



Sparkbright

issue 5
winter 2010

WELCOME TO ISSUE 5 OF SPARKBRIGHT

Hello, and welcome to our brand new issue for December 2010. It is three years since we put out our very first issue, and we can hardly believe that we're still going, bigger and better than ever.

We've been working hard over the last six months, putting together this brand new issue for your reading pleasure. We were overwhelmed by the sheer number of submissions, and were also delighted to get involved with the One Stop Poetry Fall Competition. The winning entry, written by the very talented Renée Sigel, is published in the poetry selection of this issue.

In these pages you will find the work of over thirty very talented writers from across the globe. We hope you will enjoy the latest selection of poetry and short fiction that they have to offer.

Sincerely,
Emily Smith and Ami Jordan
Editors, Sparkbright magazine.

COVER ART:

The cover art for this issue is by Sarah-Jean Holmes. Many thanks to Sarah for providing the artwork for us, and for being a pleasure to work with. She is in the process of creating an online portfolio, and if you wish to contact her, feel free to email us and we will forward your message on.

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BLUE

This morning seems so far away. It belongs to another time, another world. One that I never want to let go of, but its slipping through my fingertips, fading in my mind.

Blue. I remember the blue dress, it was her favourite. There was always something about the way she looked in it that lifted my heart. It was just a simple summer dress but she looked so radiant; the way the straps skimmed her milky white shoulders and the hem danced around above her long slender calves, it was captivating.

I remember how we talked over breakfast about insignificant plans to paint this and fix that, and how she left her coffee for so long it must have gone cold, just like she did every morning.

I remember how she kissed me goodbye at the door before turning and walking down the garden path; the blue dress swaying side to side in time with her hips. She said she needed to buy some groceries. She said she wanted to make my favourite for dinner tonight. She went out because of me.

I remember trying to read my book to kill time, but instead I just stared at the pages whilst I thought of her, our new house, our first year of marriage, our next 50 years of marriage....

I remember waiting impatiently for her return but there was only ringing, and then the voice saying those awful things that couldn't be true; things that would shatter my reality forever.

I remember waiting in the cold white corridor, listening to the sound of my own breath, unable to recall exactly how I made it there.

Then came the man in the long white coat. It took a long time to free her from the car wreck. She lost a lot of blood and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. He was sorry. They did all they could.

I silently nodded as he motioned to me to follow him into the room he had appeared from. There she was, laid out on a surgical bed, still in her blue dress. It had been torn and parts of it were soaked in her blood. Her skin was so pale, and her lips were as blue as the dress had been.

I stared down at her, completely numb, my mind refusing to believe what I was seeing.

My beautiful wife.

Dead.

Her dress stained with the blood red of life. Her skin stained with the cold blue of death.

THE HOSPITAL

Pain...

Darkness...

Sharp, stark light!

But where am I?

What is this place?

"This is The Hospital. You were involved in an... incident..." a voice spoke from above.

My eyes gradually adjust to the bright light of the overhead fluorescents.

Standing over me reading some form of a chart is a short, dark-haired, potbellied man in a long white coat, but with a crucifix. A doctor?

"Hospital? What happened?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" he replied.

"I was in the shop- I heard a crash at the tills- My God, the man had a gun! He shot me!"

"Exactly. You were shot and so you were... brought... here,"

"How long have I been here?"

"Oh not long, and we don't expect you to remain much longer. We feel you're almost ready to leave now,"

"But I was shot... how bad was it?"

"It was very serious. Why else would you be here?"

"But I don't feel any pain,"

I began checking my body for any sign of injuries. I couldn't see anything upon my arms or legs, not even a blemish. I ran my hands down my chest and then leant forwards and felt down my back as best I could. There was nothing. My chest was completely smooth as was my back. Even the scar I had had since I was very young, after having placed my hand against a very hot bulb when I was asleep, had disappeared.

"What is this?! There's nothing wrong with me! Where am I?! Who are you really?!"

"I see it's too early for you... I was wrong about your being ready..."

Dark and black again...

*

It seemed like any other day. My wife, Maria, needed some more powdered milk from the shop for our little baby girl, Dramalla.

I decided to buy a bottle of wine for Maria and me once Dramalla had been put to bed.

As I was heading to the tills I heard a crash.

An assistant was pushed up against the shelves, pinned there by a large man in a balaclava and armed with a pistol. The pistol wasn't pointed at the assistant, but at the cashier.

"Put the money into the bag or I'll shoot!" he spat, pointing the gun at the assistants head.

"Ok... I don't w-want any t-trouble," the cashier stammered and opened the till.

The gunman had his back to me and couldn't see me lurking behind one of the

shelves, watching all of this happen.

I started to creep up behind him. I held the bottle of wine in one hand and was about to bring it down upon the back of the gunman's head, but the assistant spotted me and tried to turn towards me; the gunman noticed this and turned to me.

All of a sudden I was looking down a long dark hole surrounded by cold steel and containing death. Or at least that's how I saw it then. I felt a cold shiver go down my spine and time seemed to freeze in that moment. The cashier was staring at me with a look of terror in his eyes; the assistant was looking at me with a mix of horror and a dim hope, whereas the gunman just had a cold hard stare. It was in that moment I knew he was going to fire.

Time sped up.

I saw my arm rising, wine bottle in hand, and then come down and throw the bottle at the gunman.

It struck him on the shoulder of the arm holding the gun and caused him to spin round.

I heard a deafening boom and smelt gunpowder as the weapon went off. I charged the gunman and attempted to wrest the gun from his grip.

The assistant was crawling along the floor, trying to escape the demon with the gun and the cashier was ducking behind the till but still I ignored them.

I was struggling with the gunman, and he was winning.

He tried to bring the gun around to shoot me, but I managed to maintain a grip on his arm that kept it pointing towards the front window of the shop.

Suddenly the gun went off again; I felt a sharp pain in my side and saw the front window shatter.

The bullet had grazed my side!

The gunman then roughly jerked his arm downwards in an attempt to break my grip.

It worked.

He swung the gun up and caught me beneath the chin with the barrel of it.

I fell to the floor. I could hear someone screaming from somewhere and could taste something coppery. Blood...

Then the gunman was above me, gun pointed at my head.

"Why'd you do that? Why'd you have to get in the way?"

Then there was the deafening boom once more and a bright flash of light.

There was a brief instance of pain and then blackness...

Until the bright lights of The Hospital...

*

"Ah! I see you're back with us again," a voice spoke above me.

"What did you give me?"

"Oh just a little something,"

"Now tell me, what is this place really and who are you? I have a right to know!"

"Yes, yes, all in good time. First I must check that you're ready,"

He was once more looking over me with a chart in hand, crucifix dangling from his neck.

"Ready for what?! Where is my wife?! Where is my daughter?! I want to see them!"

