of the vernal equinox.

©Karla Linn Merrifield

Moon

I see you on the streets,
in my reflection on the window.

The sky wraps you
in gradations of light.

I will be dreaming tonight
of the harbor:

legs dangling from a dock,
smoke brought in by wind.

Fisherman’s moon,
you are unreachable.

©Jacob Oet
Under the Gingko Tree

Under the stinking gingko tree,
whose jade fans seek not to know
the foul fruit spattering below,
two lovers bitterly part
and spiteful words cut and fester
when silence were the better part.

The plinking of piano keys
from brownstone window—
some wag picks out a Joplin rag—
one lover leaves to shop for boots,
the other goes his wandering way
into the wicked tunnel
of the rackety subway train.
Against his tears and mopes,
some light o’ love finds smiles
thoroughly unrequited.

She, who hated process,
gazed upon the supple toe
of glazed and costly boot,
glimpsing slivers of perfection:
gash of cardinal
dish of quinces
moan of plaintive lute.

He, who was okay with dross,
sifted through his memories
to find the splinter of his doom,
and chopping twisted earthy roots,
made soup of his hilarious loss.
Outside his shabby window
waved the lovely gingko tree.

The lovers met again one night
beneath the gingko tree.
They danced around the question,
the riddle of the shivering tree,
shaking down repulsive fruits
as if embarrassed, scarified,
by its extreme polarity.
At last she said, *If you’ll eschew
the putrid parts of this alarming tree.*
Said he, *It’s nothing to me now
as long as you’ll have me.*

Winter Affair

We pushed up and up, we levitated
soon enough to a warm thought
over slush-coated streets, the cling-clang
of bells while a woman sang through ceiling speakers
and wet shoes streaked a tile floor.

Today, across from an empty chair,
alone never felt so close, so real-----cold lover,
its grip hard on my wrist.

I boot my feet in fur these days and rely
on peripheral vision so as not to ruin
the surprise. Surely there will be a surprise,
some sun-faced miracle-----or at this rate,
your hand in hers.

He Speaks Softly

Leave off these last few angry airs,
My love, that I may keep my heart at ease,
That what we call our love affair
Will suffer little more than what it sees.

Too often what I do or say
Becomes a cornerstone we cannot lift,
A stone that weighs, a lump of clay-
We stumble, cry, resist and weakly drift

To corners well-rehearsed. We slump
Across a room devoid, a sterile stretch
Of tiles like worries made to trump
Our nascent hopes with granite teeth that catch
And crush. O Lord! O Love! Unbind
This grip of self, debilitating “me”,
The fear that smirks and struts to find
A timid soul to occupy. O! Free

The one who loves, who wants but you,
The man supposed to answer in the night,
The man asleep when love is due,
The one awake afraid of his own fright.

©Carol Alexander
©G.A. Saindon
Translation

Which language can I use to speak to you?
Most are closed to me, the foreign syntax of worlds not my own,
the signs translate differently, a cultural rift.

When you lift my hair off my neck,
I want you to press your lips just there, but you give a quick fan
and drop the locks back into place, damp, clinging tendrils.

For language we have touch or laugh
until our eyes slide out to sea, awash in what we can not say. 
The horizon widens its interminable blue ache.

©June Sylvester Saraceno

When I Was

The sky provoking a sense of awe
With a golden crest it let out a violent roar
The clouds gathered fast
The good weather would not last
A breeze blew in and kissed the floor
Then it slithered down the street with furore
The ethereal plains ruptured their load
Sublimely in the bitter cold
It rained with an unsightly force
Continuing heavily with little recourse
It looked as though everything in the world wanted to cry
When I was looking at the sky

An eclipse overshadowed my garden window
A horse drank from my shoe before sleeping on my pillow
Dandelions married roses and floated away
Serpents grew legs and had something to say
The sun imploded into a dancing lion
Feathers became as strong as iron
The earth collided into the moon
Midnight somehow became noon
There was nothing I could do
When I was falling in love with you

©Yasir Hayat
A day is a day is a day. They follow one behind another if you think of them as petitioners of faith in a line before thrones.

“I need bread.”

“I want freedom.”

“I must have security.”

“I need a woman.”

“Red shoes for me.”

“Whiskey.”

“Got a light?”

“Daddy?”

Who are any of us to believe someone would lay themselves down, much less rise up again. For us? Why not for the fact of life, for beauty, for the sun, for the spring, for …

Theme parks for the resurrection.

I was maybe twenty, thirty miles north of Louisiana, coming south on I55, daydreaming while the slope of Mississippi land around me went flat and you could suddenly see across distances, fields and farms. Passed the edge of a town where a church was beginning to empty the faithful onto an asphalt field full of cars and pickups, the faithful heading for an after-service harvest of going home to supper.

You know how it is, I mean, when your eye rests on someone and you feel recognition, some connection to the soul of-a-one you do not know … but recognize? Maybe you don't, but your mind gets that way when you've been driving so far alone ... and you've been alone a long time before that drive, need a smoke or a cup of coffee or both and you wish you had a woman, not just any woman, but a friendly, happy woman beside you.

Anyway, that Easter Sunday, I saw her. Coming out of the church, down the steps, headed for the parking lot. Beautiful, blonde, alone, separate from the others, just tall enough, just plump enough, young, not young, familiar, strange. Strange? Strange how you can see someone so clear from so damned far away, see things you'd never notice up close. Should have stopped the car by the side of the damn highway, run over, introduced myself. Might have seemed odd, maybe offensive, maybe trouble, definitely weird that a stranger would run to a church parking lot from a parked car on the side of the Interstate … maybe even illegal, but what the hell? Where's the point of a God, resurrections, heaven or hell, if you can't suddenly fall in love from distances and fall, thunderstruck, at the feet of a woman, a total stranger, and foreswear your foolish, empty life to serve the purpose of love forever after?

Am I right?

Damned right I'm right. Nonetheless, I didn't do it. Drove on as though life was meant to be empty. Even smiled, said quietly aloud to the distance, “Foolish imagination. Foolish man.”

Can I get an amen?

~
She peeled off a couple of bills and threw them in my face. “Go get yourself laid,” she said. Everything about her was fire, she seemed to smolder in the dark. Some guys leaving the roadhouse saw and started laughing.

I put out my hand to her. “Steady. Steady.”

By then she was crashing into the car and wheeling out and I started to choke from the dust being kicked up. She had managed to bash that Pinto up pretty good. Tonight might be its swan song. Par for the course she had plenty to drink.

Fall had come too soon, a nip in the air. The cash scattered around my boots it could be early leaves.

I squatted down in the blue light of the roadhouse sign. Three twenties. Let some other stiff pick up her money. Find it and swear it’s his goddamn lucky day. Everything about this woman was no good. She lived for the drama. The kid was suffering. Little Henry had called his mama shit-house crazy to her face. That’s when I knew something had to be done.

Next morning, early, I phoned her sister Myrtle May. “Baby needs you,” I said.

“Not this time. I have my own affairs need attending.”

“Myrtle May.”

“It’s no use repeating my name it’s not going to change things.”

I glanced toward the shut bedroom door. Without saying goodbye I hung up the wall phone.

Out in the yard Henry was tossing the ball for a mangy yellow stray. “Henry Lewis you’ve been warned,” I said.

The little boy’s eyes got big and worried. “Aw, Daddy. He’s so awful miserable. He’s got no food or nothing.”

“Give him some of that old baloney back behind the lettuce. Not the good baloney, the stuff in the plastic bag.”

Henry’s face lit up. “Stay here,” he told the mutt, “I’m gettin’ you some meat.”

The dog, at least, seemed obedient. It stood there watching the boy walk toward the house.

I knelt down and patted one knee. “C’mere.” The dog moved toward me slow with its tail tucked in. It came to a halt near the juniper bush.

“That old bush isn’t gonna protect you,” I said. “If I went in the house for my rifle I could blow you apart right here.” The dog had cocked its head to the side like it actually got my point.

Even you understand, I was thinking. Everyone gets it. Even a freakin’ dog gets it.

“Baby,” I whispered feeling that familiar thud in my chest.

Then I looked at the sky thinking it’s going to rain later.

~
“If I move in, I know I will kill your cat. I mean I'll murder it. Most likely. You need to know that,” Faith said, her green eyes big, tearful, the sides of her mouth quivering.

Jerimund could tell she was serious. “Well, that is a risk I am willing to take.” He looked over her shoulder, quietly distressed, at his six-year-old gray tabby, Sir Earl Grey.

“Well, maybe I'm not!” she said.

Jerimund wasn’t sure what to do about this answer. He didn't want her to kill Earl Grey, but he so wanted her there at night. He got up and made her some soup. She liked Chicken and Stars.

The next day at work, he was sitting in his clear plastic envelope examining the genome of Deinococcus radiodurans—a germ that could survive exposure to gamma radiation, which is something most life cannot do. He was supposed to be developing an amoeba that would eat nuclear waste and turn it into something useful: plastic or lead or less toxic nuclear waste, perhaps. Instead he was working on a sequence in his head that would give polar bears giant bat wings. It had come to him in a dream when he was ten. A big white bear, elegantly flapping overhead with gigantic furry white bat wings. He had always wanted a skybear.

It was two p.m., so the sun briefly shone in his tiny window, and he was surprised to see some dust glisten in the beams. Dust was mostly dead human cells, cells filled with genetic material that should not be in the envelope. Much of that must be his dust.

He waved the dust towards the gene-analyzing machine. This was entirely against protocol. Contamination. He might accidentally produce a radiation-eating Jerimund. But he wanted to look at his code. He wanted to sift through and find the nucleotides responsible for Faith not wanting to move in with him. Perhaps he gave off a scent that made a woman with genes like Faith's want to kill his cat.

He knew just waving the dust at the machine would do no good. The dust/cells could not get in. His dead skin flipped and floated about uselessly.

“Isn't he a nice cat?” he said to her as they sat on the couch the following week.

“Yes, he is,” she said. “I don't want to get too close to him, though.”

“Do you like your soup?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said, and smiled up at him.

Then she looked down at the cat. The sides of her mouth started quivering again. Now was not the time to ask her to move in, but he wanted to try again soon. She lived far away and worked even farther away, so if she didn't move in, Jerimund would spend most nights alone.

They were both sad, so they went upstairs and had sex. Sex between them was great. He felt like a glorious skybear.

While he was getting ready for work, he found a red strand of hair on his cardigan. Faith's. He pulled it long. It looked like a filament of laser light. He could make millions of copies of her out of this strand of hair. It was a galaxy of DNA.

Maybe he could bring it to work, memorize it, and then, if she wouldn't move in, or would try to kill his cat, he could keep making new Faiths. Surely, he would eventually make one that he wouldn't make cause to want to kill his cat? But no, that would be playing God—and that was something his mother had told him not to do outside of work.

Weeks passed. On weekends they kissed. They had sex. They slept side by side and spooned. Sometimes they slept head to chest, other times chest to head.

He said, “I love you” a lot. She looked like she wanted to say it back but something wouldn’t
let her. He cursed his badly ordered nucleotides.

Then one weekend, as winter was coming near, she said, “I love you” a lot. Seven-and-a-half times. The half one was slightly mumbled.

Jerimund asked her again to move in. It was the fourth time he had asked her. But she said, “No.” She reminded him of his cat’s well-being. Every time he asked, he got sadder and sadder.

He started staying late at work examining his genome for the problem. It was not really such a bad genome. He hummed his code at night; the nucleotide pattern had a rhythm. It sounded like the Volga Boat song.

He couldn’t find what the defect was.

***

The spaces between the weekends seemed longer, and by the time Faith came to see him that weekend, it had been too much. He had scrubbed himself, dusted his house, and cleaned Sir Earl Grey. There would be no scent, no secret genetic marker to set her off.

He looked at himself in the mirror before he made his move. “You can do this,” he said to himself.

He pretended he had gone to get her a spritzer. Instead, he came back with the cat and—though her mouth started to quiver—he placed it on her lap.

She petted it until her mouth stopped quaking.

She looked up. “I’ll move in with you.”

***

Jerimund was very happy that week. He was making progress on the amoeba. He made one that liked to eat nuclear waste and would turn it into arsenic and a smaller amount of a different kind of nuclear waste. At least arsenic is natural.

He had also been examining his cat’s genome. The rhythm of their genes was eerily similar. Two Volga Boat songs with improvisation in between.

When Jerimund first got Sir Earl Grey, he was a tiny kitten. So tiny, in fact, that he called him Teabag. The minute kitten would curl up on his shoulder and sleep there.

When he first met Faith, she reminded him of Teabag. Huge eyes and hair like a marmalade cat with its ears back.

***

Faith’s smile was very big as they moved her stuff in on Saturday, and Jerimund was very happy, too. She had a spice rack with new spices he had never tried. She had better lamps. She had a beautiful oak coffee table. He liked the books in her boxes a lot.

He went out to get the last box. She put on the kettle. She killed Sir Earl Grey. She had pinned him to the oak coffee table, a paring knife through his top third, a screwdriver through his middle, and an ice pick through the bottom quarter. Her mouth was quivering, her eyes welling.

“Don’t say anything. It is totally my fault,” Jerimund said.

“No…” she said, teary.

“Yes, you warned me…” he said, hoping Earl Grey’s soul was ascending somewhere.

She poked the ice pick and tittered for half a second but then looked back at him and started tearing up again.

***

He spent the next few days at work, poring over his genome, and over Teabag/Sir Earl
Forewarned by Benjamin Matvey

Grey's. What was wrong with them?

He stayed a few nights in a row and slept in his plastic envelope. One night, he dreamed of mixing a narwhal with a kangaroo to make a leaping ice pick-like creature with a unicorn horn.

But did he really want a kangaroounicorn?

***

He came home sad. He realized he could make a new Teabag, but that Faith would probably have to kill him again.

Faith had been busy since he was gone. In the living room she constructed a see-through plastic cell, with a cot, a dresser, and bed, and in the corner a toilet behind a little curtain with pictures of daisies on it.

