



Event

Issue 6

**Ann Christine Tabaka is a poet to  
watch out for. Suddenly in the  
midst of a poem an image blows  
you away. In the Title poem:  
“Oxygen thin as a noon shadow.”**  
.... Paul Brookes, poet & author

**Available at:  
Amazon.com  
&  
barnesandnoble.com**

*Reaching for Dawn* is my sixth book of poems. Once again, I hope that you enjoy the journey as you travel with me into the inner depths of my observations, my mind, and my feelings. Maybe you will find a little of your own thoughts and feeling in my words as you read along.

#### LAST WISH

Lilacs on her grave  
my mother's last wish  
an explosion of amethyst  
emerging from her heart

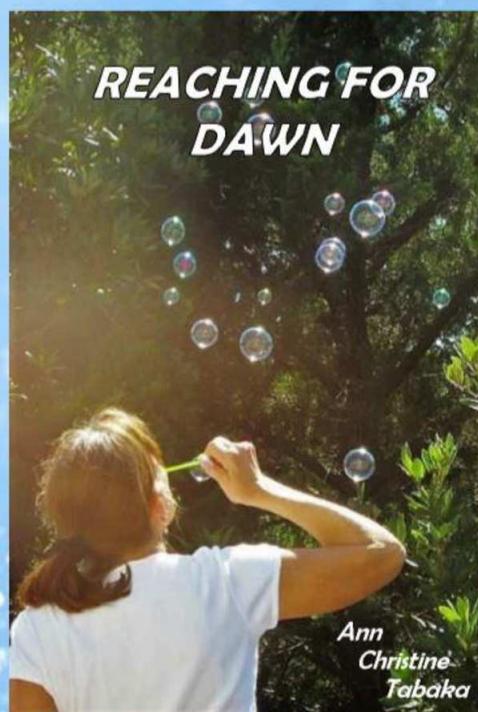
the greenness of a spring  
background now fading  
as the widow's bouquet  
dies alongside her groom

resting against the marble stone  
now my mother's headboard  
petals falling like the tears that  
accompany my memory of her smile

sweet scented footsteps  
through the garden  
of a time so long ago  
and my mother's final words  
“remember me when the lilacs bloom”



REACHING FOR DAWN  
Ann Christine Tabaka



# California **Transit**

Stories  
Diane Lefer

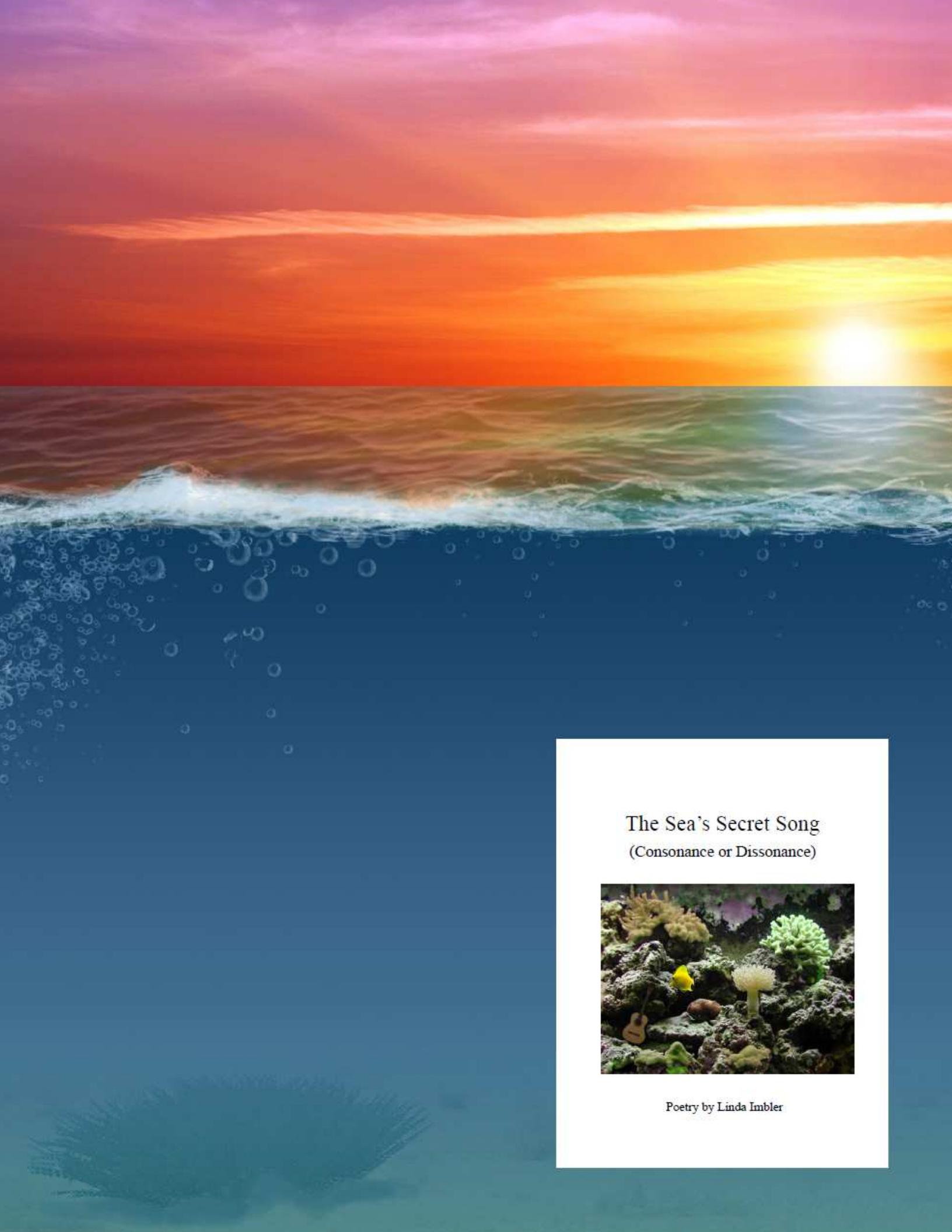
Winner of the  
Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction  
Selected by Carole Maso