Have they been told I'm awake?! I can't find anything wrong with me and you're not giving me any answers!"

"They will be informed in good time. But for now it's not possible for you to see them,"

"They should have been told as soon as I woke up! They'll be worried about me!"

"I very much doubt that..." he muttered under his breath.

"What was that? Are you saying my family aren't worried?! Do they even know I'm here?!"

"You're ready now. You're asking all the right questions,"

"So I'm finally going to get some answers then,"

"Yes. Your answers are driven by anger rather than hysterics. In answer to the question as to who I am I have been known by many names over many different generations of your race. The Ancient Egyptians knew me as Anubis, the Greeks knew me as Kharon, and during the time of the Black Plague, I was known as The Reaper,

"As to where you are, you are between life and death. This is where souls come so that they can adjust to death,

"People come to me here when they have died suddenly without realising that they are dead. I try and create a situation that they will be familiar with but will fit in with their last memories. I then have to test them and make sure that their mind can take the knowledge of their death. If I were to just simply tell them that they are dead, then their mind will lose control and they will be lost forever. I hope you see why you are here now,"

"Adjust to death... You just let me relive the last moments of my life! What about my family?! Why couldn't you let me relive my last moments with them?!"

"Because then you would have just kept reliving that memory without any knowledge of where you are or what happened. I had to make you understand that you were shot and that the bullet killed you so that you understood that you cannot go back, you can only go forward into true death,"

"But what happens there?" I felt numb... dead? I was dead?

"Not even I know that. Only that it is where they want you to go when you move on,"

"Who are they?" I asked, suddenly terrified about what would happen to me.

"The creators, the spirits, the beings from another time and place who forged this universe in the hope that they could create a place they have control over. You may encounter them in time. You may not. All I know is once you move into true death, you can never return to this plane of existence,"

"Will I ever see my family again?"

"I cannot say. If they wish it you may do,"

"I... I understand... I'm ready... Do what you must,"

I closed my eyes and felt one solitary tear run down my cheek.

There was flash so bright that I could see it through my closed eyelids and then...

*

Husband and father gives life to save corner shop

Anthony Serrine gave his life today to save the lives of two corner shops workers from an armed gunman. His wife, Maria Serrine and 10 month old daughter, Dramalla Serrine are currently mourning their monumental loss.

AFTER

The glare drilled its way through Colin's eyes as he landed with newborn-calf grace on his knees.

"Ow—Jesus!" He choked, clutching his left leg with one hand and shielding his eyes with the other.

"Sorry, Chickpea," a ragged voice rattled. "Right location, wrong character."

Colin felt his stomach muscles tighten as the owner of the voice let out a pained cackle.

"Hang on, Col ," it rasped. "I always forget about the light."

The flush of white, Colin could see from behind his eyelids and hands, subsided like a sunset on fast-forward into a delightful urine-yellow before it finally settled to a calm blood-red.

"Gonna open your eyes or what, Chickadoodle?" The stranger's voice sounded all at once distant and yet within the walls of Colin's skull. "Think we got forever, or what?"

Colin sacrificed a sigh and willed his eyelids to stutter open to a blur of misty color. He winced as the aroma of the room diffused into his nostrils. The air was thick with a familiar smell; somewhere between flatulence and old egg sandwiches.

"Don't worry, Chicklet, your bowls ain't shifted. That's just me." The cackle roared in Colin's ears once again and a shock of pain leapt through his leg as he dragged himself up from the floor.

His eyes, slowly adjusting to the dim red light, moved around the room attempting to register where he was. It was no use; this was no place Colin recognized, and there was something unreal about the space. The floor seemed somehow insubstantial, as though a length of red satin had been pulled lazily across an abyss. He shuffled his feet on the soft surface as he noticed the lack of corners in the room. It was perfectly circular. The wall, bleached into the uniform red of everything else he could see, was made out of doors. How many doors there were altogether Colin could not tell, as there was no way to keep track of where he had started counting from.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Colin jumped in shock as he realized the stranger was standing directly behind him. Colin span around, top-like, to face the owner of the voice. The sight made him take a pace backwards. The creature, whatever it was, was about five feet tall, horribly hunched, with skin like wrinkled brie and a face which housed more lines than an architect's sketchbook. It looked vaguely male, but it was hard to tell through the ill-fitting sackcloth tunic and folds of age.

"Be repulsed all you want, my lad," it rasped. "At least I ain't naked." It reached out a calloused, crooked finger and flicked Colin's flaccid penis.

“Jesus!” Colin gasped, thrusting his hands southward to form a cup for his genitals.

“Bloody foolish lookin’ things.” The creature chuckled.

“Can I have some clothes, please?” Colin stammered—not that he was cold. In fact, there seemed to be no temperature in the room at all, which, for some reason, made him desire to be clothed all the more.

“I dunno why they can’t just let you remember this shit.” The creature muttered and looked up at Colin with worn, bloodshot eyes. “I’ve just come from another frickin’ job and...” It trailed off.

Colin spared another look around the room. So many doors, but what were they for?

Where was he?

“Oh, for Chrissakes!” The creature hissed suddenly. “Your life’s done with.” Colin’s stomach disappeared from within him.

“What do you mean?” He asked, not hopeful about any possible answer. The creature allowed its wrinkled and torn, sluggish lips to slowly crack into something close to a grin.

“Welcome to, you know...the place.” It wheezed with its arms held akimbo. “I’m your assigned angel. We’ve met before—not that you give enough of a toss about my hard work to remember me, eh?”

Colin narrowed his bewildered eyes.

“You’re an angel?”

“Yes, yes. We all know you were expecting some tight-bodied, firm-titted, naked hermaphrodite strumming a bleedin’ harp. But guess what.” It yanked Colin closer with a deceptively strong hand on the shoulder. “I asked for a hot female tennis player. Existence sucks!” It cackled again and then pulled Colin toward the edge of the room.

Upon reaching the edge of the room the pain in Colin’s knee vanished, or at least it no longer concerned him anymore; but something was most certainly wrong with his body. He was quaking, and as he stared at what the creature was showing him, he realized that he was trying to cry.

“Aw, what’s up, Chickeroo?” the creature asked, placing a coarse hand on Colin’s naked lower back. Colin could not reply. His stomach twisted as he peered down and then, at the angel’s request, upwards. The room was not circular at all. It was a spiral. The edges sloped and rolled back like a helter-skelter, up and down, doors stretching on and on for as far as he could discern.

“Thought it was a circle, eh?” The angel croaked. “Like all them shit-for-brains philosophers of yours with their circles and ouroboroses, eh? I mean, seriously, how the bleedin’ hell do two snakes eating each other go on forever? It don’t work. They’d just keep on going until all you’ve got’s two snake heads, back to back dying into dust. Or one snake eating itself? Bloody ridiculous.”

Colin wasn’t listening; his mind was swirling from the sheer depth beneath and above him.