“I will just stay in here,” she said. “It's safer.”

Jerimund did not like this idea. He wanted her in his bed. To be warm and soft with him.

But she looked happy in there. Free of worry of future cat murders, or misdeeds of any kind.

He saw that she hadn't vacuumed out her plastic envelope very well either. Dust swirled above her head, and in all likelihood it was his dust, and her dust, and even Sir Earl Grey’s dust. He wondered if maybe his skin cells in that dust were still alive—if only a little.

He imagined them raining down on her and then, like little radio towers, transmitting the sensation of her skin and warmth to him. He could feel her from the other side of the plastic. She could stay there, and he would feed her Chicken and Stars. He could remake Teabag and keep him safely outside the plastic, and they would all be happy.

It occurred to Jerimund this might be good enough.

You’re the Top by Andrew Stancek

Tibor runs through his yard and buries both hands in the lush orange fur of the new neighbor’s Pomeranian. The dog yelps, flops down and shows off his belly for rubbing. The woman’s laugh is throaty. “She loves you,” she says. “She never does that for anyone except me.”

Tibor flushes. Her hair has the same shade of cinnamon as the woman in the painting in Father’s office and her eyes have the same squint. But she has clothes on and the woman in the painting doesn’t. Tibor is glad she can’t know he’s thinking about her with clothes off.

He keeps rubbing the dog's tummy. “You’re a big boy,” she says. “Would you help me move my piano closer to the window? I wanna look out when I play.” Tibor nods. “Should I check with your mom?” Tibor shakes his head.

Her house has deep plush carpet right behind the front door, where their house has linoleum. Tibor takes his sneakers off, follows the woman and the tail-wagging dog into the living room bathed in startling sunshine. The grand’s keys grin at Tibor; she runs her fingers over them in an arpeggio. “I don’t know why I didn’t immediately put it in front of the window,” she says. “Do you think we can push it over there?” Tibor leans his shoulder in; the piano wheels move smoothly over the polished hardwood.

She places the bench in front; the dog jumps up next to her; she begins “You’re the Top”. Her fingers are long and her hair bounces around her face as she plays. I won’t be that good in a million years, Tibor thinks. She finishes with a flourish.

“Time for cookies,” she says. She brings over a plate; he breathes in the cinnamon-lemon hotness. Tibor takes two, nods his thanks. That night he hides a cookie in a baggie and places it under his pillow.

~
The Window of Mértola by W.F. Lantry

It’s a small window, maybe three foot square, framed in rosewood. It had to be small, the house where it was installed was adobe, and even on the second story the opening had to be spanned with heavy beams to bear the weight of thick walls. I’d never seen it, I’d only heard rumors of its existence, that somehow through wars and earthquakes and occupations, it had survived, been disinstalled, and transported here, to the university archives. Uncatalogued, stored in some basement or vault, no-one had seen it for decades.

I wasn’t interested in the craftsmanship or mechanics, nor even in the fabrication of the glass panes. The allure was in its clarity, in what it had seen. Somewhere around 1655, a young nun had looked through it and seen a foreign officer, a Frenchman, walking through the convent courtyard below. Some say she had already known him, had entertained him and others in the small house on the convent grounds. Others called this a wild rumor, meant to discredit her vows, or intended to diminish her subsequent fame. All we really know is she wrote him several letters, which somehow fell into the hands of a Parisian publisher. Les Lettres Portugaises went through forty editions during her lifetime.

I called up the head of the archives, a learned and sympathetic man who was out of his depth, overwhelmed by the underfunded demands of a vast collection. There were paintings gathering mold in attics which hadn’t even been documented, much less restored, artifacts from the Jesuits’ trips to South America literally crumbling into dust, stacks of lambskin scrolls nibbled by mice.

“I can’t spare an archivist to help you search, and I can’t let you wander around through the collection alone. But there’s a Discalced Carmelite who sometimes volunteers for us. Perhaps she’d agree to guide you, and keep you from breaking too many objets d’art.”

That sounded fine to me, it would at least keep the pleasant old gentleman out of my hair. A meeting was arranged for the next day at three.

At precisely three twelve I was pacing the colonnade, wondering if she’d appear. A monk, maybe a Franciscan, was pruning the terraced roses nearby, and cursing the over-cheerful birds in the almond trees. I heard the clack-clack-clack of low heels on the paving stones behind me, and turned.

Discalced simply means barefoot, but the first thing I saw were her shoes. Black and perfectly polished, patterned stockings up to her knees. Maybe further, I couldn’t tell: her pleated skirt started there. It was dark navy blue, and held up with a Claddagh belt. The silk blouse was slightly lighter, jewel toned in the occasional sun as she walked. Her jacket bore a peacock pin, her dark hair shoulder length. Her light sweet voice shamed the songbirds as she greeted me.

“Shall I call you Sister?” I said.

“Miranda will do perfectly well,” she said. “What are you looking for?”

Standing there outside the building, among the perfume of freshly cut roses and surrounded by the songs of lazuli buntings, I told her about the window. She hadn’t heard of it. She didn’t know the story of Soeur Mariana, even though they came from the same order. I told her about the officer and the rumored evenings, how the sisters served tea and were famous for pastries, how they danced the fandango to castanets and violins, to the delight of their visitors.

“Things were different then,” she said, unlocking the huge double doors.
The Window of Mértola by W.F. Lantry

Even the hallways were dark, half of the bulbs were burned out. Most of the light came from narrow windows facing South. We walked past room after room with their doors ajar, each filled with some kind of object: statues in one, chandeliers in the next. They’d been monks’ cells once, before the order moved away, simple rooms with a bed and a basin, lit by a single pane. I followed her down the stairs.

The basement was one huge open space, stacked floor to ceiling with crates and boxes. Paintings leaned against the walls, massive framed works three meters high, depicting the coronation of some long forgotten king, the installation of a nameless pope. Landscapes that once hung in drawing rooms, still lifes portraying the fruit of a hunt, pheasants in season, or deer. Some leaned against marble statues, the smooth alabaster skin of elegant nudes, graces dancing in spring. Miranda blushed when she saw them. Their forms were nearly perfection, they looked as light as gazelles. One held a bow in her hand.

“Do you think it might be crated?” she said, her eyes scanning the rows.

“I hope not,” I said. “We can hardly pry open every likely looking crate. Besides, we don’t even have tools.”

“Oh, there’s no worry about that,” she said. “The workmen are incredibly sloppy. They leave stuff lying around all the time. I’m sure we can find whatever we need.”

And she was right: in the next row we found a long bladed screwdriver that would serve as a perfect wedge. There were pry bars and hammers on an ancient bookshelf, carved with the form of a rising phoenix. Its lacquer was flaking away.

The crates had been made out of any wood handy, whatever grew in-country. Zebrawood or Purpleheart, Brazilian Cherry, Madrone. Most I didn’t recognize, perhaps more valuable now than what they held. Sometimes the provenance was charcoaled onto planed faces.

“Any ideas?” she said.

“Check for writing in Portuguese, maybe?” I said.

So that’s how we spent the next hour, moving up and down the rows. When she bent over to brush away dust from some box, I tried to avert my eyes, and mostly succeeded. Three quarters of the way through the room, we found a likely crate.

It wasn’t easy to wrestle down, but I managed. She held the pry bar, I swung the hammer. The nailed planks popped right off. I levered the window out. It stood in its frame between us. My hands traced its borders, its hand blown panes. They were remarkably clear. I could see right through them. I could see Miranda.

She was looking, through the window, at me.

~
I nearly drowned once and saw the light—the tunnel, the Halleluiah chorus (before I ever knew Handel)...the whole works. I took a swing at the guy trying to revive me because he’d spooked the vision. But my point here is the light.

This light was physical, somatic, swelling my salivary glands and oozing from the quicks of my finger nails. You could gush around in this light, in a slurry of shifting senses. Birdie in a birdbath of ambrosia and endorphins. Meat and potatoes and mango chutney. I could go on.

One other time in my life I’ve been swallowed in such a light, and that was a dream of my old girlfriend, my first girlfriend, the one, as a kid, that stays forever, you never get over this one, you never get rid of her, she’s the first.

I woke up, in the dream (I dreamed I woke), and there was Phoebe beneath me and we were smearing our faces together, which is to say not a kissing so much as a deliquescent surrender of my face into hers, and hers mine, mixing faces in a plasma of all the tenderness and passion I’d ever felt for her—see above light.

It was longing suffused with completion. I remembered her taste, her black hair, her dark eyes that took me in, then or now, without seeming to, but when they did on this night, came the promise of a little something she might say, a noise she might make, to reassure me this was real. It was definitely that light again, I recognized it, the seratonic secrets of light without luminance, light that had nothing to do with day but everything to do with undying love.

Or it was mostly of that kind of light. Ninety-nine percent because, remember, it’s a dream, and the girl died fifteen years ago, and I’m happily married. And I must have had a dog, that I’d had once, in the bed with us in the dream because it moved, sort of raised its head under the covers beside us.

But then as dreams will have it, it’s not my dog at all. Turns out it’s my wife, Mia, and this is terribly unfair. I’ve never been unfaithful nor would I be, but what can you do with dreams?

“Hi, sweetie,” I said, and indicating the form beneath me, “This is Phoebe. Phoebe, Mia.”

Phoebe is trying to push me off of her but we’re sort caught of red-handed here, a little late for denying anything so I reach over and gather Mia to us.

“A gentleman uses his elbows,” she says, meaning when he’s on top, and showing thus some consideration for Phoebe, which is a good start I figure.

“I don’t know how she got here, I woke up and we were like this, and it’s a dream…”

“It’s probably one of your jealousy dreams,” she says. “You know, that’s what really pisses me off about you, you have my jealousy dream and you get to play the wayward husband. Your happy happy is just frigging unboundless!”

“No, no, I said,” said I. (I tend to come half awake in dreams, sort of lucid dreaming where you can control them except I can’t control them, just study them from the sidelines and hope for some purchase, like an indecisive director I saw on a movie set once, full of frowns and hints, that nobody much heeded, but the show went on. So that ‘I said’ back there, is me starting to wake up.)

But who would care to wake from the best women of his life, who have more than a little to do with each other, though they never met, the one long dead the other thoroughly sick of hearing about her.

“No, sweetie,” I say. “It’s no happy happy unless you two get along, you have to like each other, and you would, I’m telling you you’d hit it off, go shopping. Christ, you’re both so smart... maybe a play?”

I turn to Phoebe: “Could you help me out here, say something?” She’s working on it, she’s come from so far away, suffering a little eternity lag, so I say to my wife, “Look, Mia, could I, just,
could I hold your two faces, like this, up to mine?"

There’s a pause, this is the abyss: I will either resolve this or segue into a falling dream for about ten minutes, whistling like a bomb. But even at this precipitous edge tonight it seems I’ve got my balance, I’m not dizzy in the least, and my hands are brimming over with these two faces and I’m mindful of my elbows and to persuade my wife, who does have if not the prior at least the stronger claim, I go for her most vulnerable spot: “Do this for me, and I’ll give you a back rub.”

Dream—flash—becomes a cartoon, as if: they both roll over simultaneously to offer me their backs, which are so different that it’s hard to concentrate. Mia is tall and long, with flowing red hair, and back muscles like Margot Fontane’s. Phoebe is a petite brunette, long indigo black hair that always looked underwater to me, and with a butt like a kid’s and back muscles like Margot Fontane’s. They both danced when younger.

Can you pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time? I can’t. I can, but it’s hesitant and awkward and each lapses into the other, so these girls are getting simultaneous and bi-symmetrical backrubs, the best I can do under the circumstances when in fact I always gave backrubs to seduce women, not put them to sleep. But off to sleep they drift; Mia begins to snore a little and Phoebe’s clutched a ringlet of Mia’s hair, pacifier-like.

And the dog—there was a dog after all—large tail thumping over by the door, it wants to go out.

Dog, you can pee in the rubber plant for all I care. I got these hummocks of buttocks challenging me here, no place I’d rather be, though lord knows what to do with them. A fine perplexity of haunches, dilemma of dunes, yes butts.

I cover them as best I can, not easy since I’m sitting on the covers, in the valley between them. I smooth their hair. Le rouge et le noir. I feel sleepy myself and notice Phoebe’s beginning to fade; so I shake her a little.

There is a murmur muffled in pillows, not sure whose.

“Phoebe, don’t go. We won’t have this chance again.” I rub a little harder, more sensuously, Phoebe on the left, Mia on my right. I want to wake them but I know most any full-sized disturbance will blow the dream; so I’m stuck, and then my hands begin to ache. I think about singing to them, but, well, Mia sings and Phoebe only liked to whistle.

I don’t think about yanking the covers off and somehow making mad monkey love to them, we three, because…it’s a dream with its own druthers, and it’s just not going in that direction. Besides, they might not like the same sorts of monkeys.

Then Mia mumbles something.

“What, hon?” I say.

“Scratch,” she exhales.

Yes, well, instead of massaging for my supper, I begin to scratch, gently, nails running over the little impurities on their backs, tickling pores, sending tingles, imagining I’m their skin so I know where next to go. But their little coos of pleasure are too delayed and sporadic; one must second guess.

And where does one go, caught between longing and completion, far and near, odyssey and Ithaca, act and thought, then and now, night and day, love and love?

As usual, Mia nails it.

I can’t quite hear her at first so I have to whisper what. What, hon?

“Don’t stop,” she sighs.
Any visitor to Philadelphia ends up, inevitably, in Rittenhouse Square, right in the heart of the city—as William Penn himself intended, in his original design. These days, trendy outdoor cafes line the Square on Eighteenth Street; and in the current fashion, have French names like Rouge or Bleu.

In one such café, an elderly waiter served breakfast to two women: one wore shorts and bright green polo, the other, a long flowing skirt and lacy shirt. He poured, with old-world flourish, coffee for the romantically attired woman. He was rewarded by her radiant smile and a request for marmalade “only if it's no trouble.”