*“... smart, well written and have that most elusive of qualities: vitality. They take on difficult issues — immigration, racism, torture, animal suffering, environmental degradation. ... A vein of wry wit runs*

# Muscle Shoals

*The  
Hit Capital's  
Heyday & Beyond*

C.S. Fuqua

A wide-angle photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sky is filled with horizontal bands of orange, yellow, and red. A bright sun is visible on the right side. The ocean in the foreground has small white-capped waves and a large number of small, glowing blue bubbles rising from the bottom left towards the surface.

## The Sea's Secret Song

(Consonance or Dissonance)



Poetry by Linda Imbler

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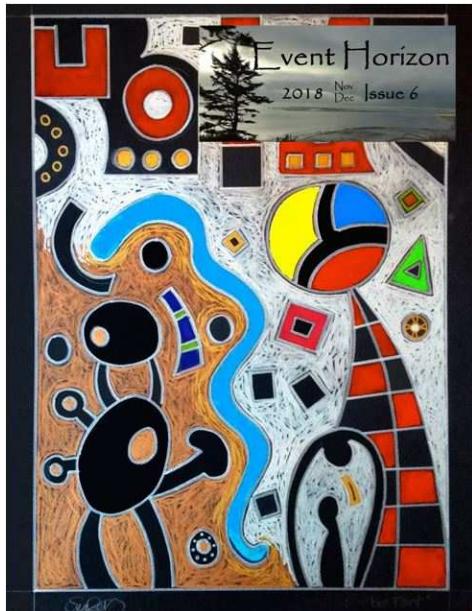
*~Schuylkill Center*



*~ a literary and graphic arts periodical*

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On the cover:  
In Memoriam  
Robert Klein Engler



*front* Don't Be a Faust--Lies  
are Brass But Truth Is Gold



*back* Father Went On Ahead

See **Notes from the editor** for notice of Robert's passing.



@RaflarTheArtist

## Notes from the editor

### Death Notice

One of my contributors has died. Robert Klein Engler passed away in his sleep on October 3, 2018. His poetry appears in Issue 5 of Event Horizon. Robert agreed to provide the cover art for Issue 6. I went to his Facebook page to look for a wider selection of images and that's when I found the notice. The front and back cover art of this issue is Robert's work. Robert was also an essayist and writer. Many thoughtful works of his can be found with a simple search. A fantastic collection of his graphic art may be found on his Facebook page in Photos.

### Kendall's Column

It is with pleasure that I announce an exciting new regular feature of Event Horizon. Kendall Evans will be our columnist. Kendall is a writer. A selection of his poetry appears in Issue 5 of Event Horizon. A science fiction piece of his is in this issue. His column begins with this issue.