“Some of you got close, of course,” it continued, oblivious to Colin’s lack of attention. “That whole Lacuna Coil thing, or that Golden Spiral stuff that mathematician came up with, now that’s the thing.”

Colin yelped as the creature grasped him by the neck, pressing its hard fingers into his flesh, and yanked him downwards so that they were face to face. The angel’s eyes were tired and old and in their gaze Colin felt less than insignificant.

“You wanna choose a door or what?” it growled.

“Which door should I choose?”

“Don’t make much bleedin’ difference, squire. Every choice you ever had, every choice anyone else in your life ever could of made, any possible variation in that wee spell of yours is accounted for. Everything you done, everything you didn’t do, every lie, every angry pie, blah, blah, blah and so forth. It’s up to you which one you choose. Infinite variations in an infinite existence, chief.”

Colin glanced up and then down at the swirling mass of endless doors embedded in the cavernous red wall.

“I don’t know which one to pick.”

“Bollocks to this,” the angel wheezed. “Tell you what, you either pick a door sharpish or I’ll just kick you through one. How’s that?” The angel scowled through its hideous, prune-skinned face. It was enough. Colin reached out a hand and turned the first handle he found.

“Good boy, now. In you go.” The angel leered.

Colin had one foot through the doorway when he paused, struck by a sudden thought.

“Hang on,” he objected, “how can this be infinite if you’ve come from another job?”

“Hah!” The angel grinned back, “Now that’s the real question, ain’t it, my little Chickpea?”

It then lifted a loose-skinned foot and prodded Colin through the doorway, and as the door closed quietly behind the human, the angel muttered:

“For Chrissakes, this one’s gonna take for-bleedin’-ever.”

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HOMEOSTASIS

Despite a convincing dream, when Graeme wakes he finds he has not turned into a cockroach. This surprises him. He rolls away his blankets, and re-checks himself: no extra appendages. Just one, normal, human torso. Highly disappointing. Still, some significant change must be coming; his dream was very lucid, vivid. He is convinced.

Graeme decides to forgo his usual breakfast of porridge, but, finding nothing else that appeals, capitulates. A half-cup of oats: microwaved, two minutes.

Wednesday--another day of sales-chart scrutiny, explaining and predicting GP trends, short and long-term analysis. But not today. Today is ripe for change; he will put himself forward for the vacant Team-Leader role. He goes into his bedroom and opens the top drawer of his bedside table, takes out his lucky gold ribbon and stuffs it in the right pocket of his pants: in the little coin pouch inside.

He leaves for the train station. As he walks, the air around him feels electric--transformation is surely imminent.

Graeme boards the 7:20 train, presents his ticket-card to the conductor. A hole is punched in, crescent-shaped, the sixteenth in a series of similar punctures.

He smiles at the girl seated opposite, patting his pocket with the gold ribbon. She frowns and switches seats.

At 7:42 he disembarks, and strolls to work.

On arrival he heads straight for the lunchroom. No instant-coffee crap today though; he has bought a packet of the real stuff. The machine upstairs, however, is all levers and dials: he cannot figure it.

Graeme spoons instant coffee and milo into a mug. He boils the kettle.

Down in the office a tall blonde he does not recognise is tearing notices and cheatsheets off the walls, dropping them on a cart alongside a pile of old ringbinders.

He leans across Mike's cubicle-divider, taps his shoulder. "Hey--who's that?"

Mike frowns. "That's Jane, the new manager--"

"New manager? What happened to Ben?"

"Ben? Ben's gone, man..." Mike cranes his neck, ducks down. "Crap. Go--work!"

Graeme enters his cubicle, switches the monitor on. No emails.

"Graeme, isn't it?"

She is standing right behind his chair. Scrutinising him. He nods, and slides his

hand into his pocket, checks the gold ribbon is there.

“Hello. I’m Jane. So--let’s have a look at your charts.”

Graeme nods and opens his folder.

“How do you think your GP’s tracking at present?”

“Well,” he gestures, “it’s been a slow month--but I think I’m doing okay, considering overall performance.”

Jane leafs through his charts, furrowing her brow. “Hmm. That looks about right. So. Anything you’d like to mention, bring up?”

This is it: his big chance. Graeme stands up.

She tilts her head, as if somehow critical.

“No,” he says. “There’s nothing to bring up.”

Jane leaves. And in her wake, everything seems to crumple in around him.

Graeme heads outside for his fifteen-minute break, starts eating an apple. A piece descends his windpipe: he coughs, hacks and splutters. His lungs feel raw.

Back inside, he takes the office first-aid kit with him into the bathroom. Graeme pulls the gold ribbon from his pocket and flings it across the room into the stainless steel urinal trough, and then slumps down against the wall, pulling the insides of the first aid kit out onto his lap. He clicks open a plastic bottle of paracetamol and wolfs the painkillers down like white M&Ms--

Engine-valves rumble.

“...Yes, very lucky. Got that stomach pump in him just in time.”

A white uniformed man is crouched alongside Graeme. Something massive is jammed in his mouth, worming inside him. He lifts a hand to force it out.

“Hey, hey! He’s coming round, seems distressed by the tube--more sedative!”

“On it. Okay. There--I think that’s done it.”

His vision blurs, and his eyelids close.

THE SHOE THIEF

“Why would she steal a dead man’s shoes?” Lillian Adley stood with her hands on her hips. She stared at the body of her husband Ben, yellow and waxy in the soft glow of the funeral home lights. He looked older than his thirty-eight years. Mr. Donovan, the funeral home director, stood before her. A vein swelled and quivered on the left side of his neck. At the back of the room, a space heater rumbled as it struggled to warm the cold air circulating through the chapel. Freezing rain splattered against the windows.

Lillian’s father-in-law Samuel reached out to take her by the elbow. “It’s all right Lillian. Ben doesn’t need those shoes anymore.”

Lillian stood firm. “I spent the better part of a Saturday afternoon helping Ben pick out those shoes.”

Mr. Donovan’s wife Cadence started to play *Rock of Ages* on an organ in an adjoining room. Lillian winced. Ben hated that song. Mr. Donovan used a handkerchief to blot sweat pearling along his hairline. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” Lillian said in a hard voice. “We paid good money for those shoes. Now he’ll walk around in the afterlife wearing only his socks.”

Samuel slipped a hand behind her back. “Come on Lillian. Ben will be all right.”

She joined Samuel on the front pew. Lillian’s lips flattened into a thin line. She folded her arms over her chest and looked straight ahead. Reverend Holland moved before the crowd. He opened a bible and fanned through the pages. Lillian closed her eyes. She remembered the last time she saw Ben, standing on the back porch, head cocked toward the shadowed woods behind their house, listening to the haunting wail of a distant loon. “Late in the season for a loon,” Ben said without turning. “You know why they cry like that? They’re searching for another loon. Kind of like people I suppose, afraid to be alone.” He glanced over his shoulder with a smile. “I’m glad you heard me calling.”