He floated away.

A motherly woman approached their table. “Excuse me, are you part of the wedding?” she asked the romantically attired woman.

“Not to my knowledge,” answered Tanya Cohen, laughing. “Seriously, no, but if you're looking for the church, it's probably the one across the Square. It's hard to see with all the fog.”

She stood and pointed to a sandstone church across the Square—faintly visible through the morning’s thick fog. The woman seemed infinitely grateful for this small favor.

Tanya sat down—and for a moment, wanted to confide about the man she was about to meet. But with prim Ivy Keane, that was out of the question.

She explained to Ivy, “I have a date this morning, that’s why I’m so dressed. Well, not exactly a date-date, it’s hard to explain.”

Ivy remarked, as if giving up hope. “Hey, I can’t keep track of all your men. It’s confusing.”

“My therapist uses a notebook,” Tanya answered, dryly. “Anyway, remind me to leave before nine. So, what’s happening with what’s his name, the tech guy?”

“Mark.”

“Right, bolo tie, Stetson, cute,” Tanya said; and, she thought, a bit too explicit about his availability.

“Long story, you know, everyone, everyone said, Mark’s the one, he’s perfect, and we had this intense long-distance thing going.” Ivy paused, ominously, “You know, he lived in Eugene, Oregon.”

“I almost took a teaching position there, except they didn’t hire me,” Tanya said, trying to see into the tree-filled Square. She saw a shadowy form in the distance—perhaps one of the statues, perhaps the man himself?

“Anyway, I think, I can’t do the shore with dating and parties and everything. That’s not where I need to be. I need to be with him, you know what I’m saying? I’m like, I need to do this, and he’s like, absolutely. So I fly out and there’s nothing. No one at the airport, he’s not answering his cell, it’s like nothing. I mean, zippo, nothing at all.”

“He died?” Tanya asked. She imagined road rage, car crashes, heart attacks, maybe a murder.

Ivy brushed this irrelevancy away. “You are so so morbid.”

“In my next life, I plan to be an optimist.”

“You crack me up,” Ivy said without a smile. “Anyway I’m in some god-awful motel, and I can’t get in touch with Mark, and it’s like a total nightmare. Long story, short, I find him, and he’s living with another woman.”

“That’s what my therapist calls an intimacy issue,” explained Tanya. Maybe Mark, too, had a blank-faced therapist to whom he told all.

“He had no problems with intimacy if you see what I mean,” Ivy said—a racy comment for Ivy.

“I see, a man of easy virtue,” Tanya said. “Well, he wasn’t gay.”

“Gay would be good. There is no Mark Hunter, at least not a Mark Hunter who lives in Eugene and is some kind of tech wizard. Who knows where he got that from, his real name’s John Orlowski. He’s from South Philly, I think, originally, at least that’s what his wife told me.”

“So you were the other woman,” Tanya said. “Was that awkward?”

“The wife? No, no, she’s great. Anyway, she told me that John or Mark or whatever you want to call him has lots of names, and like another fiancée and of course, other women showing up all the time. I mean-- a complete and total nightmare.”
In Rittenhouse Square by Carla Sarett

Tanya pictured Mark or John, in his Stetson, fending off a horde of enraged women: a comically shriveled vision of Man of the West. "Poor guy, it must get confusing."

"What poor guy, I loaned him five thousand dollars," Ivy said.

Money, Tanya felt, might explain why Mark had added Ivy to the mix, but not entirely. More likely, Ivy was one more distraction in a lifetime of constant failure —business schemes gone awry, creative efforts scorned, debts unpaid and favors unreturned. His life might require hundreds of such diversions and charades.

"And then he said it wasn't a loan, it was an investment and I should have understood the downside risk." Ivy shook her head pathetically, and repeated, "Downside risk, downside risk."

Tanya looked away, embarrassed. She heard church chimes, nine of them; and glancing at her watch, saw that she had lost track of time.

Of all mornings to be late, she thought. But with Ivy close to tears, Tanya felt that she could hardly just rush out. But, now, she waited patiently for the bill, and insisted on paying for the both of them—and kissed Ivy before she left.

Finally, she escaped into the Square—yards away from where she had sat. The morning was still misty and cool, especially for Philadelphia. A perfect morning, she thought, absolutely perfect. Despite herself, she felt giddy at the prospect that lay ahead.

Rittenhouse Square was a pocket-sized park, easily canvassed in a few minutes. She combed it, bench by bench, statue by statue, corner to corner—but he was not there.

Although she lacked proof, she had a sense of his having been in the park. But, she admitted, his absence answered the question—he was not there and that was that. The entire gambit seemed silly, even fantastic, at least in hindsight.

By now, the fog had burned off but the day still felt spring-like—a time to sit and dawdle. Few settings, she felt, were as congenial as Rittenhouse Square. It was modest, unpretentious, but somehow blended the nineteenth century with the new. The scale of the park seemed right for small pleasures—dog-walkers, children, animal statues, neatly edged beds of marigolds and pansies.

Next to her, two tiny elderly women in pastel suits engaged in a cheerful discussion about the world’s end. Ice caps were melting and the earth was soon to be one vast desert without a drop of water.

Across the Square, giant Scandinavian tourists trekked with enough bottled water to survive a long drought. Perhaps they feared the prophesies about water, too.

"Surrender!" screamed an impossibly small child. He aimed his thumb and index finger at Tanya, and pressed his trigger thumb; and she collapsed and allowed her head to drop low, between her knees. She moaned, until another boy triumphantly raised her head.

"Wait men!" he cried. "She's the Princess, we have to help."

An angry mother stopped this unseemly battle, shouting, "I told you, no guns!" She stared at Tanya as if Tanya herself had sold machetes to the boys. "I don't let them play with guns."

"They're boys."

The woman spit out fiercely, "I don't let them play war. I'm trying to create a better world."

"We only have peace because someone else fought a war," said Tanya. "It's Memorial Day Weekend. That's what the Memorial part is for."

Tanya skulked away to avoid further hostility—her park time was over. She decided to exit the Square on the western corner, near the Church of the Holy Trinity. There, her path was blocked by an apparent bride posing for wedding photos. Tanya’s earlier advice had been correct: the wedding was here.

"You're not supposed to upstage the bride," said a faintly accented male voice—Eastern European, she guessed. Standing next to her was a man with a sort of shabby refinement.

"Heaven forbid. No, I'm not in the wedding," Tanya replied.

"Ah, well, you look very beautiful in white," he said without the embarrassment of an American.

Tanya took his compliment with equal ease. "Thank you. Believe it or not, I'm on a very special date, all appearances to the contrary."

He laughed. "Where is this mystery man? He is invisible? I think he is standing here, jealous of me."
“Now that’s another mystery. He’s a complete stranger I met on a street. I know nothing about him, not even his name. Last night, we thought it was fate. But now, I’m thinking it was just another random event,” Tanya admitted.

“Fate—you could walk into any bar and meet this kind of fate,” the man said, exhausted at the prospect.

“And believe me, I have. But fate, accident, how do you know? Maybe you’re leading one life, and it’s not the life you were meant to—it’s just one fabulous mistake, which anyone’s life could be, like this wedding, this couple. Maybe they’re not really meant for one another.”

He said, “I hope not. I introduced them. They were my students—piano.” He waved his elegant hand in the direction of the Curtis School of Music, on the other side of the Square. Many prodigies blossomed at Curtis; and perhaps bride and groom were among them.

“And you are?” she asked.

“Mischa—Mischa Radu,” he said. “And I need a favor, please.”

She noticed his wrists seemed frail, almost feminine. “My name is Tanya Cohen and I probably can’t do you a favor. The day hasn’t exactly been working out.”

“You can come to this wedding with me. The person I thought would come today, she didn’t come. She is a busy person.”

“And are you disappointed, that she’s busy?” asked Tanya.

“No. If she were here, I couldn’t ask you,” he said, stating the obvious.

“I suppose you couldn’t at that,” Tanya agreed.

“And you, you maybe have a boyfriend, not the invisible man?” he asked.

“Well, it’s complicated. There are two men, really.” As she spoke, Tanya felt her words like weights, too heavy to carry—and for what? “I guess it’s not—complicated, that is.”

Mischa said, matter-of-factly, “Once something starts out wrong, it is never right, same with music. You start wrong, you must start over.”

By now, the wedding guests began their ascent into church. Tanya spotted the motherly woman from the café. The two waved to one another like old friends—as strangers often do when they meet again, unexpectedly, with delight.

Tanya looked helplessly towards Mischa. He gently took one of her hands with both of his and pulled her along, as she leaned backwards. “Come, it is a beautiful church and it’s cool in there.”

‘Now, what’s my therapist going to say, if I pick up one stranger on the street, and end up going to a wedding with another. On top of all my other intimacy problems,” Tanya joked.

“Intimacy, this is not a problem. This is something you worry about when you have no problems,” he said, bleakly.

Later, she marveled at the shimmering blues and reds of the stained-glass windows. “So, is this fate?” she asked him.

Mischa said with a weary fondness, “Fate, accident, same thing.”

And then, the ceremony started; and she forgot all about the world outside.

***

Rittenhouse Square had been wrapped in swirling mist when Whit Newman arrived, long before the hour of nine. Somehow, he felt that the woman would arrive as early as he had, as intense and impatient as he was. By nine, he felt his wait had been endless; and he left only a few minutes later, in a state of confusion and hurt. As it happened, he walked straight past Tanya; but fog obscured his view and she blurred into shadow.

But that afternoon, he regretted his haste. He began to wonder if he had missed her; or if, perhaps day and night were one to her, and she would arrive that evening.

So he returned to a darkened Rittenhouse Square at nine o’clock that night, and then, the next morning. He haunted the Square mornings and evenings for weeks. Later on, he waited in other places, even other cities. At the beginning, he had a vivid sense of her, but over time, that too became smudged and unclear; and each time she passed him, she took no notice.

***
In Rittenhouse Square by Carla Sarett

The night before his appointment, Whit met a former lover—in a tiny hole-in-wall bar, not far from the Square. Margaret was fashionable, with large dangling earrings, a skinny black dress, and a languid manner.

“You look great, Margaret,” Whit said, delicately, treading lightly for her sake.
“I feel great,” she replied, all vim and vigor. “I’m getting married soon.”

Her news stung Whit. He saw his relationship with Margaret in a new light, although in truth it had been a casual lukewarm affair, and hardly merited the name of romance. He now asked if their relationship might have taken a different path. He asked, “Why didn’t it work out?”

Margaret once might have pointed out Whit’s constant moodiness or his endless introspection. But, by that time, she had forgotten his faults. Instead she said, “We weren’t meant to be. There’s nothing inevitable about us.”

“But you can’t believe in fate. You’re a scientist, you’re rational,” he said.

The words rational and scientist, while true, seemed insulting, at least the way Whit said them, and at least the way Margaret heard them. She argued, “Of course, I believe in fate. I need to be someone’s destiny. It has to feel like necessity.”

“Don’t worry— you will,” she consoled him.

After he parted from Margaret, Whit wandered down unfamiliar streets. His mind was filled with talk of fate, destiny, and more than a little self-pity; and he ended up in Rittenhouse Square, not far from where he started.

It was then that he saw a beautiful woman running, as if in flight. She wore a man’s leather jacket, and her long hair was a mass of tangles. As she ran, her handbag broke apart. Its contents flew in all directions—and just where Whit stood, some pictures landed, revealing a pattern of faces and people under the street lamps.

He helped her gather the pictures—and tucked one into his own pocket. His gesture was clumsy, obvious in a comical way.

The woman seemed to mock his ineptness—she was unafraid, even in the dark. She boldly held out her palm. “Is this one of those psychology experiments? Because I can tell you right now, I’m not a trusting person.”

As she spoke, Whit saw that she was younger than he at first thought—she was probably in her twenties.

“It’s not that kind of experiment.” He handed her the picture—it showed the woman herself. She returned it to where it belonged.

“So, you’re not a thief,” she said. “But I’m intrigued—what’s the experiment?”

Whit continued, “Let’s say, we both believe this meeting is fate.”

“Please, that’s not a new line, I’m disappointed,” she said.

“It’s not a line. I feel it. And if we both felt it, if we both believed that this meeting right here, right now, isn’t an accident, then, by definition, it means something. I don’t know what it means. But maybe it means we’re meant to be together, you and I. But we never figure that out unless we meet again.”

“A test of fate versus chance?” she asked.

“If you like,” Whit said, smiling.

Tanya’s flair for the theatrical was natural and effortless—like her glamour itself, it was spontaneous. “So tomorrow, meet me here at nine. If we’re meant to meet, you’ll find me. If it’s fate, as you say.”

Whit moved close to her. “It’s fate.”
She asked, excited, “How long will you wait for me?”
He teased, “How long do you want me to wait?”

At that moment, as she was then but not later, Whit might have embraced her. He understood her desire and curiosity and even her recklessness. But even a kiss might have made the moment, or even Whit himself, seem ordinary—and surely, he felt, he required more than that.

Her last words to him were, “It only counts if you wait for me forever.” And she vanished into the night, like a mirage in hot sand.
In 1973, Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci shocked the world with *Last Tango in Paris*, a film whose disturbing theme—anonymous sex involving the use of high cholesterol solid fatty oils—caused it to be banned in many countries and applauded by the American Dairy Council.

Bertolucci said that the idea for the film—starring a 48-year-old Marlon Brando and 19-year-old Maria Schneider—grew out of a sexual fantasy; his dream of “seeing a beautiful nameless woman on the street and having sex with her without ever knowing who she was.”

I have a fantasy somewhat similar to that of the great Italian director's; I want to eat in a restaurant without knowing who the waitress is.