### Shameless self-promotion

Event Horizon will never make me a million dollars. Equally astonishing is the realization that that's OK. I have a community who appreciates what I do. Besides providing a friendly venue for voices to be heard, I would like to point out that Event Horizon provides another important and accessible service. If you want to promote your chap book, upcoming exhibit, short story collection, or - what the hell - your roofing business, full page ads in Event Horizon are very competitively priced. But wait: There's more. If you are a contributing artist or writer to Event Horizon, the cost to you is zero. What? You want that exciting price but you're not a contributing artist? Well, send it in! Click the Advertising tab on the website.

### Kendall's great idea

But not only that, Kendall has revealed another expansive possibility from Event Horizon. My contributors are passionate about their art. My readers are restless consumers of the intriguing and the obscure. Express yourself. If you are an expert or a hungry collector of all there is to be known about ... your particular obsession, we need to hear from you. So far I have no one to tell us about Abstract Expressionism, 16th century Persian poetry or the implications for curatorial practice in the age of Instagram. I repeat: we need you. I need you.



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# Petra Sperling-Nordqvist

## Our Kind



**Petra Sperling-Nordqvist** hails from Europe where she received an education in languages, literature, and philosophy (in Germany and Oxford). She has spent the last twenty years with her husband, horses, dogs, and cats in California, dabbling in teaching, writing, acting, dancing, swimming, singing, and playing music.

## **Our Kind**

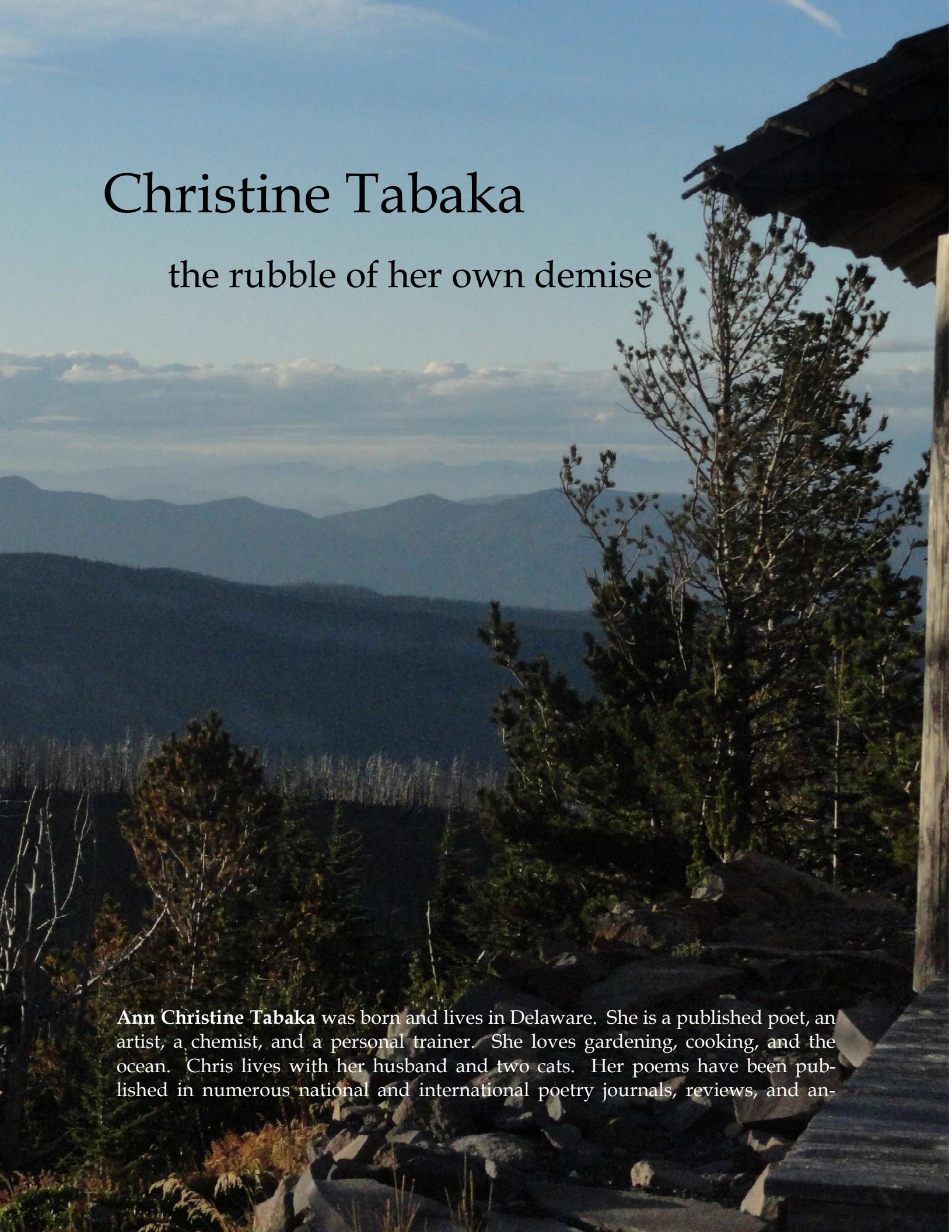
Our kind played  
with balls that bounced  
off the walls of futility.