Samuel asked her to come out on his trawler the following Saturday. Lillian agreed, not that she needed to be reminded of her pain, which he was sure to do, but to follow the course he charted back to normalcy. Gray and black clouds swallowed the sky. It started to rain before they cast off, the rain turning to snow as they chugged out of the bay. Waves lapped against the hull. Harbor seals popped their heads out of the water and barked. An osprey screamed from the sky to spear a fish. Black back gulls floated on the air like summer kites capturing a breeze, their cries a lament to the people of the sea. Five miles out, Samuel shut off the engine. In the ghost light of an autumn storm, his wrinkles, his souvenirs from a life of toil, announced his acquired wisdom. He hauled up a pot and pulled out a lobster. “This one’s too small,” he said and tossed the lobster back into the water. He tied a new bag of bait, the stench of herring overpowering. “I ever tell yah that Ben came from a long line of pirates? The first Adley to settle in Maine, Hartwell Adley, joined Dixie Bull’s crew. After Dixie Bull’s capture, Hartwell searched Damariscove Island for the Dixie’s buried treasure. Eventually, he took to the sea as a lobsterman. Generation after generation of Adley men followed his lead until Ben came along.

Poor Ben, he turned green anytime he went out on the water and kept his head buried in a bucket.”

“I miss him,” Lillian whispered.

Samuel paused in his work, his gaze on the mist-shrouded water. “He was the finest kind.”

Lillian bit her lip to keep from crying.

“It’s been tough for you, losing Mattie in the accident and now Ben.” Samuel turned to face her. “You’re still sore about those shoes.”

She hunkered down against the wind. “She took Mattie’s shoes too.”

“Sadie Donovan’s as numb as a hake. She hasn’t been right in the head since she fell under the ice at Miller’s Pond back when she was ten.”

“Why do you think she steals their shoes?”

Samuel took a deep breath that lifted his shoulders. He finished baiting the trap and sank it. “Don’t know and don’t care to know.” He came to Lillian and drew her against his chest. She began to sob and shake. “Now, now,” he said in a calm voice, “the important thing is for you to move on. There’s no future living in the past, ayuh?”

Lillian said nothing, for how could he understand that she no longer thought about her future. The hourglass lay shattered, the sand spilling over shards of glass.

She dreamed of Ben that night. They were walking along a rocky shore, stopping at every tide pool, fingers probing the murky water for signs of life. She awoke to cold gray light. Lillian shivered. She slipped into her robe and padded to the window. Outside, a new storm threatened more snow. At the harbor, sailboats rocked in their moorings, barren masts rising like trees in a winter’s forest. Farther out, trawlers pitched on the choppy waves. Lillian pressed her forehead against the cold glass and closed her eyes.

Do you remember our quest, our exploration of tide pools? Together we freed the creatures of the sea, casting them back into the pounding surf. Why couldn’t we free ourselves? Did you have to die? Do I have to follow as if steel to your magnetic pulse, my path predetermined by fate?

Lillian clenched her teeth. Waves of pain broke over her and she sank to the floor, tears raining onto her cheeks.

She stood outside Sadie Donovan’s small frame house, tucked back in the woods to the north of town. She wondered how Sadie managed to live alone given her mental state. Lillian pounded on the door. “Get out here Sadie Donovan. I want those shoes back!” She waited a minute. Lillian knocked again. She reached for the doorknob. The door opened with the squeal of hinges. Lillian stepped inside. Boxes and garbage covered the floors. The air smelled like a pile of damp rags. A sharp pain twisted in her gut as she surveyed the scene. Lillian went from room to room, wading through the

trash. She paused outside Sadie's bedroom and shouted toward the stairs. "Where are those damn shoes?"

Lillian flipped on a light and headed down into the basement. She hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, the air rushing from her lungs. Shelves lined the walls of the spotless basement. Shelves filled with row after row of shoes. Lillian approached with a hand over her throbbing heart. They were all here, the shoes of everyone who had died in the town during the last thirty years, neatly arranged by individual families, the name of the family scribbled in black marker on a piece of paper attached to the shelf. On one shelf, sat the shoes of the Browning family, the wingtips of Grandpa Browning, the pumps of his wife Sally, and the tennis shoes of their grandson Mason who drowned at the age of thirteen, and next to the Browning shoes, those of the Lister family, Judge Lister's black Oxford's shined to a mirror image. As Lillian scanned the shelves for the name Adley, she imagined Sadie standing before the shoes and talking to them. The spectral voices of the past intensified and for a moment, Sadie felt spirits surrounding her to whisper words of comfort. Her throat went dry at the sight of Ben's Rockport's sandwiched between the highheels of his mother Grace, and Mattie's white Easter shoes. A soft moan escaped her throat. Lillian lifted Ben and Mattie's shoes and pressed them against her chest. She held the shoes for several minutes and then gave them a soft kiss before returning the shoes to the shelf.

She spent the afternoon on the beach, waves roaring as they broke upon the shore. A cold wind moved in from the north. Lillian ignored the chill. She searched the mystery of tide pools and held life in her hands.

© Kenneth W. Harmon

TENDAI, SANTANA AND THE SHEBEEN

When you approach The Shebeen you can hear the music from outside as you kick the beer cans away from the entrance. After you get past two non-committal bouncers, you stumble down three steps straight onto the dancing area.

I negotiate my route past a “me-nice”, who’s shaking her bum to the music, and find my usual table within easy hailing range of the bar. Lorato, my favourite waiter acknowledges my wave and brings me a cold Windhoek lager. By now there are two sex workers dancing, more for fun than self-advertisement in the half-empty room. A group of men are watching an English Premier League match on the big TV screen. While Lulu, the lead vocalist, a pitch-black beauty with long braids, is singing that she still hasn’t found what she’s looking for, Tendai, sinister in black leather waistcoat, bandana and wrist band, is playing some lazy guitar licks in the background.

Terry, the bar-owner, sidles up to me.

“Hi Bruno, ‘aven’t seen you for a long time. Everything okay?”

“Fine,” I reply, “Just been busy. Everyone seems to be building these days.”

“So you’ve got a lot of drawin’ to do?”

I nod my head, already getting bored.

“Where’s the missus? She not ‘ere tonight?”

“She’s at home. Says she’s tired – she’s expecting.

“Congratulations.”

I decide to change the topic.

“Tendai sounds like he’s still in good shape.”

“Don’t start me off on Tendai. ‘E’s a piss-artist. ‘E should’ve been ‘ere two hours ago, but ‘e just pitched up ‘alf an hour back. If you’d come ten minutes earlier you’d’ve found them still fixing the equipment.”

“Maybe because the place doesn’t fill up till after nine.”