Around the time of *Last Tango*’s release, waitstaff in restaurants began to importune customers by announcing their first names—the waitstaff’s, that is, not the patrons. “Hi my name is _ _ _ _ _ _ _ and I’ll be your waiter/waitress this evening” became restaurant fare as standard as crème brûlée. The goal, one presumes, was to enhance the evening’s experience by persuading diners that they were on a first-name basis with the help, thereby justifying higher “price points” for the owner and bigger tips for the servers.

The insincerity of this ploy was apparent from the fact that there was never any attempt at a bilateral exchange; no waitress ever asked you what your name was. If she did, she might have to send you a Christmas card, or buy you a birthday present. You can be sure she didn’t want *that* to happen.

As a result of this enforced familiarity I have, over the past few months, been waited on by an Antonia, a Celeste, and a Gloria. I’ve met a Brittany and a Chelsea; I’m somewhat surprised I haven’t encountered a Liverpool and a Portsmouth as well. In every single instance, the freighted and flirtatious subtext that name-exchanging inevitably carries with it, like so much ballast in a cargo ship, has led to precisely nothing. Not even a come-hither look as I walk past the cash register, or a 2 cent peppermint instead of just a toothpick. Just a happy face next to the signature of “Chloe!”

The disappointment that I’ve felt over and over again has caused me to turn in upon myself and withdraw from the world; I want, like Greta Garbo, to be left alone. I want to eat in silence, not to be reminded again and again of the many women who have told me their names, then dropped me like a hot rock. I want the joy of anonymous dining.

And so I have come to my local Quiznos, a restaurant so low-down that the counter help does not tell you their names. Here, I hope to enter the realm of the forbidden, the unknown. The woman behind the counter has no nametag, but begins to speak as I approach.

“Welcome to Quiznos, may I take your . . . “

“Please—no names.”

“I need to know the name of your sandwich.”

“My sandwich has no name.”

“Then you can order by number.”
I look up on the board and see what I want, or at least what I want that doesn’t come in the form of a woman.

“Number one,” I say. The Honey Bacon Club.

“Small, medium or large?”

“What does my size matter?”

“The manager’s special is a medium toasted sandwich with a bag of chips and a large fountain drink.”

I consider her generosity, her willingness to help a total stranger. I find this—strangely alluring.

“You have been most accommodating,” I say with sincere gratitude. “Medium it shall be.”

She begins to cut the bread on the specially-marked Quiznos cutting board that makes proper sizing of sandwiches a matter of mathematical precision.

“What do you want on it?” she asks.

It is a question she must ask, and yet I think she knows the answer. “I must have—everything.”

She takes the high-speed condiment dispenser, specially manufactured for Quiznos with not one, not two, but three spouts, and squirts it over my bread. It is over all too quickly, and yet—I am satisfied. I look in her eyes for some sign that she is, too.

She slides the sandwich wordlessly into the Quiznos oven, then disappears, only to reappear on the other side, like a startled wood nymph! She’s a one-woman assembly line!

The sandwich emerges from the mouth—uh, actually, I guess the other end is the mouth—of the oven, and she wraps it with brutal, almost sadistic efficiency. She turns, gives me a look that I think is more than a perfunctory expression of fast-food commercial gratitude—and is gone.

I am awoken from my reverie by the voice of the butt-ugly shift manager.

“For here or to go?” he asks.

“Did you say tango?”

“No— to go.”

I look after her. She is lost to me already—waiting on someone else. Someone she just met. Someone—like me—she doesn’t know. I am crushed, like the ice that comes tumbling out of the soft drink dispenser.

“If you don’t mind,” I say to the manager, “I’d like the extra large fountain drink.”

“That doesn’t come with the special.”

“Yes, but I want the plastic souvenir cup—to remember her by.”

~
She knocked on my door. Did I want to go to a party across town? Of course. I wasn't over having been in love with her yet, and didn't want to be. After all, of what value is a poet without an unrequited love?

We set off arm in arm down the tree-lined streets of Midwestern America, shuffling like figures on a Dylan album cover. We held hands crossing The Square, with its central statue dedicated to Motherhood. The surrounding stores had already darkened to match the night. Her arm graced my waist with its touch as we passed down more clapboard-sided streets, where dry leaves blew along the curb or made insect sounds on sidewalks. Brief kisses leaped from lips to lips along the narrow bridge that spanned a river whose name I've forgotten. The moment felt Sixties Campus Radical Romantic, freely and unashamedly physical despite her heart's refusal to stand near mine. Hell, I figured there might be a chance to win her love back. That, of course, is Timeless Romantic.

The hall boiled with people and sound. There weren't any places to sit and almost none to stand, but it didn't matter. The band made talk all but impossible and that was all right, too. If we'd wanted to do any of these we could have found more comfortable, and certainly more comfortably private, places. The party only served as a place, an excuse. We'd come to dance with each other.

There are partners who can stumble across the floor with you, those who are able to dance to your lead, and those who Dance. She was the woman after whom all of the last have ever been modeled and ever will. I've never been light on my feet, as the phrase goes, but she could control and inspire so subtly that I felt like Astaire and Valentino. It didn't matter if we slow danced, did the Cha-cha or Stroll, Twisted or Hitchhiked. The band knew its stuff, I felt more than adequate to the evening, and she was phenomenal.

We danced for an hour or so, never leaving the floor, never leaving each other. The band took a minute or two between pieces at first, giving people a chance to struggle onto or off of the dance floor. Maybe the lead guitarist sensed or saw something, or just got caught up in the growing energy my partner brought to the proceedings. Whatever happened, after the first few songs his playing changed. He slipped seamlessly from piece to piece, letting us continue and others work to keep up, pulling the rest of the band along. If she and I could raise the bar, he was going to prove himself our equal. He passed that test with flying chords.

And then the band did something totally out of phase with what had come before, with "Misty", "Blueberry Hill", "Pony Time", and all the other standard songs for a Friday night college party. They struck up John Loudermilk's classic, "Tobacco Road".

You can't dance to that.

People headed off the floor like roaches under a kitchen light. It was time for something to drink, maybe a quick feed from the grill, a nuzzle in a darker corner. I thought to follow the crowd, and took her hand.

She stood her ground. She pulled me back to face her. She started to dance, leaving me to decide: either stand there and watch, or join her.

What the hell. This wasn't cheek-to-cheek music. I could join and watch at the same time. She looked very good. She'd help me look good.

Few of us stayed out on the floor, and we became a party in the middle of a party. You know how that happens sometimes, no matter how large or small the affair. The others get weary, or wrapped in conversations and seductions. What you need to understand is that this wasn't a drunken wedding reception request, a quick song nobody cared about or enjoyed hearing. The music flowed, gut ripping and soul rending, sweet and lyrical. There were riffs and mini-bridges that Loudermilk didn't pen, that lived only long enough to happen. Whispered and screaming tones of bass and voice that came from no conscious source. They drove her, and she them, and I'll always be glad I surrendered to the evening's ride.

We danced for twenty minutes on a bridge that swung from hold tight to beat me and touched all points between. After a while, it wouldn't have mattered if the floor were cheek-to-cheek with dancers. Only she and I existed in the universe, and the passion of this bridge would hold us in its sway after the crossing ended.

Most of those who thought they'd join us failed before they took the first step toward the floor. The others probably grew tired of it, but the band didn't and we didn't. It went on until its end came and the river of music, the rest of the dance, resumed their flow.

We left after that, unable to imagine higher mountains to scale. Walking back to our side of town, we spent time standing above the river, kissing in the darkness and dancing what proved to be our forever-final pas de deus. Still heated from the trip across that other bridge, our skin steamed like our lips in the chill night. Then the rest of our lives, like the dance and the river, resumed.
Down the aisle, right before the Johnson's Baby Powder, the rows of baby bottles and packaged nipples, and Pedialite, he stands. He's wearing a gabardine and has the kind of reddish mussed hair that only rain and wind, or having sex make.

Only it isn't raining. Or windy.

He runs his fingers through his hair and I can see his hands are long, graceful, pale. I think briefly, madly, of whipping out my cell phone and shooting him here, full side view. His profile is breath-taking, with the sort of head that film moguls clamored for back in the days when movies were movies, and men, men -- men to look at anyway.

The Roman nose and slightly squared off chin and high cheekbones bring to mind Gary Cooper, Paul Newman and James Dean, all at once.

I tell myself not to get excited. Look where he is standing – before the baby section. But then, as I verge on hopelessness, thinking life not fair, he reaches for the Pedialite, the orange-colored one.

Not the baby oil, or baby powder, or even Q-tips, but the Pedialite. And at that moment, in my mind, possibilities take a different course.

Maybe, instead of married, with children, he's dating a bulimic who asked him to go to the store for her daily recharging. Perhaps he himself is bulimic.

A bulimic piano player. I wonder what his name is.

He glances in my direction then, sensing as someone vaguely oblivious might, that someone is staring at him. For I am fairly obvious at this point, just standing there, star struck – But quick, so quick to toss him back a smile, just as he turns, the Pedialite in one hand, running his other hand again through his wild, damp hair, as if for my benefit. He gazes straight at me with gray green eyes that penetrate, eyes framed by lashes that don't belong on a man. Unbelievably, he is wearing just a white tee, jeans and boots – my Stark Man assemblage, the outfit I most love on a man. This one tops my list of lists. I can't let him go just yet. Quickly, I remember what I am here to get. I can feel my heart palpitating, standing behind him in line.

He's already at the checker's. The one checking him out is Jose, the Latino with the crooked teeth and long ponytail who helped me find a remedy for my cat's upchucking just one week ago.

Jose catches my eye, sending me a faint smile while bagging the man's purchase. I beg him in my mind, “Smile more, give me a big one, Jose, so he sees and turns.”

Standing behind him, I pick up the scent of tobacco and Patchouli or woman's perfume. His shoulders are broad and square, slightly hunched.

“Tell me, how much is it again?” The voice, deep, unmistakably French, repeats, “How much?”

And when he hears, he replies, “Expensive. Everything is very expensive in America, even here.” He raises the container in his hand looking left and right at no one in particular.

I find myself practically dancing back and forth, feet springing, trying to see around him, to find a way into the conversation, to wiggle into his life.

I might let him know, “I traveled to Paris once long ago with a man I didn’t love who fell for me even though I begged him not to.” Perhaps he would then nod politely in my direction, and, before leaving, tell me to return to Paris.

Yes, there are some things one should do, again and again. But, of course, I say nothing.

“How much?” I find myself asking. Jose tells me. And I repeat -- even as I see the Frenchman flying out the door, toward his car, his waiting mistress, his life -- I repeat in his honor, “Everything is so expensive, here,” adding “here” to distance myself from where I myself belong, because right now I am so much more than this, and he, that one with whom I have allied myself, is not just a strange man departing who will never return, but larger than life. He is a projection of something right around the corner that I am running to get, that will be mine.

~

33
I was in Fulton buying gossip books—five for a dollar—when I ran into that actor, Lamont Evans. I didn’t see him right away, too busy staring at the cover of *Mocha Dreams*, a best-seller by January “Mocha” Jones, the video vixen who’d been married to seven different rappers, two at the same time. The cover of *Mocha Dreams* made you feel lusty and envious all at once: January had lips the color of the inside of a melon, and she lounged inside a bathtub full of diamonds, blowing jewels from her fingertips the way other folks would bubbles.

“Want DVDs with that?” Charles, the vendor, leaned across the cardboard table, his round fingers tapping rows of shiny, plastic-covered movies.

I shook my head. The last time I bought a DVD from Charles, it was like watching someone else’s nightmare: occasional explosions of blurry laughter; gray, ghostlike heads floating across the screen.

“Just the books,” I said, trying to sound friendly, polite, because I like Charles, but the words came out sarcastic. That day, for some reason, the air stank of Dark and Lovely relaxer, and the chemical smell made everything feel a little harsh.

“I’m sorry.” I picked up another book, a children’s book about Rosa Parks, just to show I was socially conscious and not a mean, siddity type of person.

Charles shrugged, opened a thin plastic bag. From faraway, we heard a voice that sounded like something heavy breaking.

“Marissa!” a man shouted. I whirled around, dropped the books.

“Let me get this for her,” he said.

Immediately, I liked his voice—authoritative, as though he were used to being listened to. The man gave Charles a few dollars, picked up the books and placed them in Charles’s black plastic bag, set the bag on top of my purse. Casually, he scanned the movies. “Get me this DVD too. I’m in it.”

“As part of the audience or part of the film?” I asked.

“You don’t remember?” he smiled. The man had dimples so deep a person couldn’t help but like him. “We dated for six, seven months? Back in the day, we were in that gospel play together, *Sometimes the Sun Goes Down.*”

I remembered the play, not the guy. I wondered if he’d had extreme plastic surgery of some sort. A chin implant, a nose job or two, maybe a set of artificial cheekbones? He had to be doing well for himself now, because back then, how could he have afforded it? The gospel play had made money, sold out across the southeast, but because the cast consisted of out-of-work R&B singers and actors, we were paid just enough to make rent.

“It was a very large cast,” I looked at the cover of January’s book, at her sexy, bored expression, and wondered what she’d say in this sort of situation. “I think I’m a different person.”

“It was so long ago, we’re all different people,” Lamont said, and he stretched his arms out to indicate the world’s tilted, sickening movement, the whole dizzying pace of time. Charles, who normally doesn’t smile did, and nodded as though he understood. A few pedestrians turned, stared as though Lamont’s words were the beginning of a church sermon. “People grow, they change.” Lamont lowered his voice—he spoke now as though we were in a private, intimate space—and he placed his arm protectively around me. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I was immature, back then.”

“I mean, I don’t know you,” I said. “We’ve never met.”

Lamont laughed, but I still hadn’t a clue. I waved bye to Charles, walked past the Jimmy Jazz store, the Footlocker, and headed towards the train. Lamont followed, his determined pace suggesting there had once been something heroic about our relationship.

“Marissa,” he spoke with a force that made me stop walking. “Don’t play like you don’t
remember...The walks in that park downtown, how we’d grab fried catfish and sweet tea over at the Beautiful, the step-show at Morehouse, the final night of the play—and all we did after?"

