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Review



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The Ranfurly Review

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Editorial

Welcome to the 17th issue of the Ranfurly Review, our winter edition.

This is a top notch edition, because not only do we have a full list of contributions from all around the world, with some fab poetry and fiction for you to get your teeth into, we are also proud to be able to offer another special feature.

For the third year running, the Ranfurly Review is pleased to be able to give to you the latest winner of the Poetry Superhighway Annual Poetry Contest.

Run by the brilliant Rick Lupert in California, the PSH is a wonderful global institution that brings poets together from all nations all around the world.

So, go forth dear reader, and enjoy this immense edition.

Colin Galbraith
Editor/Publisher
December 2011

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What a Mother Sees by Declan Tan

Out there beside her are folding chairs with other bodies in them and bellies that move in/out. Some faster, some less desperate: guts of the father, innards of the grandmother, the grandfather. But she doesn't like to think about those.

Chair abandoned, the kid flings the arms high and runs around wild and bold looking at them breathing and so on, saying rar rar rar and such like. There isn't much for him, or anyone, at the table. But something keeps them glued there.

The lad occasionally comes in the vision of his mother whilst on his rounds. She who rearranges new placemats to fit between grooves of the bench and her glass of red, not the only one on the table, sat out in a ground floor garden below a block of flats. And it's just after lunch where the miniature tower of unfinished plates waits for her impatiently to be sparkling again. (These same plates will also shoot expectant glances at the visiting over-mother, though currently she is in the midst of a skirmish with the grandfather which, for the audience, is a comedy but for the combatants, slow murder). Out there in the garden are more tools and other clichés too, an unused barbecue in the shade, a tree that leans timid with years of thrashing wind, for example. It is all quite normal.

The kid halts his energetic parade halfway round a sandpit so sparsely filled that he can see the floor. He has realised that he has done himself in. Sounded the alarm in his nappy. He is of course still in his first stages. Talk, personal hygiene. The first stages before everything starts to go backwards.

The mother sees it in his eyes, she's noticed.

She has recently developed the habit of comparing him to other children she knows (relations, godchildren, unknowns she sees day-to-day), the way they run and talk and she thinks, hopes, that this one's better.

The other mothers sit in waiting rooms, underground trains, stealing looks at her and the quiet automatic child. They glance like those unclean plates of slow-cloud days, proving they too are responsible and worthy mothers, flashing eyes back and forth between reflection and readjusted fringe, grinning at judgemental strangers who feign interest during these long public trials, all gurning this way and that as if to say: "kids, eh? Tuh." Celebrating their little triumphs scored against the run of play. She ignores them mostly, this particular mother, offers the smallest of smiles because really she wants to be as far away from them as possible, those that time and age have melted

into familiar expressions and identical patterns of mania. This is because she thinks herself different. And with this there is a certain sadness. For she is not.

Concerning the sullied undergarment, she realises the lad has taken this step slower than most. But that thought again: that he'll do something no one's ever seen before, something she can't even begin to conceive or accept. A return on her investment. Perhaps the shit-filled nappy is a silent beacon of his rebellion. Nevertheless, this habit of comparison is to her something she thought she'd never do, and a disservice to them both as it is.

But when she sees the child sleep no comparisons need enter her mind. Perhaps he'll be an astronaut and the whole episode with the diapers will be a humorous aside to an otherwise untarnished biography.

Back at the table, it's a wide glass clean in her hand. She takes a pretend sip, tilting the hair back but nothing much rolls in. She doesn't need the drink but it's a convenient obstruction to the persistent gurgling of things around her. Her eyes go up to the Sun and just between that moment when the burn peels back the tissue, that's when she catches a glimpse of him: someone else's son.

Up above, estimate 3rd floor in a building across the way and just to the right, a young man moves outward from behind a window net, brushing it aside. He's leant in his t-shirt and unwashed hair that stands aloof. He holds his elbows calmly on the ledge as if to say yes, the day is passed, what of it? Arms out as he looks across thankfully at a wall of bricked-up windows, staring shy and mute like a glassy-eyed fish at the thing. Drops of wine slip past her teeth as she watches, content to be hours behind the current of conversation.

This one lights a cigarette, or something short and white. Makes her feel for a cigarette too. But her son won't be like that, she's thinking. Won't be at home in the daytime, snoring while awake and worn by soiled clothing standing intermittently in windows, dropping litter down into people's gardens. The gardens of good hard-working honest people with the breath of hardboiled eggs and petroleum. He'll be one to walk in straight lines, give money to the church, laugh at the right moments, wait for the man to turn green. Clap when others clap. He'll leave 7 in the morning and be back 6 at night, living all and only in those hours, announcing his return when it's time and standing there before the door, completely undone. Church on Saturday. Eggs for breakfast. Love on command. And sit hollow-eyed at Easter. Perhaps sing a few lines during the hymns but we won't ask too much of him now. He'll at least hold the book at the right page and move his lips like the others.

He won't be some lazy knockabout unable to splutter a single sentence of expected pleasantries and he certainly won't mumble or stutter in the way that he seems to be wanting to say a million things at once and unable to manage any of them. He'll speak clearly, eloquent-like, and command a silent respect, even deference.

She feels the sneer of her thoughts tingle her lips and dwell in her nostrils. And if he were any of those hateful things, she would alternately blame him then herself for the breach of common decency, before finally resting the blame on something else entirely.

She looks at her son running circles around the seated bodies. If it weren't for the constant chatter she'd hear his lively feet on the patio. She jangles keys at him with a prolonged sound that is something like affection. But he's too grown for the old key trick. He snatches them with a tiny hand anyway and runs off into the house, giggling madly.

Her son will swear only twice in front of her, that is her prediction. When it's happened she'll let on that she's forgotten but she'll remember because it'll only happen twice. Once at Christmas when he's had too much to drink and he's having a good time so she only gives him that confounded look often seen. His girlfriend will be there and look at him with the same look as his mother, but for a different reason. The look, however, is designed to be remembered. Both their faces in the quiet. The other time she can't quite predict but she knows there'll be another. Maybe something soft like 'bastard'. Then he'll run up the stairs embarrassed. They'll have stairs by then, her husband promises.

When it's night she gets out of bed remembering the dishes, but goes out on the patio instead, after she's taken a tinkle and while the others sleep in their beds. She doesn't flush. Now she feels for a cigarette and disregards the weak vow to her husband of already smoking the last one for the day. Then it's the rest of the wine so she takes the bottle with the glass in a single hand from the counter. She steps outside and fills it with what's left. The keys barely glint from the pit of sand. She doesn't see them yet.

In the window he will be there smoking again and this time his hair will cut a sly outline in the yellow bulb light of what appears to be his kitchen. Has he learnt to cook yet? This is one of the questions important to her at the moment, one of the criteria for comparison. He puffs his own cloud on a day when they stand motionless.

Before the young man drops the smoke and before it drifts into a garden they both watch a car enter the courtyard, make a three-point turn and exit again. The figure ducks under the net and the light

goes out. She is left with the big, half-eaten Holy Communion wafer in the sky. And her wine.

Someone will forgive him for what he does. If it isn't his mother then it'll be something else.

She goes back to bed and eases herself onto the mattress and the pillow, into the side of her foetal husband.

He will awake and ask her: Where have you been?

She realises she only has answers to these simple questions.

But perhaps they'll get a dog and call it Huxley.

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Poetry by Stephanie Smith

Portrait of Myself as a Cat

I curled around your ankles
In and out
Deciphering the maze
I bit deep into the bone
To be close to you
I licked my paws
And mewled at the moon

For all the doors remained locked
And Winter came too soon

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Ghost Story by Tony McKenna

There were two people sat at a table in a room. A young man of around 30 and an elderly lady. They faced each other. The table was covered in a film of red velvet. A couple of candles had been placed on the table and they flickered weakly in the surrounding dark. The meagre amount of light rendered all the objects in the room soft like shadows, and lit the old lady's face in a mournful hue. Across the table was the younger man. His posture was straight and rigid and slowly he started to speak.