“That’s *why* it doesn’t fill up. They’d come earlier if Tendai started playing on time. E’s just a lazy bastard. Sometimes ‘e gets another gig somewhere else, and doesn’t pitch up at all. Bloody Zimbos!”

Terry sees me wince. He makes an excuse to pull away.

“I better pick up the empties before people start throwing them at each other. You never know in this place”.

He walks away to pick up empty bottles from other tables. The band plays a few more soft rock numbers, then finishes the set off with "Hotel California" and takes a break. Later, when the Shebeen fills up they'll play reggae, and later still, mbaqanga, kwaito, and kwasa kwasa. The drummer puts on a Mafikizola CD. A "me-nice" wiggles up to my table and asks for a drink. I chase her away. I stopped that kind of hanky-panky many years ago.

Tendai, Lulu and the drummer go to the bar and buy drinks. More people are dancing, as the place begins to fill. Tendai comes to my table and puts his fist against mine in greeting.

"Don't know why I bother with this dump," he complains.

"Well, the way Terry was talking you may not have to for much longer."

"That stupid, Yorkshire welder, he's talking kak. He's threatened to sack me so many times. Do you think you can treat an artist like a bank clerk? 9 to 5? If I left, this place would be like Princess Marina mortuary."

I know what's coming, but I don't mind hearing it for the third or fourth time.

"Terry calls me a Zimbo, but I'm more mixed up than that. My father was a Zimbabwean, my mother Congolese and I've got a Malawian grand-father. I was brought up in Zimbabwe, Zambia, DRC, and I've worked in South Africa, Tanzania and now Botswana – wherever I can make a buck."

He finishes his Hansa, as if to fuel the tirade.

"The Batswana call me Lekwerekwere, and Terry calls me Zimbo."

As a mixed-race "coloured" I'm in tune with his outcast role.

"I've played with Kofi Olomide in DRC and Zambia, with Les Wanyika in Tanzania, with Tuks in Zimbabwe, Hugh Masekela in South Africa".

His voice is getting louder and his face creased with passion. I signal to Lorato to bring another Hansa for Tendai and a Windhoek for me.

"What does that Yorkshire welder know about music? Me, I speak fluent Shona, Ndebele, Setswana, Bemba, Lingala, French and kiSwahili."

"As well as singing in Spanish and chiNyanja", I add to humour him.

"And Xhosa and Portuguese."

Tendai takes a huge gulp of the Hansa, and still carrying his can, without any warning, jumps back onto the stage. He switches off the Mafikizola CD, to some complaints from the dancers. I go to the toilet while Tendai is fiddling with the computer and mixer. As I return to my table I'm aware of the floor, sticky with spilled beer and cigarette stubs. Tendai finds the Latin rhythm he needs on the

computer play-list, slings the guitar into position, checks the mixer for the last time and finishes his Hansa. I glance at Lulu and the drummer. They shrug shoulders, obviously puzzled why he's getting on stage before the break time is over. They stay down in the bar, drinking.

Tendai starts the delicious introduction to Santana's "Oye Como Va". The noisy bar is suddenly hushed for a few seconds. Tendai throws a contemptuous glance at Terry, then tucks his head and concentrates on the guitar. Nobody is dancing, but several people are swaying and clapping at the solo. Almost imperceptibly Tendai changes from a Latin sound to Congolese rumba, then throws in a few chords from "Sina Makosa", which is enough to get the Zambians, Kenyans and Tanzanians onto the dance floor. Several "me-nices" follow.

Tendai's trills and runs seem to be playing with the crowd. I don't even want to order another beer, the performance is so riveting, like a battle of wills. The rumba tune segues into a Chimurenga hard-picking rhythm, and the Zimbabweans in the bar wave their hands in the air or join the packed dance floor. Just as they're screaming with pleasure, Tendai changes yet again, this time going into a salsa-spiced kwaito rhythm, and it's the Batswana's turn to scream and rush to any space where they can dance. By now the whole bar is jumping in adulation for the guitarist's witchcraft. When it seems like the roof is going to blow off with all the sweaty energy released, Tendai segues back into the cool phrases of "Oye Como Va", and everyone in the bar raises their hands above their heads to wave or clap. Tendai doesn't smile, but you can feel his triumph. I look around for Terry and see him shake his head, whether in frustration or admiration, it's hard to say. He squeezes his way around the tables picking bottles.

There's an awkward pause, without music. Lulu and the drummer scramble onto the stage and quickly start their usual reggae set, Tendai performing now like a mere human. I signal to Lorato for another Windhoek. Everything is returning to normality, but all of us in the bar feel, that for a few minutes at least, we have been wiped clean.

© David Kerr

I WISH THAT I COULD TELL YOU

"I wish that I could tell you about love."

She's sat cross-legged, the bed-sheet tucked up under her arms, a book lying open on her lap.

He's lying on his back, hands behind his head, smiling a slow, satisfied smile. Behind his head, he turns the gold band on his wedding finger, a nervous habit, or perhaps just a habit.

"I wish I could tell you all of those stories that are so old that they're yellowed round the edges, bathed in a golden glow of happiness."

Which of them chose this hotel? Neither of them remembers now, and each is resenting the other because they've ended up here.

She's staring at the wall on the opposite side of the room, staring at the space next to the window that looks out over a short-stay car park. She isn't smiling; she's learning how to keep her face completely blank. There's a pause, heavy and awkward that hangs over them. She licks her lips.

"But actually, I shouldn't tell you about love."

"Why not?" he asks, rolling over onto one side and propping himself up on one elbow.

"Because that's not how it works." He looks puzzled, but waits for her to continue. "In the stories the woman never says how she feels."

"That's because in all those stories you're thinking of, it doesn't matter how she feels. A gallant hero comes along, sweeps her off her feet, and they ride off into the sunset."

"No, that's not it," she says, softly.

"It's not?"

"No. It's because she's scared."

"Of what?"

"Of losing. Or getting lost. I'm not sure which." She pauses, and glances at him out of the corner of her eye. "Love is supposed to whisk you off, out of all your senses and sensibilities. It becomes that one thing that matters more than anything else."

"All you need is love?" He's grinning, mocking her, but she scowls at the wall. Closing the book on her lap, she clasps her hands and turns the platinum engagement ring that sits slightly too big for her left hand.

She climbs out of bed and walks to the bathroom. He lies still, listening to the water

running in the sink, imagining her cleaning herself up. He knows he's left a bruise on her wrist, perhaps he shouldn't have been so rough with her, but he had to make her realise, somehow. He wanted to leave his mark, mark his territory; he was fed up of sharing her after all this time.

The bathroom door opens again; she walks out without a word. Still not looking at him, she begins to dress, before moving to the mirror to re-apply her make-up.

"Love is about finding that one person that you never want to say goodbye to."

Picking up her handbag, she crosses the room in three quick strides. The door clicks shut behind her, and the silence rings unbearably loud in his ears.