The details were so specific that for a second I wondered if I were experiencing another one of my memory lapses—I’ve had relationship amnesia before: shortly after graduation, I forgot the names of my friends from high school; when I lost my cell phone two years ago, I also lost the contact information of everyone I’d ever dated—but I was sure this time, positive that I had never seen this man before in my life.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I don’t know you,” I told him. “I hate to admit to not knowing someone as good-looking as you, but really, we’ve never met.”

Lamont laughed; he seemed more amused than ever. “If we’ve never met, then tell me this—how’d I know your name?”

Marissa was becoming a name like Ebony or Tasha; several girls in the neighborhood shared the same identity. Besides, I’ve been told I look like a Marissa. I tried to explain this to Lamont.

His response? He squeezed my hand—and listen—my hand hadn’t been squeezed with that kind of familiarity since I was a girl crossing the street with my mother. Suddenly I felt a flash of safety and warmth, and I knew Lamont was someone I could trust. “Your hands are cold,” he said, and he shook his head vigorously, but I couldn’t tell whether he disapproved of me or the weather. “You’re in New York now; you should think about wearing gloves,” he added. “I know you’re not used to them—you never wore gloves, not that you needed them in Atlanta. But now you’ve got to think about protecting yourself.”

“I’ve got to catch the train,” I whispered so that Lamont would continue speaking in that same intimate way he had been, and we began walking again, only more quickly and this time holding hands.

“Junior’s is right across from the train station,” Lamont gestured in front of us, at the diner’s glowing yellow sign. “You got time to catch up?” he asked.

I did have to meet someone, but I knew she’d be late. And too, I knew it wouldn’t take that long to get to where I was going. But the most important factor of all: over the years I had gotten used to being passive; I simply didn’t try to fight the natural course of life the way I used to. And so I nodded, followed Lamont into the restaurant.

***

Laila, our waitress, had the most glistening, brilliant black ponytail I’d ever seen. Pulled tight, it rose up, up until it was a good four or five inches away from her head, then it exploded in dips and turns and rollercoaster waves until it collapsed in exhaustion mid-way across her back.

“I’ve been thinking about getting my hair like that,” I told Lamont as we watched Laila’s hips switch away.

Lamont glanced from my face to the back of Laila’s shiny, immovable black tower. He seemed to be seriously considering how the style would look on my face, which surprised me. Most people will decide whether they like a style before they determine whether it’s a good look for you; if they like the style, they say it will look good on you, but if they don’t, they say it won’t. Rarely do people consider how their friends will look in a particular style, how a new color or hair texture matches up with that person’s particular personality.

“There’s a place not far from here where you can buy some hair like that,” Lamont said after a few seconds, and he pointed out the window, in the general direction he was thinking of. “You’d look good like that. You always were a pretty girl. Not too many styles you can’t wear. Few years back, I
saw you in a hair magazine. You were modeling blonde braids that looked like corn kernels. My sister owned a beauty salon and months after your picture was in that magazine, women came in and asked for braids. And this was right in the middle of winter, when nobody gets their hair braided."

I smiled, pleased. "Do we really know each other?" I asked.

Lamont nodded. "I knew you before you knew me," he said. "You did a lot of hair shows, and 'cause of my sister, I went to them all. At the Bronner Brother show one year, you had green hair, your skin painted to match."

"I remember!" I thought about how my breasts had itched, how days after I'd find flecks of green paint under my armpits and against my thighs. "I was Nature Woman. That was the theme. The stylists put swamp makeup on me—pure hell getting it off. They had fake twigs and branches in my bangs."

"We didn't actually talk until we did Sometimes the Sun Goes Down," Lamont went on. He was smiling so deep I thought his dimples would puncture his tongue. "I used to be shy, a real church boy. But you were the kind of person who shook cobwebs out of life. I knew we'd be together that time after the show, after the final curtain call. That night, most of the cast headed to that three-level club, used to be on Peachtree."

"Club Visions?" I asked, and though Lamont's story interested me, I paused to look out the window. A shriek of wind had grabbed my attention, and when I turned to look, I saw it was snowing outside. A few scattered snowflakes flew furiously at the glass.

"Yeah," he said. "Visions, before it got shut down." Lamont reached across the table, took my hand, pulled me back into the conversation. "Doesn't weather like this make you miss the ATL?" he asked without a glance toward the window. "When it gets like this, I can't wait to be back down south, or even out in LA."

He shrugged, then continued. "That night, everyone else was at Visions, but we somehow ended up backstage, like we'd planned it beforehand, like we'd agreed to do it. But we hadn't. We never spoke much, not even during rehearsals. And that night, we still didn't say much. It was just me and you, this darkness, this heat, this enthusiasm...We had all this enthusiasm and didn't know what to do with it. We could still hear the audience clapping and cheering. You stood next to me, and even though it was dark, I knew it was you. I felt your breathing, and it was like I could still hear the music, the singing. Even when I started taking off your clothes, I felt like I was in church."

"Did we trip over any props?" I asked. "The space—wasn't it cramped? I remember all those costume changes and the curling irons and the wigs for the beauty parlor scenes."

"We were graceful, actually. You were very good at balancing on one foot. Still, someone might have seen us, I don't know. Maybe a member of the crew, but no one said anything. But after that night, I wanted us to be together. I thought you and I understood each other. You don't remember how afterwards we went down to the Beautiful and ate grits and fried catfish? I remember thinking it was funny how you put hot sauce on your grits. But a few weeks later, I started doing the same."

I nodded because this sounded like something that could have happened to me, to us. I pressed my hand against the cool window, just as Laila came back. She frowned, to scold me for leaving fingerprints on the window, and I quickly wiped them off with a napkin. I left a streak, however, and sighing, Laila set things on the table: a mug of hot chocolate and whipped cream for me, coffee for Lamont.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Cobb salad," Lamont said. "You?"
“I’m fine,” I said, and Laila nodded, before she and her magnificent hair disappeared.

“You used to eat,” Lamont gestured at my hot chocolate. “Pork chops, steak, fried chicken! I never knew one woman could eat so much. So a cup of milk can’t be it for you. You’re not getting all Hollywood on me?”

“I have to meet my mentee today for lunch,” I told him. “I’ll get something more when I see her.”

This amused and impressed Lamont. He leaned into me, his smile wide, generous.

“You’re someone’s mentor, now?” Lamont picked up his coffee but didn’t drink it. “With what, Big Sisters? The Girl Scouts?”

I sipped some hot chocolate, thought it needed to be sweeter and began emptying sugar packets to it. “She’s a college sophomore,” I told Lamont after I had re-tasted my hot chocolate and found it more to my liking. “Last year, I taught spoken word at a college in Atlanta—but now she’s here at Barnard on domestic exchange. In that class, she was my best student.”

“How so?”

“Passionate, enthusiastic. She gets mad at all the things people don’t care about anymore.”

“You were like that. I remember you were always going to protests,” he said.

“Nia—she’s a writer; she sends me her poems. Once in a while, she’ll mail a book she’s read—all marked up with words underlined. There’ll be a note saying ‘read this’ followed by three exclamation points. Then I feel I have to, even if it’s something I’ve read before and disliked.”

“I still care about things, important, positive things,” Lamont shook his hand as though I had protested something he’d said. “I know you don’t think I do, and because of all that happened to us you probably think I’m selfish, that I’m a jerk, but whenever I’m not filming, I try to give back. Each month, I volunteer with at least fifteen different charities.”

“That’s a lot,” I said.

Lamont nodded. “Ever since you and me broke up, I’ve been trying to prove that I’m the person you thought I was.” Lamont sipped his coffee, and I wondered—what kind of person was he? And what kind of person had he been? I started to ask, but then he was talking again. “But enough about me,” he said. “You’re probably a great mentor. You’re smart, could teach a young person a lot.”

I sipped my hot chocolate and wondered if this were true as Laila came back and knelt to set the salad in front of Lamont. As she got closer, she paused. I looked at her and could see her face softening although her hair remained as sturdy and intractable as ever.

“You look familiar,” she told Lamont with cautious excitement. “We get all kinds in here, so you don’t mind me asking—you from that video countdown show, Video Jump-Offs?”

Lamont nodded. Laila let out a little shriek.

“Before you leave, mind if I get your autograph? My daughters love that show,” Laila smiled brightly at Lamont.

“Find a pen,” Lamont said, and Laila reached inside her enormous ponytail. It took Lamont two minutes to write his own name; it was as though his own signature felt unfamiliar to him. The family behind us made impatient noises as Lamont crafted a series of careful swirls and loops.

“I got to go see what these people want,” Laila tucked the autograph into her uniform and sighed. This sigh was full of so much exhaustion that, briefly, I felt sorry for her.

“So you host a video countdown show?” I asked as I watched Laila and her hair stomp off.

“Pays the bills. Makes it easier to get other kinds of work. My goal, in fact, is to return to theater. When I get old, I want to play Enobarbus in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra,” he
said. “You see, I’m thinking about the future now, ‘Rissa. The past is the past.”

I thought Lamont’s goals were a bit lofty, but I didn’t say anything. Instead, I took out my copy of January’s *Mocha Dreams*. “She’s in all the videos, and she married my favorite rapper. Have you met her? What’s she like?” I asked.

For the first time, Lamont looked uncomfortable. “She’s been on the show,” he said, then coughed and looked as though he wanted to say something else.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s nothing. She’s nothing like you. And it’s strange to be talking to one woman about another so different…This reminds me of something I’ve thought ever since those days in Atlanta—you’d make a great baby’s mama. You’ve got good DNA. Know that? You and I could raise the kind of child that would make the world a more harmonious place,” Lamont stopped, drank some more coffee, paused to consider: “I’m getting ahead of myself. Are you seeing someone?”

I told him that I wasn’t. Lamont then began discussing the merits of natural childbirth. He also wanted to know what day I started ovulating. He said he wanted his children to learn at least three foreign languages, and he asked if I knew Russian. When he finished, I looked down at my watch and realized it was time to meet Nia. I told Lamont goodbye, but before I left, he gave me his card—his name, cell phone, and email in large gold letters.

“It’s okay that you and I have to go right now,” he said, after he’d kissed my cheek. “We’ll see each other soon enough.”

I shuffled my books around in my purse and searched for my metro card. When I looked out the window, it was still lightly snowing.

Lamont took that as a sign.

“This is the start of something,” he said, “the start of a brighter, sweeter life.”

When he spoke in that authoritative way he had, I believed him—this really was the beginning of something new and wonderful. It wasn’t until I was seated on the train, racing furiously from Brooklyn to Manhattan, that I started to think, wonder how I’d agreed to have a baby with a man I had only just met.

***

But my story shouldn’t alarm you. Lamont and I are one of many lost love stories drifting cloudlike across New York. And, it’s not just New York but everywhere this happens—people sail past each other then realize that one person, one moment, could have made their lives so much larger. Love involves random luck more than anything else, no matter what all the relationship experts tell you about how to go about attracting a mate. Every once in a while, I’ll scan Craigslist, see all the anonymous people grateful or just plain ticked off they didn’t win the romantic lottery.

To *The Hispanic Man with the White Baseball Cap* in front of Fordham Plaza on Thursday, November 4. You came up to me very politely that morning and gave me the most beautiful compliment I have ever heard in my life. You told me I was a naturally beautiful woman that morning… Thank you for making me smile and making me feel beautiful.

Or:

For the lady in the blue dress: Sadly, the train pulled into Metropolitan Avenue, and you were gone. I noticed that your dark blue dress had white lettering down the left side - I realized too late it was a website address. I wish I had seen it sooner. I wish I had said something to you. I wish I didn’t have this damn ring on my finger!
Today, as the train rocked back and forth towards Manhattan, I thought about the man with the baseball cap, the lady in the blue dress, how they’d each given someone a moment of joy. Then, I tried to remember Lamont, our relationship, what we must have meant to each other. I couldn’t remember too much, but the more I thought about it, the more certain I became that something must have happened…I pondered all this as a man sat so close I could smell the baking soda he used to brush his teeth. I felt heat between us, so I stood to avoid spilling into his lap. I grabbed the pole in the center of the train, held on tight as the train slammed to a stop. Then the announcer bellowed that we were being held at the station because of a sick passenger, that the sick passenger felt dry and weakened by life. The lights in the train flickered on and off; the air got very hot and sweetly musky, but in a few seconds, the train started moving again, smelled once again of rust and piss. I wondered, then, if the sick passenger really had been sick, whether it wasn’t just the temporary nausea one experiences whenever life moves too slowly or too fast…

The train came to my stop and I got off. I thought: The relationship with Lamont must have been real. We must have had lazy, dreamlike sex on Saturday mornings and performed in melodramatic gospel plays together, spent our Friday nights at college step shows that shook with so much excitement our hearts stung. And our relationship must have ended in some tragic way, and it’s just because I’m one of those people who does the Zora Hurston thing and conveniently “forgets everything I don’t want to remember” that I can’t recall all those moments that should have shaken me with so much pain and gratitude.

The place Nia wanted us to meet was only a short walk away from the station. It had a fireplace, sofas, bookshelves, rugs, and looked more like your best friend’s living room than a real restaurant. When I walked in, Nia was seated at the center, and she looked as she always did--pure, beautiful, almost too delicate to be alive: her stem-like body led to a tiny Afro floating around her forehead as sweetly as dandelion fluff.

That day, Nia had a book in her hands, and she seemed immersed. Before I walked up to her, I fixed my face into the most intelligent expression I could—whenever I saw Nia, I always tried to look as wise as possible.

She noticed me, though, when I was still a few feet away, and she shut the book so quickly I forgot my intelligent expression and wondered if her book were only a prop.

“Marissa!” she said with sparkle in her voice. “You look adorable. There’re snowflakes sticking to your eyelashes!”

I laughed, brushed snowflakes from my cheeks.