David Blaine spoke as though he were stupefied. In any other context people might have imagined that he had been afflicted with mental illness for he mouthed the words in a thick, belaboured fashion; he spoke in a way which seemed to imply a faulty wiring somewhere between brain and mouth. And yet. The old lady to whom he spoke was utterly rapt; her large dark eyes shone and her upper lip trembled ever so slightly. Her hands, those rigid, vulture like fingers were pressed into the table; her whole bearing was arched forward as though she might better absorb his words; as though she might catch them and somehow contain them, before they were lost to the darkness forever.

'I hear a daughter lost' - he intoned. 'A lost daughter so far away that wants her mother. That wants her mother to know....'

The elderly lady craned forward; as far as she was able. Such stringent movement would have otherwise caused her pain but her concentration had numbed her to any physical feeling. She was flaming inside. She was listening with an intensity which was almost violent; which seemed to resonate the space around her, a space which cracked and vibrated with invisible sparks. To capture the attention of a single human being so entirely is the objective of lovers, of romantics and poets, yet the young man before her was not in the least pleased by his power. In fact he felt vaguely repulsed. Her face and the lines which were etched into her forehead, which fell from the corners of her lips, appeared as nothing more than a sallow mask; her large, shimmering eyes lent her a cringing, almost bovine appearance. That was entirely accurate - this ancient had the aspect of a cow; a wretched creature which could no longer carry its own sagging bulk but nevertheless, from some deep rooted and blind compulsion, resisted being taken out to pasture. Her daughter, a far away foetus; a five year old thing birthed all those years before, a thing which had succumbed to some medieval disease, and was no doubt better off in the ground. Better than a life with this simpering, whimpering hag.

Though these thoughts and others floated through David's consciousness, he never for one moment let them intrude on the task at hand; he didn't allow them to affect his speech; the dry, drawling mumble, his speciality, was not for a moment interrupted. After all he was at work. He was a professional. He had realised very early on in his career that affecting an emotionless, sober drone created a special sense of spirituality; it lent to him an aspect of timelessness; a young, serious and really rather attractive man; a man who had disdained the pleasure of youth in order become a conduit for a higher power. A man emptied entirely of human content. Oh so true. David Blaine was a servant of something greater. Or at least the old dears were convinced of this and, blessedly, a good few younger, more attractive and eager women felt the same. For this, they were easy to open up. A perk of the job one might say. Blaine understood that there were only two types of people; victors and victims. Victim. His thoughts were returned to the old women in front of him. David Blaine spoke in his most toneless and profound voice:

'She is going.....she has gone. Her emotion crosses the boundaries that man cannot see. It will sustain until she returns...'

The old lady interrupted him with a sudden intake of breath.

'More' she whispered. 'Please'.

'The spirit has.....departed' – he intoned in the same dry, desiccated voice. The old woman's face was frozen in its expression of rapture and heartache, though Blaine felt nothing more than impatience. He wanted her out. The stillness, the silence, stretched between them until finally the old woman blinked and seemed to return to herself. She took an envelop from her pocket. It was filled with bills. She slid it toward the younger man with a murmured 'thanks'. She gathered herself up and shuffled away. Blaine waited a few moments to be sure she was truly gone, and then left the room.

That night he went to the Sulphur club. He had shed the clothes he used for work; the soft buffalo skin pull over and the loose beaded trousers. Clothes befitting a Shaman. A sham man. Now he was dressed in a 3 button double breasted vent-less Armani; a tailor made 4000 dollar suit; an exquisite cool wool fabric. It had the magical quality of transferring and bestowing its own qualities on him. When wearing it *he felt expensive. He felt brand new.* He walked into Sulphur Club and was at once enwrapped in the darkness. The club represented all he had ever wanted. The tinted sapphire windows, the lavish flooring, the way the attendants would slip out from the darkness like shadows and remove your jacket with a only a whisper. Such casual, tepid elegance.

He drank cocktails. One after the other. The pale white liquid shimmering dangerously in the dark. From the shadows forms crystallized; curvaceous women with strapless dresses; their shapely walks both beautiful and cruel. He drank more before getting up and moving through the sleek darkness to the toilets, where he locked himself in a cubicle before snorting a thick white powder line. Perhaps it was the cocaine, or maybe it was a lack of food (he'd had nothing other than a Valencian salad that day), for suddenly he was dizzy; his mind locking up, closing down, and for a moment he even fought to retain consciousness. He staggered into the bright light of the washing area and looked into the mirror. He splashed cold water on his face. He felt better. Briefly. The stark bright blazed unnaturally for a single moment and then everything cooled to black. A secret rhythm had been interrupted; from the outside he heard a collective gasp.

'Power Cut!' - someone yelled.

From within the darkness he felt something else. The lights flickered weakly, intermittently, and from the mirror he saw his eyes; swimming pools of darkness which grew impossibly wide as they registered the thing that was standing beside him. In the weak light he was transfixed; it was no more than three feet tall and had the semblance of a child; a little girl. Where the nose should have been were two small vents. Its eyes were laughing.

He felt himself slipping and with a vague, flaccid gesture tried to contact with the top of the basin. He slid softly down. His limbs remained unresponsive as it moved closer. Still smiling. A subdued dread resounded with each beat of his heart. That ghastly image; a parody of a little girl was almost transparent; it would flicker and jump like a bad quality video tape. It lurched suddenly closer. Its mouth opened exposing an array of black needle teeth. It drew close to his ear. 'Boo' – it whispered.

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The Rescue by Carys Bray

The father has been waiting for someone to rescue the son for more than twenty years. At first he thought that that he could do it. Equipped with a *Say-No-to-Drugs* book he set out to winch the son to safety. 'Just say no,' he said. The son laughed and told him to fuck off. 'We aren't the kind of people who say fuck off to each other,' the father said. But the son is the kind of person who says fuck off, and this used to bewilder and frighten the father back then, before he knew that there are worse things than words.

There were more books; books that alternately blamed and encouraged the father. The books all agreed on one thing: the son had to reach Rock Bottom before things would get better. The father thought the son had reached rock bottom when he dropped out of college and didn't take his A Levels, despite being predicted a B in Maths. Remembering this makes him laugh. His past expectations tickle him like a dry cough. Older and wiser, he believes that a lack of A Levels is not the disaster he once considered it to be.

The father thought the son had reached rock bottom during a summer of paranoia when the son spent hours kneeling behind the windowsill in the lounge, poking his head up and under the net curtains, looking for a black car that was following him. There *was* a black car, parked at the top of the road and the father couldn't remember how long it had been there, which added an element of plausibility to the son's ramblings. There was a brief time when the father believed the son, and the two of them peek-a-booed behind the curtains together making it seem like they might become friends again as past games of *I spy* and *Hide and Seek* echoed through the lounge. The paranoia was worse at night. The son came into the master bedroom and begged to be driven somewhere safe. The mother thwacked a sleepy arm across the bed and said 'Don't.' But the father heard the squeeze of fear in the son's voice. He wished he was the kind of man who could say fuck off, but he wasn't. He got in his car and drove down the M6 towards Birmingham and then back again while the son dozed, fitfully in the passenger seat, waking every so often to scan the motorway for the black car. And in the mornings the father went to work, stupefied with tiredness.

He thought they were at rock bottom when the son stole five hundred pounds from the mother's bank account. He thought it again when the son set fire to the house, by accident perhaps, and when the son borrowed the car and crashed it. The father was certain that they were there when the son was admitted to the psychiatric hospital. 'If

he can stop the drugs will he get better?’ he asked. The doctor talked about chicken and egg situations and the father nodded and tried to understand. Later, he followed the nurses, telling them that the son used to be good at maths in an attempt to humanise him, to give them some idea of who they were about to rescue. While the son was in hospital, the father slept well, he wasn’t woken by worry in the early hours and he even thought about booking a surprise holiday for himself and the mother until he realised that the silences between them would not be remedied by a week in Spain. And the son was home after five days anyway: the doctor said that he’d improved.

He thought that rock bottom had been reached when the son had his stomach pumped in A&E and again later, when the referral to family services came and they were subjected to *Therapy*, something which the father considered to be American and therefore suspect. The family therapist advocated a new approach and scepticism was shelved in order to rescue the son with the apparatus of *Tough Love*. The son had to find somewhere else to live and the father promised to stop slipping him the odd tenner here and there, a promise he mostly kept.