© **Emily Smith**

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NIKUL PATEL
DIANNE TCHIR
ANTON FROST
KATE BERGEN
DAVID R MORGAN
NICOLA SHOLES

DINE WITH MORNING LIGHT,

i.

Cold decades style
summer holiday snow.

Silver campgrounds get sparse
and under dew,
fleece of shining day-grades.

Sunday schooling vacant lots
finds another dice-minded site
each gothic July night.

ii.

Pitched a raincoat tent
on ballpoint pens
and guitar strings,

cooked soil and flowers in engine heat
with seashell pots and paper plates

dressed under sawdust
and salty spray.

© Chris Holdaway

LAY DOWN, CITY LIFE

Lay down, city life
I'm on the bus to school
A man sits perpendicular
Mutters incantations to nobody
"The people of this city sleep."
A block, and still I am offered Quaaludes
"Big boy, spare a smoke? Thanks anyway!"

Lay down, Moses
Your Faulkner chorus
Stream-of-conscious ramblings
Like a slipstream undertow

Lay down, suburb life
Two girls on the bus talk loudly
Everyone needs to hear what they say
Nobody says a thing
The fluorescent light
Has been on for three months
I am lined like cracks in the sidewalk

Welcome to life
Where everyone is in it to out you
Or honest about not wantin' to know ya

I'm so fucking impressed
This is the spot where the coward stabbed me
All for to be tromped with ill repute

© Julien Edmund Moss

NIGHT

We sped down darkened highways holding
cameras with dead batteries and
cans of spray paint like loaded guns.

Drive, just drive, no destination.-

Those words we thought and whispered and
yelled out open windows.
We drove until the fuel gauge read E,
filled the tank,
then kept on driving- past cemeteries and road kill
like a buffet for the carrion crows.

The radio blared songs everyone hated,
So we turned up the volume
and still sang along
while playing drum solos on dusty dashboards.

When we ran out of road we borrowed intellect
from has-been authors and clichéd musicians.
We debated religion and philosophy
while composing hypothetical psychiatric prescriptions
to cure our fragile minds.

LOWSIDE

I build my city from
heavy bricks and plastic trees.
I hang a noose from every window ledge
and throw my keys in every sidewalk grate.

I stand alone on glass rooftops
dancing a waltz in spike heels.
I toss sledge hammers and
burn red ants with a microscope lens.

I move my city to
the lowside of a rushing river.
I hide in the basements with candles and
wet matches and wait for the flood rains.

FREEWAY AT RUSH HOUR

What struck me was the populace, exhaust
and sunlight glinting off so many aluminum
boxes. Wheels being manned by cigarette smokers
and cell phone talkers and the impatience with
the radio and the minute hand on a clock,
hunger I'm sure played a role for it was the dinner hour.

Smiles were non-existent. Neither on drivers
nor the faces of their passengers. Air conditioners
blew hair back into fan-like halo's and some men stuck
sun-red elbows out open windows. Such a maelstrom
of insufficiency, bad luck to be caught in such a muck
of steel with nothing to read but license plates and bumper
stickers.

Better yet to concentrate on a quicker route, the weaving
in and out, brake lights galore and nothing to do but
stare at the elderly woman broken down in the gore between
the Val Vista and Higley exit. Disconcerting might present
itself as a better word, or sad in it's heaviness of so many lives,
vacant in my own but present with me in our mechanical vices.
Such convergence. This bottleneck of strangers, each immune
yet not immune to life's utter clamor and climb.

Still we pretend this is paradise. Our dreams fill the sky
but without wings we're stuck in lines that stretch for miles.
We must, from above, resemble funeral necklaces. Little gems
of silver and gold, pearl and ruby red and through our sun roofs,
a billion crosses swing like pendulums from rear view mirrors.
Such calamity. Such oppression. Such empty flagons of spirit.

© Lisa Zaran

NO ROADS

with no roads on our map of conversation,
we began
without plan,
and climbed, into the branches of imagination,
past the twigs and leaves-
those apothecaries
of lost libation,
into houred improvisation-

through its desert wanting rain
after years of stasis,
in a slow camel train
searching for that oasis-
with moving dunes
and negative runes
fending off the grey
in a charmed, nomadic way.

happen then, that this cold acoustic tune,
met your luteful lagoon
of mosaical notes-
and the baton moved,
as was proved
round the wheel with ambient spokes,
conducting without rules
our forgotten fools.

somehow,
go now,
through the eye of words,
to the heart of this rhythm
and the scion of its schism;
then home, like migrating birds
into separate nests-
for now, love rests.

© Strider Marcus Jones

FIREFLIES

It's been a year since
you've given me your
picture, a small one
that fits in my palm,
and inside my room
I've kept it free of the
dust-filled air. Lit by
a tangle of light from
the pattern of stars,
the visage of your
beauty I once knew
has seldom changed.
Now all I know is
that you're so far
away and I shiver at
the caress of my cold
fingertips. I speak the
language of meandering
fireflies, gazing at them
at night over a moon-
swept field, wishing you
were here with your
children who love to
play soccer. The oldest
one was born with curly
hair, a gene from her
grandfather. All alone,
I look out my window.
My home, like an
island in the snow.

THREAD OF LIFE

In the dusk of late
summer you are
but a piece of paper
and ink now that
the months have
slipped between us
and the illness you
have refuses to leave.
I imagine the last
tears I've cried have
turned to glass on
my cheek. I held up
today's letter to the
light and your words
were like a sliver
lodged in my heart.
When I saw you in
May my visit was
too brief, yet my
thoughts for you
flow deeper than
any dream. My only
hope is that if you
part before the curve
of dawn comes that
the wind will shape
you like a bud and
a leaf.

I CANNOT RETURN

I cannot return
to the time of her arrival.
I cannot return
to the second
her first cry began,
unheard,
as I struggled
with the pain of numbness.
I cannot return
to that tiny window of consciousness
that brought a glimpse
of her black hair and the tiny forehead,
where I placed my first soft sticky kiss.
I cannot return
to the hours we simultaneously slept,
attached, separated,
seeking each other in dreamless sleep.
I cannot return
to the moment I woke
in a white room,
alone, remembering, expectant.

I cannot return
to those glorious moments of a union
- a re-union
I cannot return
to change, in time.
But I can wander
in the space of my own mind.

© Anna G Raman

INSOMNIA STONE

The desolate lake forbids company.
And there is someone ravaged by bleak words.
How does the territory dispense wanderers?

And there is curt language for panicked misanthropist.
(See note on pushed out anchorite.)

Shame upon the lake, yet from afar; and some stroll past with unconscious air.
Haven't a thought for depths – fight the branches.
Eve gloom presides? Click the flashlights to continue.
Rainy chortle in the puddles unseen. Fasten the mind, daybreak approaches.
And laugh when the body is found face down singing in the lake smiling.
All along in the town drinking water.