“You’re on time,” I told her and gave her a hug. “I thought you’d be late.” Nia grinned, explained how she’d finally figured out the New York subway system, and discovered that she lived no more than three stops away from everything.

“Do you want to grab something and then get out of here?” she asked. “I lived in Savannah, before I moved to Atlanta for school,” and she paused to dust snow from my hair, “so this is my first time in the north, my first time seeing snow. I don’t want to spend the day inside and miss something magical.”

“Let’s go,” I agreed; I too wanted to get out in the world. “We can spend the afternoon walking around the park and catching up.”

Nia put on her coat, placed her book into a satchel. Then, we stepped outside.

As soon as we were on the sidewalk, I felt my fingers grow numb. “I need to start wearing gloves,” I said, and my statement made me remember Lamont. I told Nia about seeing him while I rubbed my fingers together.

“But I don’t remember anything about him, the relationship,” I said. “Is that strange?”
It’s normal for you. You were always like this. Midway through a lecture, you’d make a point that seemed totally unrelated, as though you were remembering something from a previous class,” she said. “It all came together at the end, but there was always something disjointed about you. Kept us on our toes.” Nia shoved her gloved hands inside her coat pockets. “The thing about snow is that it’s cold. Beautiful, but cold. Let’s walk,” she said.

So we did. We crisscrossed and zigzagged until we came to the park, and as we walked, the snow stopped falling, though the streets and sidewalk glittered with thin patches of ice. Near the park’s entrance, a middle-aged woman was walking her dog. The woman seemed unaware of her surroundings: she was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, but her dog had better sense and wore a plaid hat and matching jacket. Nia and I shook our heads and laughed. We watched until they turned a corner, and then we returned to the subject of Lamont.

“But shouldn’t I remember something?” I asked. It was one of those moments when I suddenly felt frustrated by everything in life: my inability to connect the past with the present, little dogs that dressed better than I did.

“Your friend--I know who he is!” Nia interrupted my self-pity with a recognition that made her face shine. "Video Jump-offs shows all the videos that feature rappers’ mistresses. I can’t believe that waitress lets her daughters watch that show!”

“It’s raunchy?”

“They’re not music videos,” Nia explained. “Every week, Lamont counts down the top ten sex tapes released by rappers and downloaded by the public. Every once in a while, one of the women from the sex tapes comes on the show to discuss the tape and how it’s helped her career.”

“They discuss private sex tapes? The kind people film in the privacy of their homes?”

“It’s nothing new,' Nia shrugged. "People have been watching other couples’ sex tapes since R. Kelly peed on that girl."

I nodded, and we walked through dying grass until we came to four boys dressed in silky orange pants and long-sleeved shirts. Because everything around us—the grass, the sky, the heavy trunks of trees—was gray or brown, the boys’ outfits made them stand out. They’d combined skateboarding with hip-hop dancing, and the music they played throbbed; each time they leaped into the sky, they looked and sounded like firecrackers.

“Let’s watch,” Nia said.

The icy ground made the show even more thrilling, made you fearful when the boys came close to falling, exhilarated when they glided through the air. Initially there were six of us watching; after a couple of minutes, the crowd grew to fifteen.

One skateboarder was especially talented. Short and good-lucking, he had a sassy confidence to him he’d earned: lean muscles pressed against the back of his shirt as he did a series of back flips; he landed effortlessly on his skateboard even when it slid over ice.

The music got faster and faster, the tricks more daring. They jumped in the air and high-fived each other, bounced from one skateboard to another. The fast-paced tempo shook something inside me: I swayed my hips left and right and wondered if I could still do a handstand. I felt young at that moment and very free. When I looked over at Nia, she’d put down her satchel and was joyfully clapping her hands.

Abruptly, the boys stopped moving and crouched down on their skateboards. Even though some people had already placed money in a nearby baseball hat, we all knew, from the rhythm of the show, that it wasn’t over. The boys looked too much like runners at the start of a race, their bodies tense and ready for movement.

And then suddenly, we heard it—the song meant to blast the boys rocket-like into the air. Their skateboards raced over the ground as the song “Ugly Girls” tore through the sky and
offered explicit instructions as to how women could best use their mouths and vaginas.

Nia stopped clapping just as the boys took flight. “Do not play that song,” she screamed, and mid-air, two of them actually turned to look at her. “You wouldn’t play that song in front of your mother or someone you respect.”

Nia’s words took us all—skaters, watching crowd, perhaps herself—by surprise. The surprise turned to confusion—should we have been protesting this? Should we have been standing as Nia was, chin raised, arms outstretched and enraged? Were we supposed to be angry? And if not, why weren’t we? Had this bland, snowy day made us nonchalant or had we been like this our entire lives? How long, we wondered, had the boys performed this routine in front of people with this song as the finale? Had anyone thought this was wrong before? If so, why had no one spoken up? Looking at each other, unsure of the proper response, half the crowd melted away.

“It’s just a song, lady,” the most talented skateboarder said once he landed, but he turned the music off. Another boy passed the hat, but no one gave them additional money.

“It’s verbal assault,” Nia said. Her voice wasn’t as sure as it had been at first. But because the boys seemed to be listening intently to her, she regained confidence. “When you play this you disrespect half your audience.”

“Alright,” the talented one said in a way that made me realize he’d decided this wasn’t something worth fighting over. “Next time, we try something different.”

But Nia was still angry, and she was picking up her satchel, stomping out the park. I looked apologetically at the boys, shrugged my shoulders, followed.

“Hope I didn’t embarrass you,” She’d paused at a card table where a man was selling photographs of the city skyline. “Sometimes I act a fool, get loud and crazy like that,” she glanced down at the photographs, their cool, black-and-white moodiness.

“How much is this?” I pointed at one photograph. It showed the city at night ten years ago; the towers peaked through the clouds, and life looked as hard and glamorous as an old movie.

“That one?” The man sitting behind the card table was bundled in a navy coat, ear muffs and scarf; you could see just his eyes, a mild shade of brown. “It’s fifteen, but you can have it for ten—it’s cold outside. No one else is buying.”

I handed the photograph to Nia, placed it firmly in her palm. I wanted to send her a message, a message without speaking: That, an hour from now, the “Ugly Girls” song would be playing again. That the boys would continue to draw a crowd and collect their tips, the same way people like January Jones would always have work, and the Lamont Evans of the world would spend their entire lives trying to make things better through explanations and apologies. After all, songs like that never stopped playing.
I should know better than to go anywhere with Trevor. I should know better, but don’t. Once again we’re at the museum, which is the only place we ever go.

“So, what do you think?” he asks.

“I take the Fifth.”

Trust me; it’s just easier this way. If I offer a genuine opinion, it will inevitably become an argument, and I’m not in the mood.

The thing about Trevor is he’s older than me, maybe seven, eight years – I never remember – and this somehow translates to his feeling a need to mentor me. And despite the fact that his mid-thirties are upon him, he maintains this sensitive artsy-fartsy-but-I’m-really-a-frat-boy-jock-at-heart air about him. This translates loosely to quoting Shakespeare while practicing his jump shot. Of course, his jump shot isn’t much considering he tops out at 5’8”, leaving us with height as the only thing we see eye-to-eye.

What probably annoys me the most about him is that he’s just obscenely average. His hair is dark brown, just plain old dark brown, common in every way imaginable. His eyes are brown, just plain, boring, average, non-descript brown, and his nose is sort of crooked and flat. Not that its crookedness is even that noticeable, unless, of course, you look for it, and believe me, I really do look for it. I look for anything and everything that is wrong with Trevor. It’s my hobby: pointing out Trevor’s flaws. Which just feeds the fact that we argue a lot. Constantly. It’s all we do. We are incapable of agreeing on anything – anything!

“You can’t take the Fifth. Have an opinion for God’s sake.”

“Fine. I don’t like it.”

“You have no taste,” he scoffs.

“What? You’re saying my opinion isn’t valid?”

“It’s valid. It’s just not correct.” Trevor grins – that same stupid, lop-sided grin he’s been subjecting me to since the day we met. I hate that grin. He grins and his cheekbones flare up like shiny apples and his mouth makes dimples when he talks. His laugh literally spites himself. Oh, and his hairline is receding, we’re talking major “M” formation, and I figure that’s why he’s wearing a rather ubiquitous baseball cap. And then there’s the leather bomber jacket and a scarf. It’s not even that cold out. I have on a sweater and I’m comfortable. I don’t know what the coat is all about, let alone the scarf.

Today the grin in public occurs in the confines of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I should be able to get away and hide, as the confines of the Met are extraordinarily vast. Still, Trevor is at my every turn, reminding me that we came here together, reminding me that while I just might find him devastatingly handsome, I hate him. All we’re doing is looking at some ridiculous sculpture that looks reminiscent of a bumper following a twisted car crash, but Trevor says it’s art, so it’s art.

Again with the grin. Smug. Devilish. …Sexy.

We venture down the corridor to find art he deems more to my liking. And if correcting my opinion isn’t enough, I know it’s just a matter of time before he corrects my grammar.

So here we are.

“Why didn’t you like it?” He finally asks.

“It’s ugly. I understand the message (insert eye roll here) as you called it. That’s not the problem. I’m sure the artist took painstaking time and effort to make this piece of crap. And that the art community respects it, admires it, etc. and subsequently I’m happy for him, her, or it, as the case may be. I also think it’s fabulous that someone justified the artist’s muse by putting it in a museum. Even so, there is no way in hell I would ever put that thing on my coffee table.”

“So be it. You want to go look at the paintings?”

“Yes, let’s go look at the paintings.”

Typically, I marvel at the paintings, but today it’s a giant bore. Contributing to said giant bore is Trevor and a litany of pontifications that I can’t even begin to reiterate. He talks too much. We just keep walking and he keeps talking and talking and talking and I’m in a daze. And then it
happens: we reach the brushstrokes of modesty being thrown to the wind. Nudes. Nudes fascinate me, actually. I love looking at nudes. Sometimes I even enjoy being nude, and while I respect the human body as a tremendous work of art, standing in a public place observing nudes alongside Trevor while he studies with his jaw agape, has made me uncomfortable, and unfortunately, not in a bad way.

So I fold my arms and wander. Trevor is halfway between a diatribe and a soliloquy and I’m trying to tune him out, but I can’t stop looking at him. I need something – someone else – to study, and I mean really study, but with the exception of a still life and a glorious upper torso, I am shit out of luck.

But why am I uncomfortable? I can think of absolutely no reason why I should be ill-at-ease, but my walking in small circles diverges back into a full-out pace. It’s involuntary. It’s flat-out immaturity, but then something strange occurs. I’ve lost sight of Trevor, which, all things considered, just may be a good thing.

So, I’m not paying attention to what I’m doing, because I’m preoccupied with what I shouldn’t be thinking, but then this strange thing happens again and I am pacing no more. Suddenly, I’m aware of someone behind me. I can feel the warmth of breath on my neck, the soft sway of fabrics touching. Our bodies are close, and while I’m just sure I’ll find it revolting, I am hoping it’s Trevor. I start to fidget, but maintain focus. Straight ahead. Clear sight. He moves in a closer. A slight whimper of conflicting frustration follows. He whispers.

“Hey Jude,”
“You don't need to yell,” I snap.
“I wasn’t yelling.”
“What?” I turn to face him.
“Where were you just now?”
“Right here, looking at the paintings. What did you want?”
“You weren’t having impure thoughts looking at those paintings, were you?”
“Impure thoughts?” I quip.
“You were, weren’t you?” he teases.
“No, I wasn’t.”
“Double negative.”
“Whatever.” And I resume my museum saunter.
“Well, if you weren’t having impure thoughts, you were at least thinking about having impure thoughts.”
“You can’t think about having impure thoughts. You either have them, or you don’t.”
Trevor just grins.

Dammit! I hate Trevor! More importantly, I hate that I admitted that I found him sexy, because clearly he can’t be, as I will not allow him to be. But God help me, he is impure thoughts personified. Oh God, I didn’t just admit that. I take it back. I’m disgusted. I’m revolted. Oh, here comes a heavy sigh.

“Ah, the heavy sigh of the sexually frustrated.”
“I am not sexually frustrated.”
He smiles and knowingly at that. Smug bastard. He shrugs his shoulders, glances around. Surrenders. “Well, unless you have anything else you have to see, I'm ready to go.”
And suddenly we’re outside discovering that after a few hours in a museum, a cold front can push through and turn a seemingly temperate October day icy to the core. We head down the steps to the sidewalk and my teeth begin to chatter.

“Shoulda brought a jacket.”
“Such profound advice. Thank-you very much.”
“Want my scarf?” He tugs it free from the lapel of his bomber jacket.
“Why? So my neck can keep warm while the rest of me freezes and breaks off one digit at a
time?"

"It’s not that cold.” He takes his ball cap off and places it on my head; I feel warmer. “I’m not giving you my coat. I don’t like you enough to do that.” He winks and then wraps the scarf around my neck. “I’d offer to put my arm around you, but I don’t feel much like nursing a black eye."

“I wouldn’t hit you.”

“Not intentionally, but elbows tend to fly when you jump away.”

We walk with no intended direction. We do not speak. We are strangers walking the same beat, en route to roughly the same destination, and comfortable in our awkward silence. We should be a black-and-white photograph in the back of an obscure magazine. No heading. Or maybe, I don’t know: forgotten. We wouldn’t even be capitalized. No one who passes us will remember us. Chances are neither of us will even remember that this walk happened. And then the picture could be taken to remember that we were forgotten.

Soon we come upon a coffee shop. The scent of questionable specials and burnt coffee permeate the block. Trevor grabs the door and holds it open, almost mid-step. “Come on, I’ll buy you a bowl of soup.”

Inside we sit at a booth with a view. Our waitress Donna brings us our complimentary water and elaborates on the specials. We decline and read our menus in silence. Donna walks away.

“You wanna split a sandwich?” Trevor asks, still studying the menu.

“Sure.”

“What kind do you want?”