When the son became homeless the father was convinced that things couldn’t get worse, as he was when the council housed the son in the basement flat of a block inhabited by social misfits and other drug addicts. Every subsequent, incremental worsening of the son’s life over the intervening years has led him to think, *this* could be it; perhaps we are here, at last. And he has settled in, set up camp, made accommodations and looked for the positive. There is *nothing* worse than death, he thinks. Where there is life, there is hope, he thinks. There has to be. There is. He won’t have it that there’s not. He is still following every degree of the son’s slide to this elusive, final destination, after which The Rescue will assuredly take place.

There *are* worse things than death, thinks the mother. *This* is worse than death, she thinks. If the son were dead she would have her memories, but as it is, every time she sees him, he snatches more of her reminiscences: there is only so much room in her head, and pictures of the man he is are supplanting images of the boy he was.

She wishes that she could disentangle the son like a piece of needlework, like one of the kitschy cross-stitch samplers she used to enjoy making with little sayings on: *You are my Sonshine* and *Don’t wait to make your son a great man, make him a great boy*. The son is her handiwork, her life’s work, and she doesn’t even like him.

In common with other drug addicts, the son neglects his oral hygiene. His front teeth are grey-brown and perforated. She finds herself crying over silly things like his teeth, finds herself wanting to

say, 'I drank a pint of milk every day when I was pregnant so that you would have good teeth and I don't even like the bloody stuff.' When the son was small he used to sit on her knee as he watched television. If she tried to get up, tried to get on with something else, the son would hold her arms tight, fasten them about his trunk, little waist and say, 'Watch me mummy! Watch me watching.' She finds that she cannot watch him any longer.

There is solace in twenty-four hour news channels. Whenever there is an atrocity she thinks of the mothers – high school shootings, stabbings, suicide bombers – 'oh, their poor mothers' she thinks. At least her son isn't a murderer or a rapist. At least he has never achieved any notoriety outside of the circle of friends she used to have. At least he has only ruined the lives of his immediate family. The friends gave her up around the time that their sons and daughters finished university and she relinquished them gladly. She didn't want to drizzle her unhappiness over them. She felt their restraint in her presence. She couldn't bear their kindness, their likely relief as they went home to their ordinary children. She didn't want to facilitate their gratitude, to be a character in the cautionary tales that bolstered their happiness.

The father visits the son. She knows when he goes, although he doesn't tell her. He usually visits the son on Saturdays or Sundays, but occasionally, when he can't sleep, he tiptoes out of the house in the early hours on the pretext of popping to the supermarket. She observes the changes in his vital signs; the optimism before the visits, the flatlining afterwards, and she is ready with defibrillating cups of tea on his return.

The supermarket sits like a sprawling lighthouse in the darkness of the empty car park. The father approaches the entrance wearily. He finds a trolley to lean on. As he walks, he catches glimpses of himself in reflective surfaces. He is wilting. His skin is beginning to slope down the frame of his skeleton. Eye bags dip past his cheek bones, pouched like purses, stuffed with the unrealised hopes of constant googling. His features have selected sorrow as their default mode. Sometimes recognition is not instantaneous, and he momentarily feels sorry for the jaded old man he sees reflected in mirrored glass and metallic fittings.

He browses the greetings cards, looking for one that he might send to the son, but nothing will do. He wonders if the son still has the kettle he recently bought him. Perhaps he should buy another in anticipation of the new kettle's inevitable disappearance. Or perhaps he should buy a microwave to replace the one that vanished last year. It would be a great relief to know that the son could eat something

hot, even if it was only for a matter of weeks. It sometimes seems that food and toothbrushes and electric razors might jog the son's memory and entice him into returning to the world which he stopped inhabiting as a teenager.

The father manoeuvres the trolley out of the aisle and pauses to stare at a crowd of store employees gathered around a television display. He can see from the banner scrolling across the bottom of the screens that they are watching a twenty-four hour news channel. He edges toward the crowd.

'What's going on?' he asks a lad with an enormous hole in his earlobe.

'It's the rescue,' the lad says.

The father doesn't watch the news. He can't understand why the mother bothers with it; depressing, miserable information from all over the world brought straight to your front room by eager journalists who would probably begin each report with 'Guess what?' if they could get away with it. He wonders what the lad with the strange ear is talking about. 'What rescue?'

'You know. The miners. From Chile. They're about to bring the first one up.'

He is vaguely aware of this story. The mother has mentioned it, he thinks. The lad with the holey ear steps to one side making space for the father to watch.

The Chilean landscape is lunar, otherworldly. Men in hard hats and puffer jackets are clustered around a bright yellow A-frame. The camera focuses on the ground and the father can see the black edges of a large pipe poking out of the earth like the sides of a dustbin. A cable is winding out of the hole, up and around a cartwheel at the top of the frame, like a giant fishing reel. It is as if they are trying to angle the miner out of the earth. Eventually, a torpedo like capsule appears and the assembled crowd clap and cheer and the camera moves to focus on the contorted face of a small boy; it is all too much for him and his sobs carry over the applause.

The lad with the holey ear wipes his eyes. 'It's one of those moments, isn't it?' He says. 'Like Elvis dying or the moon landing. People will remember where they were when this happened.'

The father nods, uncertainly. The capsule is opened and the first miner steps out wearing sunglasses and a red hard hat, smiling cautiously. The whistles and cheers resume, but the cries of the miner's son are again discernible as he rushes to embrace his father.

'Back to work then!' The lad with the ear smiles and follows his colleagues towards the bakery where trolleys bursting with bread are waiting to be unloaded. The father stays in front of the televisions. He

listens to discussions of the miners' sixty nine day captivity, to accounts of what they have been eating and descriptions of the conditions a mile below the earth's surface. He decides to watch the rescue of the second miner. It's not often that something nice happens on the news. After that he will buy something for the son and then he will go home and have a bit of a doze before work.

The second miner is quite a character. He cheers and shouts and repeatedly hugs the Chilean president. The father smiles as he watches. I'll just stay for one more, he thinks. He will be especially tired at work, but what are they going to do about it? He's only got two years before retirement. After the third miner emerges, the father decides that he has time to watch the fourth and cautiously removes a dining chair from a display in the central aisle. He sits down in front of a television with the empty trolley at his side.

The mother turns in her sleep and the cool, empty sheets on the opposite side of the bed wake her. She lies with her eyes shut for a few moments, trying to trick herself back into sleep, but it's no use. She climbs out of bed and explores the carpet with tentative, slipper-finding feet. Downstairs, she fills the kettle, switches on the television and is suddenly glad to have woken. She sits on the sofa with a steaming mug of tea and watches as the fourth miner is freed. She has a little cry, calls herself a silly old cow and boils the kettle again in preparation for the fifth rescue.

The fifth man is the youngest, she learns as she flattens a teabag with the back of her spoon. His mother will be delighted, she thinks. She sits down again and waits for the rescue capsule to surface. It is almost eight o'clock in the morning. The father will be late for work if he doesn't come home to get ready soon. She wonders exactly how long he has been gone and what he has bought this time. She is angry with him. Sorry for him. And it is at moments like these that she despises the son. It has been a surprise to realise that her love is not elastic; that it doesn't stretch as far or run as deep as the father's love; he still talks about rehab, still believes that change is possible. But no-one can force the son. He has human rights, even though what's left of him is hardly human at all.

At eight o'clock the lad with the holey ear comes back.

'Finished my shift,' he says. 'Can't believe you're still here. Are you all right?'

'Last one,' says the father. 'Then I'm off home.'

'What number is this?'

'Number five. The youngest of them all. He's just a boy really.'

They watch the television in companionable silence. The cable twists up from the depths of the earth and out of the dustbin width of

pipe. Finally the rescue capsule emerges. The excitement of the miner's father is palpable, his smile joyous. Father and son embrace. The holey eared lad wipes his eyes. 'I'm going home to watch the rest of it,' he says.