© Aaron Talbot

THIS IS

My father`s cap that often left
A circular dent in his hair, the imprint of a halo
Perhaps, or a circular furrow

The furrow he ploughed in his father`s field
Before the war and exile.
The furrow ploughed by his father

And if you strung them all together
These furrows would have circled
The world, as they circle it now.

The cap in my hands a pool
Of time I look down into,
To see my father at the plough

In the sepia light of the thirties
Lacquered with sweat,
The blade cutting into the fecund dirt,

The oxen stumbling over clods
My father looking beyond them
To where the earth curves to a cap

Through miles of chocolate corduroy.
His smile flickers briefly
A kestrel's wingbeat

One shadow rumpling a parachute.

© Steve Komarnyckyj

GRANDMOTHER'S RING

You rest against the tiny mound of velvet and dust,
wondering at her absence.
Catching your reflection in the oval disk,
you do not mind the damaged edge.
The tiny chip that grew,
as she shed the warmth and roundness of age.
You had spun around that thinning finger, immersed in heat;
glimpsing crystal, rubbing glass.

You had found your perfect fit that misty afternoon,
the amethyst hue fitting perfectly with the season.
Were happy to swap the dazzling lights for the shades of a life.
And through that life, you held her close and touched,
the joy, the loss, the hope. And to the end,
you watched the strength linger in the watery tint of her eyes.

You had seen tears too; unguarded drops when shadows came,
the dark tones of a life.
She dropped her silent gaze, was still;
lingered on beauty, lost in the mauve of water-coloured dusk.
Put her trust in purity and drank in every drop,
unaware of the god's tears and the impurities of perfection.

© Stephanie Conn

TO MYSELF, A LETTER

Let's travel along the road, and see where our feet take us
To a more burdened journey, and a world of fantasy
Where I can meet the prince, and see myself a princess,
Putting her tiara, and fall in love with his charms.

When we reach our destination and find the sign,
Let's not look behind or even what is ahead.
Chances need the braves who snatched them by force
Never regret the loss of past days, nor the wins.

My life is getting to the last chapter,
Though, I am still, to begin.
I see the hero already departing
Back to his unknown island
And to his dark castle the villain is withdrawing.

I am a bad hostess of life,
For no one taught me so.

© Nadia Faydh

PEARLS

I tread a causeway of years
with gaps widening in deep water,
but your hand steadies
and footprints close to mine
smooth over draglines
of cruel news.

You have offered tears
as a dowry for prayer,
pearls gifted from a blue sea.

We inhabit a safe place,
with time deepening the bite
of our walls into clay.
Like a childhood home
it will stay immune
to age and absence,
keeping an oyster's hold
on its treasure.

MILESTONES

The children run to the empty bay,
parcelled in thick coats,
their hand-me-down hats and scarves
carrying name tags of past owners.

We walk towards rising smoke
and find a family registered in charcoal
on the firestone, awkwardly penned
like the inscription inside the recipe book
we dusted down yesterday -
To Daddy on Father's Day -
copied letter by letter
and carefully dated.

Details of our past New Year's Days
have blurred over time
like landscape sinking into dusk.
So file this somewhere safe,
for you to discover in years to come.
Recall that I was here today,
with you on this cold beach,
our children playing as we fed
any dry wood we could find
to a struggling fire.

THE WILD PEACH OF ANGELS

Lucy kept her dreams in pockets made of buttons
where she hid frogs from the high ground of adults
and knew the secret of setting plastic yellow ducks_free
on a pond: *"My garden is God's secret heaven"*
she'd whisper to her doll as they shared
daisy petals with angels and butterflies.

She'd run into the expansive splendour of rain
like a visionary who understood its mystery
of love and sorrow and breathe, in its stillness,
the deep ancestry of wild peaches.
She'd draw pictures of M: his wife always
dressed as a coffin for her dead smile
and hollow eyes; her glassy mouth could kill
candles too, Lucy once told God in a prayer: *"Maybe
the angels could unfold her heart
so its front door would not be locked for good.."*

So, in the season when strawberries go begging
Lucy left a gift at M and Mrs Coffin's door: A wild_peach
of Angels and a drawing of a girl dressed
in cottongrass, mending a smile shattered on the_floor...

© Renée Sigel

LAVENDER HONEY

Once, our bed was a beehive.
All clover pollen and queen's cups.
The open window letting in wingsong.
But you've gone, summers pass
in pagination. Bees are dying out
yet a few still forage the garden
for saffron. This is the land

of Lavender honey and milk.
I bought my last pint this morning,
enough for tea and the cat's saucer.
When I'm tired enough I'll take a sprig
of lavender and put it in the plastic bag
with me and we'll rush into a dark
secret mansion together.

© Richie McCaffery

REVERIE

Still mosaic patterns
on an off-white stucco ceiling
like interior cloudscares.

Back flat against the mattress,
eyes open, mind drifting,
finding figures.
A dead cartoon ant with Xes for eyes.
A goose Pegasus.
Four-breasted walruses riding a raft.
The girl who lost at strip poker in 1988,
who had only her underwear left.

Pink and black stripes,
tear tracks on her cheeks.
She refused to unhook her bra.
While she covered her chest,
we reached for two sewing scissors
and snipped off her panties,
one cut on either side.
Rules are rules. The rough surface
and crannies above spelling out
a name, part of a name.

R-A-something.

Kids in the future came from
that shy black-furred pubis, perhaps.
Cold breeze from the gray bedroom fan,
set on high in winter.
I don't feel a thing. I'm shivering.

© John F Buckley

OUR DIMENSION

I become dry like a fiber or like a wide valley
variegated by a dream.

If someone gets lost – you look for him, you find him,
and wash his eyes from the fog with your white milk.
The carpenter will not lose himself between the planks
or the odor of the fillings;
the mason will not be buried by the bricks
nor will he be built in his bad thoughts;
the one who ploughs the soil will not be left behind
in the dust.

Do not forget the mad, the blind, the cripple,
fabricate birds to circle the head of the incredulous.
We all will dedicate to you bread and poetry –
and in our hands the legends will whisper.