I don’t know what I want. I never know what the hell I want. I want Trevor. Dear God that did not just slip out.

Trevor calls Donna over. “Whatcha need?”

“We’re gonna split a sandwich. Jude?”

Donna and Trevor both look at me. I look at them. I look at the menu. I look at Trevor. Trevor looks at me, then at Donna. And this continues for about 17 of the longest seconds I’ve experienced.

“Do you need a few more minutes?” Donna asks.

“Um,"

Long pause on my part. Trevor watches me, tapping a spoon on the Formica.

“I don’t know. You pick.”

“Well, how ‘bout pastrami? How’s that sound?”

“Yuk! That sounds awful. “Whatever’s fine.”

“Well, if you don’t like pastrami, we can get something else.”

“Let’s do that then.”

“Well, what do you want?”

What I’d like is for Trevor not to begin every sentence with the word well, but I can’t very well tell him that, can I? I settle for the first food-related item found on a sandwich that pops into my head, having ruled that whipped cream appears nowhere in sandwich history, with the rare exception of the ice-cream sandwich, and that’s out of the question.

“I like chicken.”

“Well, then, let’s split a chicken club and two bowls of chicken noodle.”

“Good.”

Donna jots this down, takes a deep breath and sighs. “What kind of bread would you like that on?”

Great. Another decision.

“Whole-wheat.” With that Trevor places the menu behind the napkin dispenser and leans back and I’ll be damned if I don’t prefer rye, but what can I do?

Donna meanders back to the kitchen. I welcome having a window to distract me. I watch pigeons and cabs, people and dogs, a cop, and a hotdog vendor closing up for the day.

“What’s outside that’s so interesting?”
“Not much.”
“Seem pretty focused for ‘not much’.”
“I’m just thinking.”
“About what?” Trevor crunches a few chips of ice and sips his water.
“Nothing in particular.” And I’m back to staring out the window.
“You don’t like me very much, do you?”
I almost choked on my water.
“You don’t really like me. It’s okay. No big deal.”
“If it’s no big deal, then why bring it up?”
“See? You don’t like me.”
“I never said I didn’t like you.”
“You implied it.”
“I like you just fine, Trevor.” We pause, stare at each other, and then… “You know what this is, don’t you?”
“What?” He asks, though not because he wants to know.
“Naked male insecurity.” (This is not a Freudian slip, either.)
“Oh come on.” He shifts nervously in his seat. “That’s stupid. I’m not insecure.”
“Yes, you are. You always have been. You always will be. It’s your nature. Maybe, and I’m not saying you are, but maybe you’re a boring conversationalist.”
Donna hands us our food. We both offer her marginal thanks and then return to our conversation.
“Boring? You think I’m boring.”
“I didn’t say that. I just threw it out as a possibility. Probably just to test your insecurity, which is very apparent at this time.”
“Sorry I brought it up.”
…Long…conversational…lull…
“I don’t know what to say to you, Trevor. You’re the one who calls me to go to the museum, why? Why do you call me?”
“Because I know you like to go. And I don’t think it’s too much to ask if we could hold a conversation. At least pretend that this holds some sort of social merit.”
“Social merit? What an odd thing to say.”
“You know what I mean.”
“No. I don’t even think you know what you mean.”
“I mean if we’re going to be friends, then we should at least make conversation.”
“We’re talking.”
“We’re arguing.”
“No, we’re not.”
“Jude.”
Enough said. Simultaneous heavy sigh and a quick glance for something of interest.
“Well, what do you want to talk about?”
“I don’t know. What do you want to talk about?”
“I don’t care.”
“I can’t think of anything.”
“Me either.”
He shakes his head and grins.
“See? This is what happens.” I say with a breath of a laugh.
I take a sip of water to try and wash away the silence. Unfazed, Trevor keeps eating. He wipes his face with his napkin and gives me a wink.
“So be it. We’ll just look at the paintings.”
“I’d like to paint you in the nude,” you say.

“Don’t make it worse,” I manage in response. I am still staring at your painting. The nowhere woman, the one the Lagos art critics applauded endlessly all through last week. She stares back at me, her forehead a matrix of fluid lines, her body a black-and-red geometry of grids.

“Containment, yet freedom,” you say thoughtfully, your eyes closed. “Passion, yet purity.” Rubbish, I think. “Why do you want to paint me?” My voice has risen a notch, as it always does when I’m afraid.

“So when are you coming back?” you answer carefully.

“Never,” I want to shout. “Never, never! Because you are a married man and we must stop!” When I put on my clothes and stumble out of your studio, the taste of tears hot on my tongue, you laugh.

***

My parents live on Victoria Island, in an imposing estate girdled by high walls that block out the poverty on the streets. I’m often disconcerted by the uncanny way the house ripples, even though it’s just reflections from the swimming pool and the gossiping shadows of all those palm trees.

Behind the house are the boys’ quarters, brown cottages clustering together like overgrown mushrooms. The gardener, the drivers and the cook live there with their families. The cottages could easily be visible from my bedroom, were it not for a clothesline whose offerings always flap insistently in the breeze. When I tell my mother that the African women take turns to hang up washing so we outsiders cannot see into their lives, she laughs and tells me not to read so much Derrida. “What is it?” she asks lightly. “Anger? Or guilt?”

Both. Back home in New Delhi, everyone likes to complain about colonialism and racism, to talk about the expatriate white community and their uppity ways. But in Lagos, even the Indians are racist. Because we are brown, not Black. I spend endless evenings playing with Deborah, our Nigerian housemaid’s child, her hair as-yet unbraided, her eyes black and very pretty. I coo to her loudly as I walk her on the verandah and press her to my breast, pursing my lips in satisfaction when visiting Indian families glance at us disapprovingly.

You are the first Indian I have met in Lagos who is different. You always bring chocolate éclairs and stuffed toys for Deborah, and scold her mother for not rubbing Vaseline on the child’s chapped feet.

You have a wide circle of close friends, black, white, yellow, brown. When you laugh, colors merge and the world is a rainbow.

***

We first met at the crafts market in Lekki. I was buying some paintings from an old man who does innovative geometric blocks in monochromes. The sun was very bright and the sky burned a brilliant, gaseous blue.

“You have lovely hair.”

I turned and saw you leaning lopsidedly against a wall. Honest eyes. Large brown hands with long, long fingers. Greying at the temples but still handsome.

I smiled.

“So which part of India do you belong to?” you asked. By now you had finished paying for the wooden busts you’d been examining intently earlier, and had started to walk. I noticed that you limped and carried a stick. You laughed. “Will heal soon,” you said. “Really soon, if you agree to
“New Delhi and Calcutta, intermittently,” I replied to your question. “But again, it’s a matter of perspective, I suppose. Some of us never really belong anywhere, you know. What about you?”
“Like you, nowhere,” you drawled.
We continued to walk together quietly, deliberately.
“What do you do?” I asked over lunch. We were at a club. An old Nigerian was playing the saxophone. His hair was two puffs of cotton over large, protruding ears. His olive skin glistened and his eyelids drooped delicately.
“I paint.”
“You’re an artist, are you? How exciting! And I thought all artists were poor…”
“I got lucky,” you said, your eyes twinkling. “I used to own a company in Abuja. Sold it off two years ago and went back to my easel.”
“Oh, so that’s where the money comes from,” I remarked. “The money, and the time.”
You laughed again, and called for the check. You insisted on paying, adding a generous tip that had the waiter grinning like a schoolboy, and held the door open for me. On our way back, you bought me flowers, rattled off a whimsical poem from memory, sang me a Johnny Cash song.
Your voice was deep and the notes exploded against my skin. I extended my visit to Lagos by another three weeks.

***

It isn’t until our fifth meeting that you tell me about your wife. By then I am scouring newspapers for your face, cutting out clippings of your art exhibitions, staying awake at night thinking about the exquisite bow-shape of your lips.
“She lives in London. We meet only a couple of times a year. It’s easier that way,” you say.
I have so many questions I am tripping over them in my mind. First and foremost, I want to ask you if you love her. But I am afraid, so afraid. “What about children?” I ask instead.
You shake your head.
“She didn’t want them?”
“She did. I didn’t.”
I notice for the first time the cruel turn of those lips. My throat hurts, as if I’ve swallowed the sun in an abrupt, orange gulp. It’s suddenly dark outside while inside, I simmer slowly, painfully.
Over the next week, I avoid your calls, tear up your letters, send back your flowers. I think of myself as your wife’s friend and cry for her, with her, for myself. “I had no right,” I say to her accusing shadows again and again. “I am sorry, so sorry.”
I imagine her sitting sunken-eyed on the steps of a grey London house, enveloped in fog. She is very pretty, chiselled nose, brown-fringed eyes, slender. She walks by herself in Hyde Park, biting her lip when she sees pregnant women strolling hand-in-hand with their partners. Her bed is cold and tearful and empty, like mine.

***

My parents have gone to Abuja for the day. I want to be alone, and have given the house-help a day off. My house is a storm, the dark rumble of you, your laugh a streak of lightening. My mascara streaks torrents of black rain down my cheek.
I need to get out of Lagos, to wipe off the inky smudge of your poems, to write my own life. A poem of moving feet, an ode to forgetting. I feel a rush of energy; all of a sudden I am stern-lipped and iron-hearted. I begin to pack my suitcase, flinging in my trousers and shirts and petticoats and
Lagos Laughter by Debotri Dhar

saris haphazardly.

The bell rings. Through the flutter of our living-room curtains, I see your blue Mustang parked in the driveway. I pick up the intercom and shout at the guard. “Is that why you’re there? To let in every murderer and thief?”

The guard reminds me that a few weeks ago, I had instructed him never to stop you.

“Oh yes, sorry, so sorry,” I mumble, hanging up and walking to the door to open it a crack.

You push your way inside. Your forehead is furrowed, your eyes unslept. I want to soothe the redness out of those eyes but I stop myself. You run your hands through your salt-and-pepper hair, scrunching it up in fistfuls. “I love you,” you say.

The afternoon is warm, but I am shivering. You adjust the temperature of the air-conditioning, wrap a shawl around my shoulders and tuck a stray wisp of hair behind my ear.

“I knew you would be. When you’re angry, you always take it out on food,” you scold. “It’s wrong, so wrong.”

“And you’re so the right person to lecture the world on right and wrong,” I snap.

You jerk my head up, force me to look at you. I shake myself free. You reach into your briefcase and take out a covered plastic bowl.

“What the hell’s that?” I ask suspiciously.

You go into the kitchen. I can hear the beep of the microwave, the clatter of cutlery. You come out with some rice and chicken curry on a plate. The rice is fragrant and I can smell cardamoms and cloves in the curry. You sit me down and feed me forkfuls of it. “I cooked it for you, with all your favourite spices,” you say softly. Afterwards, you wipe my mouth with your handkerchief, the cream silk one on which I had painted a navy-blue ‘K’ in the corner.

I break down and cry. We kiss. It’s the most perfect kiss in the world. I want to forget about your wife. We all come with our own fates written beforehand, I reason. It’s all karma and we must live with it, she with hers, I with mine. This time I picture her as not so pretty. She is fat, blunt nose, eyes bitter and slightly misshapen, always nagging. I want to make her up as I go along. It’s not as though I’ve broken her home, I think again and again as I trace the outline of your lips.

“Why don’t you end your marriage?” I ask eventually. “Legally, I mean. Otherwise it’s unfair to all three of us.”

Your eyes are stony. You are expecting some guests and need to leave soon, you say.

God help me, you love her, you love her too. No, I will not sit sunken-eyed on the steps of my house, waiting endlessly for the phone to ring. I am not some middle-aged, helpless housewife. I am young and attractive and a qualified professional, with a job that takes me around the world and puts me in the company of many good men.

“Leave,” I say, pushing you out and slamming the door in your handsome face.

***

I meet a lot of men, in Lagos, outside Lagos, but they don’t have your playful eyes or your exquisite lips. Or they don’t sing Johnny cash songs and cook me rice and chicken curry. Once I thought I’d met a man who had it all. When we were stuck in a go slow, he rolled down the window, lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke in thick blue rings, not caring when a nearby okra seller’s baby wailed. When he kissed me goodbye outside the main gates of my house, my cheek was cold. After he drove away, I called my driver and had him drive me straight to your house. That afternoon we had a lot of sweetheart, sweetheart. I hadn’t seen you for many months. We made love. I cried. Afterwards, you laughed at me for thinking I could get rid of you so easily.

***
We meet in different cities across the world, different times of the year. In Paris, we amble about the Louvre; you call me Mona Lisa. In the moonflower night, we take a boat ride down the Seine. You feed me caviar atop the Eiffel and spill wine on my dress. It cuts red estuaries into the white, virginal silk. Afterwards, we have a lot of fun peeling it off.

In New York, we go for a classical music concert at Carnegie Hall. I love Beethoven and Bach, I say, but nothing to beat Malkauns and Malhar. Next week we fly to New Delhi. You’ve got us two front row tickets for a Hindustani classical concert, and when an intricate taan fills up Siri Fort, I lay my head against your shoulder and cry.

My nerves are stretched taut from all those tears and I am very alert; on our way back from the concert, we fight. The usual – how much of a typical man you are, how easily you’ve placed wife in one compartment, mistress in another. “God knows how many other women there must be,” I sob. “Your soul is dead,” I shout, not caring if everything ends this very moment. “Dead, dead.”

You look out of the window and light a cigarette.

In the hotel room, we make angry love. Crumpled, tear-stained pillows, empty bottles, and outside, the noisy, insistent rattle of wind. Later, you ask me again if I will pose for you. I refuse. That is the one thing that means so much to you, the one thing I can hold back.

Next morning, I tell you I want to end this relationship. You laugh. Your laughter chases me around the globe, keeping me warm, burning me.