The father nods to him and gets up from the borrowed dining chair. He leaves it next to the empty trolley and walks outside into daylight. If he hurries he can get home in time to change before work. But he doesn't go home. He drives across the city to a concrete tower block. He parks on the double yellow lines outside and, ignoring the keypad at the entrance, gives the reinforced doors a shove. They open as he knew they would – the tenants always leave them unlatched. He approaches the concrete stairs and begins the walk down, below ground level. The stairwell has the ambiance of a multi-story car park and it smells like one too; piss stains and needles decorate the corners of each landing.

The son lives at the very bottom. The corridor that leads to his flat is windowless. Two fluorescent light strips are bolted to the ceiling; one has been smashed, the other sputters dimly. When he reaches the son's door he stops. The door is blue. It is stained in one corner with a fine spray of what looks to be blood. Obscenities are scrawled across it in permanent marker and the number has been broken off. He feels a familiar wave of indignation surging into his hands and feet, rippling into his fingers. He could probably kick the shoddy door down. If he really wanted to he could boot it off its hinges, storm inside and drag the son from his bed, or the sofa, or the floor. He could haul the son's bony frame over his shoulder, climb the concrete staircase and bundle him into the car. But he doesn't. He steps back until his spine touches the solid corridor wall then he slides to the floor. The cold of the concrete seeps through his trousers, and he waits in the shadows for someone to rescue his son.

Poetry by Clinton Van Inman

Dressed Right

They said that you were dressed right
In your blues, your red and white,
The fresh cut flowers were neatly laid,
The flag was folded as the band had played.
We stood and watched with Sunday's best
In places not for playing you would rest,
Momma fell sick, said it was the heat
When they lowered you under our feet.

They said that you were dressed right
With your blues, your red and white,
But none of those names engraved in stone
Or those flags waving for some proud cause
That gives the grownups much applause,
Or even your medals matter—because you are gone.

Copyright © Clinton Van Inman

With Graceful Sweep

The river curves with graceful sweep.
Along its banks the willows weep.
Their slender boughs are bending low
To kiss the sun's reflection far below
And yield their mystery to the stream
That carries away its boundless dream.
Perhaps the pulse or lasting splendour
Will express some secret or oft desire
Beyond all rule and mindless measure
My words too will press even higher.
Without poetry our world will perish
Leaving not a plank or rack behind
To show one royal act to cherish
Some idea that history is not blind.

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Dressed Right

If we could dance just one more night away
Filled with champagne and candlelight,
In hours held by our own delight,
Only this and this alone would please.
Like Chablis mixed with sweet bouquet
In moments we soon shall not forget
Save all not close to the clarinet,
Where only perfume and tobacco lingers
Our love shall rise above all of these.
While we tango upon the outer terrace
Moonbeams shall fall upon your face,
And I shall say that nothing really matters
Except this time that we have passed
Because we have saved our best for last.

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Amber Decker

Winner of the Poetry Super Highway
Poetry Contest 2011



In association with
www.poetrysuperhighway.com

Introducing Amber Decker

Amber Decker is a poet, fiction writer, and diligent English major from the United States. She is the author of two full-length poetry collections: *Sweet Relish* (2002) and *Lost Girls* (2010). Her poems have been widely published in various print and online journals and "Best Of" anthologies both in the US and abroad.

In 2011 she took first place honors in the 14th annual Poetry Superhighway poetry contest. Amber currently resides in the state of West Virginia with her husband and one very spoiled cat. You can see some of her publication credits and read more of her work on her blog: <http://roughverse.wordpress.com>

Amber On Life...

Firstly, I'm from West Virginia, or at least that's what I tell everyone. I was actually born just over the river in the state of Maryland, but my mother and I moved to WV when I was twelve, after my father passed away. It's the place where I've learned the most important lessons in my life and done the most "growing up," so to speak, so I consider West Virginia to be my true home. I could never live in a city. I just wouldn't feel right if I didn't drive past a field full of cows at least once per day.

I had my first book, *Sweet Relish*, published when I was nineteen. I vividly remember getting the call from the DBA of the publishing house because my best friend, who was living with me at the time, answered the phone and promptly asked the guy, "And who the hell are you?" Luckily, he didn't hold that against me and published my book anyway; however I admit that I wasn't really happy with the traditional publication route as I experienced it, so when I had finished collecting the poems for my second book, *Lost Girls*, I used my own money to self-publish. I have definitely enjoyed myself much more this time around.

When I'm not writing, I make a living as a warehouse worker. Seriously, I spend twelve-hour days basically picking up heavy things and putting them down again. That's my job. I have a bad back, so I'm trying to get away from the world of manual labor. I'm a student at present, working toward an English degree, and possibly an MFA in creative writing later down the line. This is particularly funny considering that I'm a high school drop-out.

As far as my personal life goes, I'm now 29 and have been married for almost three years to a wonderful guy who (luckily for me) has little trouble accepting my obsession with video games and werewolf movies and my strange habit of randomly quoting dead writers.

On Poetry

Where do you find your inspiration?

I believe that all it really takes to be truly inspired is the ability to recognize the kernel of what could be an extraordinary idea in any ordinary place and then grab it by the throat. For me, it could be a person I've met, a city I've visited and fallen in love with, a scene from a book I'm reading, a conversation overheard in a crowded place... anything, really. When I'm in the writing mood, I see myself as an empty jug waiting to be filled up with cool stuff. I find that the more experiences I have and the more I consciously work to extract myself from my comfort zone, the more readily the ideas for poems come.

Why write poetry?

I think that the decision to write poetry is a very personal one, and the reasons behind it differ greatly from poet to poet. For me, poetry is an act of processing emotionally-charged experiences, recording feelings and memories, and it's how I communicate. Like most people, I tell lies to myself every day. It's like putting a band aid over a wound. But how many of us have that desire every now and then to peel back that band aid and take a look at what's underneath?

Poetry is how I tell the truth...to myself and to others. It took me a long time to get past the navel-gazing phase that I think every fledgling poet goes through in the beginning. My first book is a perfect example of this. I've learned to look outward to the world and to other people, to get to the root of what it means to be human and to live in this very strange and beautiful world of ours. I don't know if I always wholly succeed, but poems have become my very personal mythology; they are how I attempt to explain the world to myself and to others. I am a professional band-aid peeler.

What poetry form appeals most to you and why?

Although I certainly admire the precision and talent that is necessary to craft an effective sestina, sonnet, or villanelle, honestly I'm not much for meter or rhyme. I'm definitely a free-verse kind of girl. It has been pointed out to me many times that I tend to use internal rhyme within my poems, but it's not a conscious effort on my part. I like the flow of natural speech. When I listen to someone speaking, there is always a unique pattern of hard and soft syllables, verbal tics, even the natural "line breaks" that occur when a person draws in a breath of air. The rhythms of natural speech are like music, so that's what I try to emulate when I write, and I think that people tend to respond well to my work at readings because of it, at least in part.

How do you go about writing a poem? How long might one take?

It's hard to say exactly how I go about writing a poem. Sometimes I will dwell on an image or a particular word or combination of words for days or weeks at a time. If that's the case, when the poem comes it may leap out of me fully formed, or it might trickle out gradually. My poem-writing times have varied anywhere from an hour to two years.

Revision is what takes the longest. I try to put drafts away for months at a time before bringing them back out into the light of day. I need to look at a poem with fresh eyes to see if something needs to be added or taken out altogether. I'm often hesitant to cut anything, fearing that I'll lose the heart of the thing, but that rarely happens. Usually, the first draft is crap. I've learned to be ruthless. I save everything, though. I'm like a magpie. Just because a line shows up awkwardly in one poem doesn't mean it won't be absolutely brilliant in another.

Do you write to music?

I've always been a little suspicious of people who claim to listen to music while they write. Listening to music is such a "brain-heavy" activity, I really don't see how anyone can actually listen and write simultaneously. Revise, maybe. I've done my share of that to music. One of my favorite bands is The Dreamscapes Project from the Washington DC area. They have this laid-back, folksy/jazzy style. Their music is like nothing else I've ever heard, and their live show is incomparable.

Describe your muse if he/she were a person

My muse would probably resemble Bruce Campbell from the Evil Dead movies. I think that cleft in his super-chin says it all...or maybe I'm just fantasizing.

How would you define success as a poet? Cash, fame or recognition?