© Peycho Kanev

MAY THE TEMPLES FALL

A towering temple stands alone
An awkward mountain among flat fields
It's sagging stone sits lacquered with lies
A filthy film upon the walls that never dried
It drips and dribbles damp puddles of deceit
An artifice moat that drowns green grass.
This mountains' gate is made of archaic locks
The sturdy door where defiance knocked
Ninety five times with a hammer and nail
Now rests on hinges locked by rust
Guarded by angels with wings of dust.
This home of saints is now a dungeon
A golden cage for soaring souls
Where snakes slither through unguarded cracks
To make their home in the dismal cave
Where cobwebs trap long ago words like dizzy flies
That struggle still to buzz in the minds of waiting ears.
Stern faces with empty eyes stare down
At a chamber that has never heard the song of laughter
Only the monotone drone of lessons lost
Echos off the guilt stained walls
Old whispers hiding in the dust.
Daydream crumbs among shining idols
Are left to rot in the stale air of an empty tomb
With the salt of past tears shed in back rooms.
This place of glory wears an ugly mask.
Scarred by secrets mixed in the mortar
A facade molded by masters of the craft
An ugly truth beneath elaborate distraction
This temple is made of the finest stone
But ancient cracks if left unchecked
Spread through gilded marble like wildfire.
Stained windows keep out the light
For the sun shall show this palace for what it truly is
Its inlaid silver melts to mud
As rubies rot to rubble
Under the light of uncorrupted rays
Its gold is gilded garbage
And its truth is not but lies
Once this hollow mountain stood full of souls
But long has this temple been empty
And no longer shall it stand
For as sturdy stone turns to sand
The temple shifts
The foundation falters
Bronze screams from high above and dopplers down
As ancient towers topple
As garish crowns crumble
Blind eyes are opened to ceilingless skies.
May the masons of such corruption be damned
And may their temples fall.

(BELATED) ELEGY FOR RICHARD BRAUTIGAN

Steelhead trout dapple
the Pacific Northwest
like the silver sound
of Chekov's phone ringing.

It's a little early
to think about dinner.

© **Howie Good**

AFTER EFFECTS

I remember every face
I slayed

I see my woman in bed
and i am unable to crawl in
next to her

easy she says but comfort
takes me off my guard

bombs in the fridge
grenades in the toilet

© **Martin Lochner**

ASLEEP

When I am asleep,
I can not create my masterpiece
Nor can I be any better
Than I was yesterday.

When I am asleep,
My work remains untouched
And incomplete
And I am exactly where I was
Yesterday.

When I am asleep,
None of that matters

© **Chris Skoyles**

THE TEMPERATURE SHE WANTS TO BE

There is a lady sat on a veranda,
With a cup of peppermint tea.
They are never without a hot drink these verandas.
Transferring the heat through a wicker table across from a wicker chair
Into the air.

There is always a book as well if not glass of accompanying wine.
Two drinks; one warm, one cold both opulent in waste,
Both lukewarm in the end.

There is a lady sat on a veranda
Never the temperature she wants to be.

DIRTY JAWS

I'm cleaning, I'm cleaning.
Stray wire wool catching sparks of enamel
in their bristling, dirty jaws.
Scrub and scrub again.

The floor is stained.
Reds and purples
foot prints in the lino,
fingerprints on my body.
She is in my hair too,
like smoke, she clings.
hanging on to fibres in clothes
Just in case I forget her.

Every night she would slide in
like raindrops from a petal
Silky and delicious.
Slipping over my lips
and under my sheets.

Everything she touched turned to love.
Deep within the door-handles she turned,
beats a heart.
Beating for me.
I can hear it at night
and my body flickers every time.

She evaporated.
Like those raindrops on hot petals.
So here I am now,
on both knees cleaning.
Scraping through dirt and love
compassion and lime scale
grime and affection.

I'm cleaning, I'm cleaning;
Just in case I remember.

THE CURSE

i fit tight jeans
with my 49 year old body
that feels 25
kindles sexual desires
mocks youthful flirtation
seduced by music and your
piercing eyes that
cut the chains of
limitations and boundaries
get me out of me

i am coming to you
i drink liquid gold, flaming red
molten copper through
my third eye

i lick the cold thin ice-
ing off the pond
your lips sear memories
steal my energy

your hands~arms pull me
close into your vortex
remind me now- the fall
of my life
your voice is brittle like glass

i go from bed to bed
not quite sure where to lay my head
you have become the bears you hunted
i lay in silence
arms flail, fists pound
with your roar, my tears flood
moans into fitful sleep
you are lost forever
still i yearn your visceral
your thoughtful mind~you

you are silent now
as you hold my hand
i hear the shrill grate of your sorrow
we are not immortal, invincible or immune
one in six will be cursed with dementia ruin

SYMPHONY

with breath
happening,

with
steps filled
with meaning

and the right kind
of difficulty

much less
matters more
with you

i am wrought
with walking

in time that moves
and compels motion.

my compliance
is dance,

my own musical
consent.

the wheel-shaped
timpani
overturms what i thought
to keep still.

i watch
the hands
of the pianist,

the purple sorrow
of the violinist's
wrist;

you
move
me

TRYST

The lightning-flies shy from the firelight
while overhead a heat-swollen sky
kindles blue flame strike on the horizon;
a promise of storms to come.

Basted in sweat:
the form of silhouettes
against a wet black night.

The moon, master of the tides
wields no power over
passion plays and bodies entwined.

But in the morning,
when they wake to songbird cries,
they will whisper bitter treasons

"it was lies, all lies..."

© Kate Bergen

CUPID PAINTED BLIND

Women dating on the Internet, if anything,
are far more manipulative than men:
curvy (tubby), Cuddly (a huge thing),
a cat lover (desperate for offspring).

Traditional homemaker you said
(You're looking for a meal ticket),
fun loving (drunken, possibly a crack head)
adventurous (will do anything in bed).

Scatty (bonkers), rugby loving (dominate me),
I'm from St Petersburg
(For God's sake marry me, British Nationality),
right wing (You'd better earn a superb salary).

I will send a photo privately today
(I'm married, don't want hubby to know).
favourite things: DIY, football, Internet play
(Can't think of anything ... oh, I'm gay).

Men dating on the Internet each day
are much simpler and straightforward,
no matter what they seem to say,
they seek sincere companionship... and sex, ok!

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WHISKEY AND RYE

He comes to me when I am lonely, does his duty, a good Muslim boy
How beautiful he is...

Stop it he protests

(Too many compliments)

He rings me from his job where he sells half-naked women to half-naked men
eating bronzed meat pies and calling him mate
They fill up on gas while he crunches Pringles
and dreams of Australian Citizenship

After serving them, he comes to me
his hard limbs
receive my soft impression
You are so beautiful...

Stop it he says, wiping his eyes

So beautiful... his black curly hair a jungle on his thighs, when the buttocks bow,
then the rougher skin begins

The problem with you is . . .

I strain to listen, fighting shocked pride and Olympic defensiveness
that I hold back with Olympic strength

. . . you think you are the only one

At night they come in packs
singing goodbye to American pies
but helping themselves to hotdogs and Slurpees
spilling and skidding and tripping over yesterday's news
She is a typical Aussie girl her bare shoulders reflect the glorious secular sun
He is a typical Aussie male his mouth as big as his pregnant Western belly

Oh my gosh he says, rolling his eyes

Later, I will glimpse a flicker of his naked soul
for a fleeting moment between the live hairs
on his lean, naked body