~

Venus at Her Mirror by Diego Rodriguez
**Writer’s Bio’s**

**Carol Alexander** is a New York City-based author and editor. A writer for trade and educational publishing, she has authored numerous children’s books, served as a ghostwriter for radio and trade publishing, and taught at colleges around the metropolitan area. In 2011-2012, her poetry appears in literary journals and anthologies published by Chiron Review, Cave Moon Press, The Canary, Danse Macabre, Earthspeak, Fade Poetry Journal, Fat Daddy’s Farm Press, Mobius, Numinous, OVS, and The Whistling Fire.

**Janet Butler** relocated to the Bay Area in 2005 after many years in central Italy. She lives in Alameda with Fulmi, a lovely Spaniel mix she rescued in Italy and brought back with her. Some recent or forthcoming publications are The North Chicago Review, Assisi, Caduceus, The Tipton Poetry Journal and The Quotable. A poetry chapbook, “Searching for Eden”, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

**Con Chapman** is a Boston area writer whose work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Boston Globe and The Boston Herald. He is the author of two novels, ten published plays and The Girl With the Cullender on Her Head, a collection of light verse about women.

**Tony Colella** works at a community college with disabled and disadvantaged students in a terribly backwards little town in Arizona. He's published shorts stories and poems since he got his bachelor's degree in December 2008.

**James Lloyd Davis** lives in northeast Ohio with his wife, MaryAnne Kolton, who is also a writer. He's returned to writing after a long absence, is working on two novels, and has published short fiction in various venues both online and in print.

**Kent H. Dixon** publishes mostly in fiction--TriQuarterly, Iowa Review, Georgia Review, Shenandoah, Antioch Review, and so on. Latest work a travel piece on Cuba, in Studies in Travel Writing (UK), and a ‘bad boy’ essay in Florida Review. He teaches at Wittenberg University, in Springfield, Ohio, where he lives with his wife Mimi, grades papers, cooks, gardens, and kayaks.

**Debotri Dhar** holds a Masters in Women’s Studies, with distinction, from Oxford University, UK, and is currently an Excellence Doctoral Fellow in Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, USA, where she also teaches. Her short stories have recently been published in The Copperfield Review, Fickle Muses, Asia Writes, Stacatto Fiction, Muse India, Cereburation, StepAway Magazine and elsewhere, and won honorable mention in Glimmer Train.

**Christa Gahlman** was born and raised in rural Wisconsin with a great appreciation for the intimacy of the woods, and the wonder that lies in a wide horizon. She is the mother of two incredible daughters and one amazing son. She now resides in the city of Madison and writes…and writes.

**Stan Galloway** teaches writing and literature at Bridgewater College in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He was nominated Best of the Net in 2011. His chapbook Abrahám is forthcoming from Sierra Delta Press in 2012. He has had more than 50 poems appear online and in print. He has also written a book of literary criticism, The Teenage Tarzan.

**Elissa Gordon’s** poetry mines a passion for travel and foreign language, and her love of water, passing many happy days on the Delaware River. She has been anthologized in The Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow Poets, South Mountain Poets Offline, The Stillwater Review, and Windmills (Australia). New Sun Rising -Stories for Japan, to benefit the March 11 Tsunami victims, and online in The Word Place. Shot Glass Journal and Short, Fast & Deadly.

**GTimothy Gordon** works in Southeast Asia and lives in the Desert Southwest. His recent books include EVERYTHING SPEAKING CHINESE; recipient of the Riverstone Poetry P Competition, and GROUND OF THIS BLUE EARTH (Mellen). Individual poems have been nominated for Pushcarts; Arts and Humanities Endowment Fellowships have also been awarded. An expanded edition of GROUND will be published in December 2011. FROM FALLING in 2012. New fiction may be found in DOS PASSOS R, TRYST3, MAIN STREET RAG anthology (THE BOOK OF VILLAINS, October 2011), and EPIPHANY MAGAZINE (forthcoming December 2011).

**Yasir Hayat** is a published horror novelist from the UK.

**Lynn Hoffman** is the author of The Short Course in Beer and The New Short Course in Wine. You can read a sample or order your e-copy at: https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/16714

**Arya Jenkins** is a poet, writer and editor. Most recently, personal essays have appeared in the Spring 2011 issues of Mandala Journal and Solstice Literary Magazine. Flash fiction is a new genre for her. She enjoys its poetic and minimalistic challenges. Arya lives in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

**Grey Johnson** lives in a Southern town that is small enough to remind one of a Monopoly board, only the real estate never sells. When he is not reading or losing a card game, he writes very short fiction. Most of what he writes appears on Six Sentences, although he posts on Fictionaut from time to time. His work has also shown up at mudjob, mudspots, Pure Slush, and Littifre.

**W.F. Lantry** received his Maîtrise from L’Université de Nice, and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. In 2010 he won the Lindberg Foundation International Poetry for Peace Prize (in Israel), Crucible Poetry Prize, CutBank Patricia Goedicke Prize and National Hackney Literary Award in Poetry. In 2011 the Atlanta Review awarded him its International Publication Prize. His work has appeared in Valparaiso Fiction Review, Asian Cha, Gulf Coast and Aesthetica. His chapbook, The Language of Birds (Finishing Line Press 2011), is a lyric retelling of Attar’s Conference of the Birds. He works in Washington, DC and is a contributing editor of Umbrella Journal. His website is: http://wflantry.com

**Maude Larke** has come back to her own writing after years of ‘real’ work in the American, English and French university systems, analyzing others’ texts and films. She has also returned to the classical music world as an ardent amateur, after fifteen years of piano and voice in her youth. She has several short stories and poems, three novels, and two screenplays to offer so far. Publications include Cyclamens and Swords, Sketchbook and The Centrifugal Eye.
Writer’s Bio’s

Judith A. Lawrence is the editor/publisher of Lilly Press/River Poets Journal. She writes because the characters in her head and those she meets in life demand to tell their story, in a poem, in prose, in a memoir, in a novel. They raise such a clatter, she has no choice. Some are much ado about nothing. Others are quite satisfying.

Lorraine Henrie Lins, author of, “I Called It Swimming” (Finishing Line Press) is the 2010 Bucks County Poet Laureate and recipient of the Penland Prize for Poetry. She’s had her work appear in numerous publications, among them The Bucks County Writer, And The Questions Are Enough, The Schuylkill Valley Journal, Mudfish 16, Eating Her Wedding Dress and, Transcendent Visions. Born and raised in central New Jersey, she now resides in Bucks County, Pennsylvania with her family and adopted Golden Retriever.

Lennart Lundh is an internationally respected historian and poet who turned to short fiction in his mid-fifties.

Andy Macera is the recipient of awards from Plainsongs, Mad Poets Review and Philadelphia Poets. His work has also appeared in Pearl, Mudfish, The Chaffin Journal, The Hurricane Review, Off The Coast, Autumn Sky Poetry and other journals. He lives in West Chester, PA.

Benjamin Matvey’s fiction has been published in Stickman Review, The Externalist, Generation X Journal, Sunday Salon, and in the anthology Philly Fiction 2. His short story “Big Secrets” was named Cync Magazine’s “Best of 2008.” His play—Brie! The Musical Dissertation, co-written with Anneliese Euler—was produced in Philadelphia thanks to a development grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. He is also serializing his first novel, X, on the fiction website Fictionaut: http://www.fictionaut.com/groups/x-a-novel

Karla Linn Merrifield is an award-winning poet, National Park Artist-in-Residence, and assistant editor and book reviewer of The Centrifugal Eye, Karla Linn Merrifield has had work published in dozens of journals and anthologies. She has seven books to her credit, including Godwit: Poems of Canada, which received the 2009 Andrew Eisenman Writers Award for Poetry, and her recent chapbook, The Urn, from Finishing Line Press. Forthcoming in February from Finishing Line Press is Merrifield’s The Ice Decides: Poems of Antarctica. Also forthcoming is her full-length collection Athabaskan Fractal and Other Poems of the Far North, from Salmon Poetry. She also co-edited Liberty’s Vigil, The Occupy Anthology: 99 Poets among the 99%, released in January 2012 from FootHills Publishing. You can read more about her and sample her poems and photographs at http://karlalinn.blogspot.com.

James B. Nicola has had over two hundred poems appear in publications including Tar River, the Texas Review, The Lyric, and Nimrod. A stage director by profession, his book Playing the Audience won a CHOICE Award. He also won the Dana Literary Award for poetry, was nominated for a Rhysling Award, and was a featured poet at the New Formalist in 2010. His first chapbook of poems, “Still,” will be out in 2012 from Stasia Press.

Jacob Oet lives in Solon, Ohio. Jacob's poetry and images appear in Palooka Journal, Straylight Magazine, Moonshot Magazine, Petrichor Machine, and OVS Magazine among others. His awards include the 2011 Younkin-Rivera Poetry Prize and the 2011 Ohioana Robert Fox Award. Jacob's first chapbook, Metamorphosis, is forthcoming in 2012 from Kattywompus Press. Student by choice, Jacob Oet is never sure which language he speaks. You may spot him in a park, forest or beach, with planted feet, arms stretched up and shaking in a breeze. But don’t let him see you; he likes to sing to strangers. He takes photos of snow, and hates winter.

Hal O'Leary is an eighty-six-year-old Secular Humanist who believes that it is only through the arts that one is afforded an occasional glimpse into the otherwise incomprehensible. He is the recipient of an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from West Liberty University.

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Gary Percesepe is Associate Editor at BLIP Magazine (formerly Mississippi Review) and serves on the Board of Advisors at Fictionaut. His short stories, poems, essays, reviews, and interviews have been widely published in Mississippi Review, Antioch Review, Westchester Review, Pank, Word Riot, Necessary Fiction, Metazen, elimae, and other places. He is the author of four books in philosophy, numerous short stories and poems, and an epistolary novel, What May Have Been: Letters of Jackson Pollock and Dori G. (Cervena Barva Press) which was recently entered for a Pulitzer Prize. He just completed his second novel, Leaving Telluride, set in Telluride, Colorado.


Rosalie Sanara Petrouske received her M.A. in English from Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan. She is an Adjunct Instructor in the English Department at Lansing Community College in Lansing, Michigan, where she currently teaches writing. She enjoys walks in the spring rain, movies that make her cry, and loves being read to, especially poetry. She will always be a hopeless romantic. Two chapbooks of her poetry have been published: A Postcard from my Mother with Finishing Line Press and The Geisha Box with March Street Press. She recently had poetry published in River Poems: An Anthology on the Allure of Rivers.

Darryl Price was born in Kentucky and educated at Thomas More College. A founding member of L. Jack Roth’s Yellow Pages Poets, he has published dozens of chapbooks, and his poems have appeared in many journals.

Denise Rue’s poems have been published in Poet Lore, Paterson Literary Review, Inkwell, Alimentum and Miller's Pond, among other literary journals. She received her MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence College in 2003 and has taught poetry in schools, nursing homes and a women’s prison. She lives in New Jersey where she is completing her master’s degree in social work at Rutgers University.

G.A. Saindon lives on 5 acres in northeast Wisconsin. He’s married for 41 years, and forever, to a lovely wife, has 7...
children, 8 grandchildren, and enough wildlife for 3 lifetimes. He calls the land ‘a park’ for its pond, one hill and plenteous trees. Therein, he sits on a folding chair to ponder why, how and when the time will come.

June Sylvester Saraceno is author of Altars of Ordinary Light, a collection of poems published by Plain View Press, as well as a chapbook of prose poems, Mean Girl Trips by Pudding House Publications. Her work has appeared in various journals including American Journal of Nursing, California Quarterly, Common Ground, Ginosko, The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal, The Pedestal, Poetry Motel, Quicksilver, The Rebel, Silk Road, Smartish Pace, Southwestern American Literature, Tar River Poetry and The Rambler; as well as three anthologies: A Bird as Black as the Sun, California Poets on Crows and Ravens; Intimate Kisses: the poetry of sexual pleasure and Passionate Hearts: the poetry of sexual love, now in a second printing. She is a professor of English Program Chair at Sierra Nevada College, Lake Tahoe and founding editor of the Sierra Nevada Review.

Carla Sarett is a Ph.D. who has worked in academia, TV, film and market research. Her short stories have appeared in Scissors and Spackle, The Linnet's Wing, Subtle Fiction, Eric's Hysterics, The Greensilk Journal, Every Day Fiction, The Ear Hustler and Lost in Fiction. You can find more of her Philadelphia short stories on Scribd.

Rochelle Spencer in 2011 received a small NEA fellowship to attend the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild's writers' colony. Prior to that, Ishe was a fellow at the Vermont Studio Center, with an M.F.A. from New York University, and currently working on a masters at Columbia University. Her work appears in Calyx, So to Speak, the African American Review, Sweet Fancy Moses, Poets and Writers, and other publications. She teaches at LaGuardia Community College.

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Andrew Stancek's recent writing has been published in Thunderclap Magazine, THIS Literary Magazine, Prime Number Magazine, The Linnet's Wings, Pure Slush and Istanbul Literary Review.

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Susan Tepper is a poet and fiction writer with four published books. Her new novella "From the Umberplatzien" is just out from Wilderness House Press. Tepper writes the Monday Chat interview column at the Fictionaut blog, and a satirical advice column "Madame Tishka on Love & Other Storms" at Thunderclap! Press. [www.susantepper.com](http://www.susantepper.com)


Neal Whitman lives with his wife, Elaine, in Pacific Grove, California, and both are docents at Robinson Jeffers Tor House in nearby Carmel. Neal writes in both Western and Japanese (haiku and tanka) poetry forms. He treasures collaborating with Elaine in creating haiga (his haiku paired with her photography) and in combining his poems with her Native America flute in public recitals. He kicked off 2012 moderating an online workshop on found poetry.

Cherise Wolas is a writer, lawyer, principal of a film company, and a fiction editor at THIS Literary Magazine. Her work has been published in *Lilith, Sex Scene: An Anthology, Negative Suck, Thunderclap! Press Issue Cinco*, and various other fine print and on-line journals. She has recently completed a novel and is at work on the next one.

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