Honestly, I could do without cash. Anyone who says they write poetry for the money clearly has a reality problem and might as well bet on a unicorn to win the Kentucky Derby while they're at it. As for fame, I prefer to be anonymous most of the time.

I think the best thing you could possibly hope for as a poet is to make a meaningful connection with a reader of your work. You may not be able to directly communicate your exact experience, but that's the thing...every reader brings their own baggage to the table. Some people will relate to you and some won't. Cherish the ones who do and enjoy the connections you make with others through your writing.

If the Writing Genie could grant you a single writing wish, what would it be?

I'd like to borrow whatever metaphor/simile machine Sharon Olds is using for a week or so. Seriously, that woman's juxtapositions of images are insane (in a good way).

What are you working on now?

I'm currently writing a series of poems about werewolves. Weird, I know. Some are about classic films, literature, lore, etc. I'd like to collect enough for an entire book. It's an odd passion of mine.

Who are your favourite poets, authors and/or books?

My favourite author of the moment is Patrick Rothfuss, the writer behind the amazing Kingkiller trilogy. The third book isn't even out yet, and I'm already drooling over the possibilities. His writing is lyrical and poetic. The story is epic. He really draws you into his world with a cast of fantastic characters.

I'm also a huge fan of young adult literature. I just feel that the genre is overflowing with creativity, the likes of which adult fiction rarely sees. Some current favorites of mine: *The Hunger Games* books by Suzanne Collins; the *Beautiful Creatures* series by Margaret Stohl and Kami Garcia; *Firelight* and *Vanish*, both by Sophie Jordan; and *Incarceron* by Catherine Fisher.

As for poets, I've enjoyed the work of many: Charles Bukowski; Dorianne Laux; Sharon Olds; Lucie Brock-Broido; Judy Jordan; Tonya Kelley; Nicole Blackman; Stephen Crane; Robert Frost; William Carlos Williams; Tess Gallagher; Billy Collins; Daphne Gottlieb; and believe me when I say that the list goes on and on, probably forever. I never get tired of discovering new poets!

What are you reading now?

At the moment, I'm making my way through *It Started With Dracula: The Count, My Mother, and Me* by Jane Congdon (a fellow West Virginian). It's a great book that is part memoir, part travelogue, and even succeeds in being laugh-out-loud funny in some places. Congdon's descriptions of Romania are breathtakingly beautiful and poetic. I'd definitely recommend it.

Poetry by Amber Decker

What is Taken, What is Left

I stole another woman's only scarf--
soft and blue as the eyes of a boy I once loved--
on a train out of Bucharest, late fall,
when my chopped hair grew out in all directions, wild red gods
thirsty for the touches of strange dark men.
I smelled like sex in those days,
my curved body kept coiled, sharp
and lethal as a weapon.
They cried out in the end, all of them, like victims.
Outside, the forests howled by, the teeth
of werewolves flashing in the night. Little dark-haired girls
poked their smiley heads into my compartment
hour after hour, watched me read my battered book
of Russian fairytales, studied with wild-eyed intensity
the precise angles of each sweat-slick and shimmering limb,
the snarling white breasts, the primal puzzle
of how to hold their bodies once they grew into them,
unraveling.
As I slept, their little fingers slipped like ancestral ghosts
through the scarlet shrine of my hair,
those smoothed, softened braids laid like a path of needles
shining in moonlight,
showing them the way home.

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Bundled in my red coat, the road
before me a blank line
in a notebook waiting to be filled
with poems, with beautiful words that do not include
fat or *ugly*.

It has begun to snow. The howling winter
pummels me, pinks
my cheeks and starts
a fire burning in my naked hands.

It is five in the morning, cows lined up
at the fence with their heads poking through,
white snakes of their breath in the air.

What is a cow, really? A large thing
full of milk, giving and giving
until she is dry. Swiveling
her curious head

toward girls in red coats
who shiver in the snow. Girls who cry
when boys call them fat.

It is five in the morning,
and the cows have turned
their broad backs to me.

They are returning home, a handful
of black feathers scattered
over snowy fields, leaving this fat girl,
this tried everything girl to herself.

I see no fruit
in the trees, no leaves
and no birds. In the dead
of winter, morning comes slowly
or not at all.

We have not spoken
since August, since before
the branches hung
heavy with fruit, since the leaves
turned red as my frozen cheeks

.../continued

and fell. I waited for you
still, like the dark half of the earth
awaits the sun.

What is a fat girl, really?

A large inconvenience, who hangs her hopes on you
like a damp and heavy coat, all that is
overwhelming, a small
fire to be stamped out, an ashen thing
so inconsequential, even the cows turn
away, pity
in their tired black eyes.

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Killing Fields, Cambodia

at night

rats skitter chew
through paper walls
long-tailed shadows

swathed
in ghost-light

dark places the mind cannot touch

laughter the dancing smoke of prayer

will not reach

an ocean
bottom

its
kaleidoscope
fish

their killing beauty

teeth like tempered steel
on whatever soft thing

would reach for them
would write their stories

the curved blade snap
of finger bones

a tiger's talent
for disappearing
into a red mist

.../continued

child's ribs
in the dark tunnel
of its throat

the ground swallows
what is left
still choking on it

our foreign voices sink
down
down

into
Mariana depths

a poem dreamed

in
a
dream

language of knives
and skin

can never be
erased

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Harvest

I like to watch the young girls flit across campus
in their short shorts, their high heels and their
infinite *pinkness*, the self-conscious bubbles of their
laughter like deer littering the forests with their beauty.

The slightest disturbance may make them bolt.

A pony-tailed brunette is crying into the
ear of her cell phone, school books
balanced on one slim hip, the sharp tip
of her shoe stamping deep into the rain-wet ground.

I hope she find what she is searching for, this one,
that she will not slip hungry into the long white coat of winter.

On the steps of a low brick building, a young man with a dark
goatee
has draped himself lazily across the molten center of the world,
surrounded on all sides by long-haired, doe-eyed girls
who fawn over him as though he were some woodland god

claiming a piece of this wilderness for himself
with his slow smile and willowy limbs
made for dancing long into the night.

Come Samhain and the bleak seasons that follow,
he will be gone, leaving only the shadows of his passing
like blood red apples on the branches of the trees,

and the girls will return home again,
their baskets heavy and full.

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When the World Ends

Bring me a buffalo with sloping horns to sing
water songs for me, to lull me to sleep. Lead me past the caverns,
the cathedrals of plague, of sun-scorched earth.

I have been irresponsible with this life. Tell me what I want to hear.
Not the same woeful stories, not how many of us have died today
wearing our war paint, laid low in our heavy armor.

I want to know how this all ends. Will the sun explode? Will the rings
of Saturn shatter, tiny flecks of ice and dust
caught in the current like swimmers pulled out to sea, simply and
terribly gone?

What does it mean to stand out in the rain, to quake
like a voodoo priestess overcome by loa, waiting for
the mother river to take the carnival cities to her breast?

I am asking you to give me the tools that will cut through
the thick tissue of this diseased land like surgical knives. I see this
bloody
war color everywhere I look, my vision clouded by it.

The wine has turned, the blood of Christ soaks
our daily bread. Locusts eat the trees and leave only shells
to be blown away by the wind. On the beach, I watch the waves

roll in, tear at the fragile seam of the land,
an old prayer robe wearing thin.
This coast was not always jagged glass, these mountains not always

dull round loaves of flesh. Give me something solid, something whole
and new, a blank canvas without red smears.
I want to be Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel,

bony fingertip skimming
the flesh of God. I want to be full
of electricity, the jolt, the joy

.../continued

of beginning and ending in the same space, my ribs aching
to be broken. Let the sea part for me,
the sun burn my face with its desert heat. I want

to walk with the dead, follow them to the riverbank
to watch them drink, to know their thirst. I want
to wear white on my dying day, to be the last one alive

when the oceans rise up,
when the sacred fires begin to burn,
when the nuclear dawn breaks.

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Alternative Bio by Steven Dodd

After she'd re-read the letter she had walked along the front for hours; digesting the delight and the disappointment. Still alone, the lease up in three months; she'd stopped for coffee at a beach-side kiosk. The damp Brighton air seeped into her clothes; grey waves broke into suds on the pebbles. This was her real beginning. Now she was a paid professional.

She'd stopped off at the shop for a celebratory meal of frozen pizza and another bottle of red on special. And then, the next morning, after a breakfast of paracetamol and tap water, she'd resolved to keep on trying. The sour goading of her success had sunk in. It would be worse to go home now. Her sister would say to her face, she'd thrown the money away.

Third prize in a competition no one had ever heard of. Her story posted on the net for nobody to read. It was a lonely, selfish struggle. When success finally came, she'd be damned if she'd tell the truth about it.

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Poetry by Carol Hornack

The Porcelain Doll

Is she?
She says she is Rosalind.
But will we ever know?

The other ladies speak of school activities, community activities
The punctuation on certain syllables to render those utterances
more
interpretative of the given meaning.

Hidden is the nervous twitching of folded fingers. "Will I fit in?
Will they approve of me? Will I be the uninvited slander of next
month's bingo meeting?"

Shut off from themselves and turned on rote pilot
They keep company with the emptiness in each other.
"We are all rung out on the same line," they say in unison.

But Rosalind
Or whom we believe might be Rosalind
She needs to write. Her great escape. The ideas begin to flow.
The channel is open. Any narrower, and would she become
Like one of the dolls sitting atop her family room mantel.
Yes, great to look at and even fun to dust at the weekly
cleaning.
But alive? Real? No.

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Poetry by Paul Summers

healing o'malley

emu park, central queensland

i. anzac day

i am dividing agapanthus
in the midday heat
tender work, teasing
apart their conjoined roots

a juvenile butcher bird
has ventured indoors
scavenging the crumbs
of our breakfast debris

across the paddock
a baby is wailing
the idle wheeze of sea
unravelling in the treetops

i am watching the ants
retrieving their dead

ii. homily

we are sat on the lap
of the tie-dyed tide.

teaching our children
the language of turtles

polite & economic
but laden with simile

then once perfected
the etiquette of terns

whose pristine lines
this sun makes concrete

much later, we'll examine
the grace of the oyster

humble in its silence
but scalpel sharp

iii. the shipping forecast

today, trees lean west. duck
the gale's frenetic punches.

subjugate fronds whipping
the grey. & fragile gulls toil,

all their flight now stasis.
here, ships sing dirges.

each dour note extolling
the toll of tangled surf.

the islands, greyscale.
pelican & hummocky,

the blur of *wedge*;
a vanishing act.

iv. mirage

today, the heat haze
makes islands weightless;
a convoy of basalt
defying gravity,
their footings breached
by a trick of light.

tyler scours the rocks
for crabs & words
to free his palsied tongue;
each quarry elusive,
they dart for the cover
of immoveable stones.

the slow surf sighs & glassy
eyed, the curlews mourn.

v. slouch

today, each cloud-bloom
has the weight of debt

perching like doubt
on this skein of *islands*

sickle-winged the swallows
slash the monotone of lapis air

unravelling the mysteries
of the beaches' archaeology

the slouching basalt basks
on parched-mouthed grass

& the sea is shrinking
like my mother's pale limbs

leaving rock-pools to perfect
the ambivalence of longing

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Into and Out by David Watt

He stood in the middle of a road that cut through open fields. And although the horizons were clear, he couldn't tell where it led. Yet he didn't have the least sense of being lost.

When he woke from this dream, Albert felt a lingering regret for a bygone time and place, but also a regret for the backward-looking nature of having such a feeling. The regret of loss and the regret of regretting were like the dog chasing its own tail. And the more he thought about it the harder it became to lift his head from the pillow, to step off his dream-raft onto the dry land of day.

He rolled onto his side, pulled the blanket up over his shoulder and let himself drift away without quite falling asleep to re-enter the dream.

When the cat jumped from the bookcase onto the bed with her mewling protest of hunger, he pushed the blanket away, got up, and was preceded into the hall by the strutting feline, displeased that she had waited this long for breakfast.

As he detoured into the bathroom she threw out a cry that to him sounded like "Goddamn you!" and he replied, "Just a minute, for chrissakes, I have to pee, do you mind?"

To that she again raised protest, only this time it was from the kitchen and not directly in his ear in the tiled bathroom.

The day had begun, like most of his days, it seemed, with contention, both within and without. Emptying his bladder into the bowl Albert sighed deeply, in a way almost identical to one's last breath.

He tried to focus on what his meditation teacher had told him, that each moment was not in building a wall but making a single brick, and when he turned from the toilet he stumbled on the first one.

"Goddam you, Pinky! Would you stay out of the way for chrissakes. You want to be fed or not?"

But she was already back in the kitchen, yowling now at the indignity of being kicked on top of the indignity of being hungry in a world where she couldn't hunt her own food.

"Yes. Yes." Albert said, understanding this, and his voice softened. "My name is Albert; I'll be your waiter today."

.../continued

The sight of her food bowl coming down to her sent a shiver through Pinky's tail and all was forgiven between them. As he stood back up, Albert had a momentary remembrance of a road through a field in a dream but he couldn't remember where it was going.

And still, he was at a loss how to get through the day.

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In The Pen by C.G. Morelli

It was twilight in the old pen; one of those nights where the air hangs like a hot plate of refried beans. Mosquitoes brushed the tips of my ears and I periodically removed my wool cap and stirred the soupy air to impede them. The pen was an unforgiving place. It was a place meant to rot a man's soul and steal away his last few drops of real confidence. It was a place where dreams went to shrivel up like fallen autumn leaves, and where life itself strained desperately against the gruelling stranglehold of daily routine.

I mopped a few beads of sweat and some excess mosquito parts from my brow and took a short stroll around the cell. The dirt floor crunched beneath my shoes. I quietly acknowledged some of my fellow inmates with a somber nod of my head. Some of them greeted me with a return nod, others with a low grunt that failed to approach anything resembling coherent speech. A lone inmate, draped against a far wall like a long string bean hanging from a vine, signalled back from the shadows by swatting at a fat horse fly and adjusting his manhood.

My cell itself was no marvel of efficiency, but it suited the warden's needs just fine. Eight inmates shared a one-room, holding-style cell complete with rock hard benches for resting and sandy gravel floors. Month-old cigars littered the ground, and hardened wads of bubble gum suspended themselves from the underside of the benches like a motionless rainbow of spiders. The cinder block walls, hastily painted the color of melted caramel, were covered in some places with childish inscriptions. In other places, the wall was neatly scribed with the rigid lines of an epic poem. In the corner of the pen stood a rusty water fountain that emitted a thick, alkaline liquid, which on most nights seemed boiled to a few degrees warmer than the sticky air. Its drain hole was habitually clogged with a clump of wet cigarette ash and stained with dried saliva. Personal space was at a premium, and some of the seasoned inmates staked claim to the more private seating, if you can call four men to a five-foot bench "private."

Conversation among the inmates was sparse and the mood was generally depressing from night to night. This was not surprising, as our existence depended mostly on the warden's every whim. Whenever he needed our services, a dilapidated telephone would ring its shrill bell and an inmate's presence would be requested outside. A heavy door would creak open, an inmate would exit into the unknown, and the door would crash back to a closed position. Oftentimes, the inmate would not return. On the rare occasion that he did find his way

back to the pen, he would return in such a weakened condition that any attempt at reliving his ordeal was not only futile, but inhumanly cruel to boot.

Thus far, I have been lucky enough to stay out of the warden's graces and my presence outside of the cell has never been requested. Each night I pray in silence that my name will never be the one repeated through our end of the receiver. But, I know it is just a matter of time before my number is called. My meaningless existence has become nothing more than a few moments of idle comfort between phone calls, followed by endless hours of dread for the next shrill ring. It's a terrible way to live, I must say.

As the night continued, the heat within the cell grew to an unbearable intensity. The thick scratchiness of wool pulled at my skin as I fidgeted on one of the creaky benches, my mind tightly gripped by thoughts of the warden. I pictured a fat cigar poking out from his porky lips and I could hear the guttural and deliberate laugh he was famous for unleashing as he issued each inmate his uniform, a white wool outfit with black stripes and a matching cap. It was a uniform better suited for an Eskimo than for a bunch of inmates in a cell that trapped such intolerable heat. I began to believe that I'd rather be sacrificed by the warden than roast alive in this pen. I knew this was irrational thinking, but it gave me a false sense of hope that was comforting, if only for a brief moment.

When the dilapidated telephone began to ring wildly, my blood stopped in my veins. It seemed to steal every ounce of morale from the inmates, and each time it rang, the shrill stab of the bell burrowed another inch deeper into my eardrums. The pen-hand lifted the phone from its hook and put the receiver to his ear. He listened in silence, nodded slowly, and replaced the phone to its original mooring.

"Epstein, you're needed outside," he said with little emotion.

This news relieved every inmate within the cell, who now sat bolt upright on the wooden benches and resumed breathing. Epstein, however, looked more like a deflated party balloon as he rose from his usual station on the gravel floor and inched towards the massive sliding door, dragging his feet along behind him to further procrastinate his efforts. On his face he wore a thick layer of sweat, which I surmised was ice cold at this moment regardless of the sauna-like conditions of the cell. His lower lip hung partially open and the nervous wrinkle in his brow did an awful job of hiding the fact that his beady eyes darted from left to right and back again, as if he were a drowning man who had fallen into a fit of panic.

The door slid open along its track and an odd white light filtered through in its place, causing the inmates, myself included, to shield

their eyes with their caps. A deafening and constant sound, like that of a fierce wind rushing through a gnarled chasm, blasted in through the doorway as Epstein took one last look at his fellow inmates and the relative safety of his cell. Then he stepped towards the light into the unknown, and the massive door slid shut behind him with a heavy thud, followed by a barely audible click.

No one spoke, but we all knew the silence was a kind of mourning for Epstein, whom we knew was in for an ordeal that he wouldn't soon forget. That is, if he were able to survive it at all. The silence dominated the air for the remainder of the night.

It's amazing how slowly time passes in an atmosphere such as this, when you know each moment is potentially your last. I could only hope that Epstein was enough to stifle the warden's lust for blood, at least until tomorrow. I respected Epstein from what I knew of him, and I wondered what kind of cruel and medieval treatment he was enduring at that very moment. But, I could not help myself from thinking of him, at the same time, as a sacrificial lamb and feeling pleased that it was not myself who had been forced through the threshold and into that blinding light.

Then, the incessant ringing of the telephone jolted me from the newfound comfort of my artificial reprise. I instinctively buried my face in my palms and prayed for the forgiveness of any sins I may have committed since birth. As I mumbled, I heard the pen hand lift the receiver to his ear once again, not uttering a single word outside of what he could communicate with a gentle nod of his head. When I heard the phone clicked back into place, I lifted my face from my sweaty palms and caught the glare of the pen hand, whose eyes were fixed directly on me.

"Layden, you're up," he said, without blinking.

My heart immediately stopped beating and sweat iced over my skin as the cell door slid to its opened position. My body unwillingly drifted to the punishing light that poured through the opening and I stepped out. I found myself standing on a hard, red, clay-like material. The door slammed closed behind me.

The fans boomed wildly as I took my first step onto the outfield grass and began trotting toward the mound.

"You suck, Layden!" shouted a disgruntled fan.

"Get off the field, ya hayseed!" another chimed in.

In the visitors' dugout, the players slapped their knees and fell all over each other with laughter. "They're bringin' in the real meat now, hoss!" one of them shouted. I tried to block the jeers from my ears by concentrating on the jovial calls of the ice cream vendors:

"Ice cream here! Cold ice cream here!" This was my mantra, the only sound I could hear within the park as I strolled up to the rubber and dug my steel spikes into its softness.

The catcher tossed me the ball and I proceeded to rub the rough rawhide with the oil of my palms. I glared into the catcher's mitt and shot strained glances at the runners bouncing off of first, second, and third bases. I got my sign, the old number one. I went into my stretch, reared my arm far behind my head, and fired a bullet with every ounce of force I could muster. The redness of the seams flashed in slow motion before me as the ball approached the plate.

The only sound I could hear in the stadium was a collectively muffled squeal from the crowd, who seemed to be suspended wholly on their preceding breath. Time had basically stopped, and for one perfect instant, everything inside the park was trapped inside a single vacuum.

And then, with the old familiar crack of ash on rawhide, the vacuum burst, and time spewed into reality with the force of an opened fireplug. The ball left a shadow over the left fielder and disappeared over the fence into the soupy night.

As I walked off the field, the warden slapped me on the back and said, "That's life in the pen, kid. Nothin' you can do."

The Kiss by Helen Taylor

'I haven't a scooby,' Sally said. 'Two? Twenty? Two hundred?' Her voice was barely audible above the music. Someone had stuck George Michael on at full volume and standing beside them, three twenty-something girls dressed as Bananarama were screeching along to *Faith*.

'Yes, yes,' Ade yelled, 'exactamundo. Twenty.' He was somewhat downhearted that she had struck the correct answer. He had been hoping to impress with his wide range of death trivia.

'So, twenty people in Britain die each year from falling out of bed. Fascinating.' Sally yawned, covering her mouth with a carefully manicured hand. Her nails were painted black and she wore a vast and complicated ring on her third finger. It looked like some kind of beaded sea anemone, Ade thought. He wondered if it was heavy. The beads rattled as she wafted her hand in front of her mouth. Her tongue stud flashed from her half open mouth, and Ade glimpsed her teeth stained yellow with tar. A fellow smoker.

'*Scuse me,*' she said. He could hear the click of the stud against her teeth.

He tried another from his repertoire.

'How many people, worldwide, get killed by coconuts each year?'

'Oh, for fuck's sake Ade, give it a rest.'

This wasn't quite going how Ade had hoped.

'Er, do you want another drink?' he tried instead.

'Yeah, Bacardi and coke,' Sally said, rattling the ice cubes that were left in her empty tumbler. Ade took the glass and pushed through the crowded room towards the dining table that was serving as the bar. Iona had converted her huge living room into an eighties night club. Film posters for *Dirty Dancing* and *Fame* decorated the walls. The sofa and arm chairs were pushed against the wall, clearing a square in the centre for dancing but the hired lights reminded Ade more of traffic lights than disco lights. George Michael had transmogrified into Duran Duran, and the grating descant of *Girls on Film* rasped from the speakers. He squeezed past the New Romantics going for it on the makeshift dance floor. On the table, between the discarded cocktail shaker and half empty bottles of tonic, there were opened bottles of vodka and gin, and screwed up empty cans of lager, but no sign of Bacardi. Ade wondered if vodka and coke would do.

He tried to signal to Sally but she was talking to Mike Addison. She was leaning in the doorway, with one leg folded behind her and her foot resting against the door frame. Mike Addison was standing

over her, towering above her, with his hand on the door frame behind her ear, looking like he possessed her. She was laughing, playfully flicking glances at his face and twirling her dark hair between her fingers. Then she stretched up and locked her arms about his neck. Ade turned away.

He poured himself a large vodka and gazed around the room. He counted four would-be Madonna's, all from the early days, with ripped fishnet tights and lacy gloves. There were a couple of Kraftwerk nerds in red shirts and liquorice lace ties hanging out by the sound system, and an Adam Ant circa Kings of the Wild Frontier slumped in an armchair in the corner. Ade did a quick calculation. 1980. It would just about do. Not that he could criticise anyone as he hadn't bothered his arse.

He knocked back his drink feeling the blaze of the neat alcohol in his throat, and patted the pockets of his Harrington jacket looking for his packet of fags. They weren't there. He thrust his hands deep into the back pockets of his jeans and found the packet, crumpled where he had sat on it in the pub earlier in the night. He rescued one mildly bent cigarette, trying to straighten it with his fluttering hands.

'Got a light mate?' he asked a bloke he didn't recognise who had come over to fill his glass.

'Yeah. Nae probs.' The guy lit Ade's cigarette with a cheap plastic lighter. 'Hey mate, you should cop a load of that,' he said, nodding his head in the direction of the doorway where Sally was snogging Mike Addison.

'I've been trying not to look,' he said.

'I ken what you mean. It's fuckin gross.'

Ade looked at the guy, puzzled. He wasn't thrilled Sally was snogging another bloke, but he wouldn't have called it gross.

'Eh?' he said.

'Ya ken, pretending to be a lassie and aw that.'

Ade had no idea what the guy was talking about.

'Thanks for the light, mate,' he said, drawing deeply on his fag. With the back of his hand, he pushed his ginger curls out of his eyes and looked across the room to the doorway. Sally and Mike Addison were entwined in a breath defying embrace of oblivion. Next to them, leaning demurely against the wall was the most astonishing sight Ade had seen all evening.

She was dressed in a scarlet pencil skirt that showed off muscular calves covered in thin black stockings, and large feet wearing three inch high black patent peep toes. Her top was a royal blue batwing jumper, with lurex stripes, that draped off her shoulder revealing a bra strap that matched her skirt. But even in the dim light

of the living room, Ade could tell she hadn't shaved. Well, he called her a she, but she was quite obviously a man. Her wig was a thick blonde bob which looked like it was fashioned from acrylic and sparkled with a rainbow of colours under the disco lights. Her mouth was a slash of crimson, and her eyes were painted a peacock blue. She certainly looked the part for an eighties disco. He just wasn't sure she looked the part of a woman.

Ade poured himself another vodka and sat down on a dining chair that had been pushed under the table. The Bananarama wannabes were singing along to the Human League. *Don't you want me baby?* No, not tonight. He searched for an ashtray but, unable to find one, flicked the snake of ash into one of the screwed up lager tins. He glanced at Sally and Mike Addison. They were engaged in an animated conversation that pricked his jealousy more than the clinch had. His eyes wandered back to the transvestite. She was easily over six feet. He reckoned that in those heels she would be taller than him. Ade was a lanky six two. He admired her strong calves. He never wore a kilt because his limbs were so emaciated.

She had man's hands, large and square, which dwarfed the glass she held. Ade's fingers were long and delicate, feminine even. Piano player's fingers, his nan used to say. But he wasn't interested in learning the piano. He'd had a go at the bass guitar because he'd wanted to be a rock star. Someone told him the bass was easy, but he had tortured himself trying to get his fingers to move over the frets and the wires. He'd persuaded Dave Alcott to let him join his thrash band *The Silencers*. It took two years of rehearsals before they realised he was crap and kicked him out. They hadn't played a single gig. His guitar was still at his mum's house.

'That seat taken, pal?' It was Iona, trying to be funny.

'No, on you go, missus' he replied, relieved to have some company.

'Don't missus me, you scrawny piece of...!' she laughed, blowing him a kiss. 'I see the plan didn't come off.' She flicked her head towards Sally who was still in the doorway of the hall.

'She wasn't impressed with my knowledge of unusual means of death. I pulled out all the stops as well.'

'Her loss, babes,' Iona replied.

'Good party all the same,' he lied, stubbing his fag end in the lager tin.

'Thanks doll,' she said, 'but I know you're hating every minute.'

'Not true,' he said, sipping from his drink.

They sat without speaking for a moment or two, the music intruding on their thoughts. Iona was the one woman that Ade felt

relaxed around. They'd been friends at university before he'd dropped out to drive the cab. They were probably best friends, if that was an acceptable concept at the age of twenty eight.

'You look stunning by the way.' He was telling the truth. Iona was wearing a backless gold sequined mini dress and black leggings. The back of the dress hung in folds just above her hips. It was sleeveless, showing off her gym toned arms. She wore black ballet pumps on her feet. Her light brown hair was tied up, and wisps framed her face.

'My mum's,' she said, tugging the dress. 'Didn't realise she was such a vamp in her youth.'

'Talking of vamps...who is that?' Ade nodded his head in the direction of the transvestite.

'Gary, Amelie, my brother's pal. He lives in London. Just up here for the weekend.'

'He's...she's...unusual.'

Iona laughed. 'He could have done with a shave.'

She prised Ade's vodka out of his hands and took a gulp. 'Right, princess, I have to go and be the hostess with the mostess. Behave yourself. Mwa mwa.' She air kissed her friend, and stood up. Giving him a backwards wave, she pushed through the dancing crowd. At the doorway, she paused and spoke to Sally. They both turned and looked at him. Ade saw Sally shake her head. His heart slumped.

Ade went back to studying Amelie. She had a good figure, flat stomach and narrow hips. And her breasts were small. He laughed to himself, thinking that he would have succumbed to the temptation to have huge tits. She didn't appear to know anyone here. She hadn't moved from the spot by the door. Ade considered going over to speak to her, but Sally and Mike Addison were still standing beside her, so he decided against it. He drained the last of his vodka and pulled out another bent cigarette. He stuck it between his lips and searched about. Lighter man had disappeared. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and tapped it on the table.

Sally looked a bit of a tart next to Amelie, he thought. Her black micro mini was cut low showing her more of her cleavage than was decent, and clung tight to the spare tyre around her waist. Her arms were blubbery and their skin looked translucent, almost pale blue in these lights. The tops of her stay up stockings dug into her thighs, making them bulge out even though her legs were relatively slim. It made her look cheap. And her white stilettos were corny, even for this cliché-ridden party.

And Mike Addison. He was just one of those blokes. Athletic, handsome, well paid. There was an inverse relationship between the

cost of a bloke's jeans and the depth of his personality. Mike Addison was wearing Armani. Sally deserved him. His own jeans were vintage Levis. That was just another way of saying second hand.

Amelie was smiling at him. With a jolt, Ade realised he must have been staring. Her smile was surprising with perfectly straight teeth that gleamed Hollywood white. To his astonishment, his stomach flipped. As if she could tell, she winked at him. A slow, deliberate wink, with long eyelashes flickering on her cheek for what seemed like seconds. Then she started to make her way across the dance floor. Ade panicked, crushing the already bent cigarette, and struggled to stand up, catching his knee on the underside of the table. He winced.

'Fuck,' he said. 'Fuck.'

She glided across the dance floor, confident in her heels, her dazzling smile not leaving her lips. Ade's palate felt sand dry, and his pulse throbbed in his temples. His eyes darted about him but there was no one else beside him. He tried on a half smile, but his mouth trembled, so he chewed on the side of his cheek to steady himself. Anxiety sweat prickled his armpits. He picked up his glass but realised it was empty as he brought it to his mouth. He turned his half-hearted laugh into a cough to cover his confusion.

She was there. Standing in front of him. Six feet three in heels. Smelling expensive.

'Er, hi,' he stuttered.

Staring him straight in the eyes, she took the glass out of his hand, and ran her tongue over her lips. Her lashes were fake, but her eyes were solemn grey, with faint creases at the angles. Ade felt his arms turn to jelly. Slowly, she put one hand behind his neck, and the other on his shoulder and paused for a moment. Then she kissed him hard on the mouth. Electric shocks coursed through his body, as her tongue whipped between his teeth like a lizard's. She broke off abruptly, turned and walked back through the crowded room.

'Holy fuck,' Ade whispered. From the other side of the room, Sally was staring at him, with her mouth open and tongue stud glittering in the flashing lights. Mike Addison was still speaking to her but she brushed him off and rushed over.

'Where's my drink?' she demanded.

'Er, couldn't find the Bacardi,' Ade said, trying to wipe the smirk off his face.

'Vodka would have done.'

'I wasn't sure.'

'You should have asked,' she sulked.

They stood looking at each other.

'So, I guess fifteen' she said, eventually.

'What?' he said.

'Fifteen. Fifteen coconut deaths.'

Ade grinned. She was way out. Out by a factor of ten.

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When she is supposed to be cleaning or researching for her PhD, Carys blogs about writing at <http://postnatalconfession.blogspot.com/>

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Please see the feature on page 22.

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About The Front Cover

This month's cover will be familiar to anyone who has more than a passing interest in the legendary UK ska band, Madness. Their critically acclaimed 2009 album, *The Liberty of Norton Folgate*, was written around this small section of road in central London, famous for once having its own government and being entirely outwith the rule of the city surrounding it.

That was 1900 and this is now, and these days the road is the same as any other in London: busy and polluted, however, it will forever remain famous thanks to Madness.

The image that adorns our front cover for this issue, was taken by Gail Galbraith in May 2011 during a short break to London.

Gail Galbraith Photography is at www.gailgalbraith.co.uk



Next Issue

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Please see the website for details

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