Our kind plays  
within walls that deflect  
unfulfilled desires to the effect  
of eager anticipation.

Our kind will be players  
throughout a world that cultivates  
unbridled compassion for creatures  
the muses and a spirit  
of authentic expression.

# Christine Tabaka

the rubble of her own demise

A scenic landscape featuring a large body of water in the foreground, likely a lake, with a dense forest of evergreen trees lining its shore. In the background, a range of mountains is visible under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. On the right side of the frame, the corner of a wooden building or cabin is visible, with a small evergreen tree growing in front of it. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

**Ann Christine Tabaka** was born and lives in Delaware. She is a published poet, an artist, a chemist, and a personal trainer. She loves gardening, cooking, and the ocean. Chris lives with her husband and two cats. Her poems have been published in numerous national and international poetry journals, reviews, and an-

## Reaching for Dawn

The shades of dawn  
falling like colorful feathers  
plucked from the sky.

Sorrow, a distant friend with  
sodden shoulder and sturdy  
pose, no longer needed.

In hand, a timetable of  
misbegotten deeds, to be  
dispersed to the four winds.

The song was sung long ago.  
The echo still remains, of  
voices faint and far off.

I do not know the words.

Climbing the mountain,  
altitude unknown, oxygen  
thin as a noon shadow.

The pinnacle appears.  
Breathing in the clouds,  
focus begins to dim.

Past fading into the future, as  
the dawn now turns pure gold.  
The summit is within reach.

## Restless Wind

The wind is a restless lover,  
ever on the move.

The wind is a jealous lover,  
claiming all within its path.

The wind is an angry lover,  
bellowing like a runaway freight train  
as it races through the trees,  
bending them with its mighty breath,  
they shake in fear.

A loud crack like a rifle shot  
echoes through the night.  
The earth quakes  
as another mighty giant meets its doom.

The hill is littered with corpses  
from former wars with the gale,  
like so many fallen soldiers that  
met the unforgiving force.

Alone and frightened  
I huddle and pray  
that the gods spare me,  
as the thunderous chorus  
continues through the night.

Morning once more,  
the wind is now a gentle lover,  
as it caresses me  
with its soft warm breeze.

## **A House in Ruin**

Walking past the old dwelling,  
looking in through doleful eyes.

She is an abandoned house,  
tenebrous windows, crumbling

walls. Visions of the past haunt  
her rooms, as she combs through

the disarray. A dark shadow  
lurking in the closet evokes images

of some forgotten past. Peeling  
paint, chipped plaster, her joints

are creaking hinges. Her mind, a  
cobwebbed attic peppered with

incoherent words. She wades  
through the rubble of her own

demise. A house that has stood  
the storms of time. Age demands

its toll. Turning to walk away, the  
once beloved house is left in ruin.

## Remembering Mom

The smell of bread baking,  
and strong laundry soap,  
it clung to her like perfume.

Faced scrubbed clean,  
hands red and labor rough,  
the smile of an angel.

Patchwork apron tied tight  
in a neat bow, always humming  
that sweet tune as she did.

No one left to call out her name,  
she preferred it that way, after  
years of neglect and abuse.

She gave all she had to give,  
and we took it in turn.  
How I miss that dear woman today.

### Saturday Morning Surprise

The cat jumps on the bed with  
an unwelcomed gift. Noticing it  
I scream. Perplexed, he jumped off  
leaving his treasure behind.

Looking at me as if to say, mother how can  
you reject my perfect offering? Turning, he  
saunters away. Holding my breath I lean  
over to look at the sad creature laying there.

Slowly the mouse opens its eyes and carefully  
surveys the scene. Seeing no cat, he scurries off  
to who knows where before I could scream again.  
Heart pounding I carefully step down.

Searching the room, no mouse to be seen,  
hoping that the poor critter finds its way  
out of the house the same way it got in.  
I go off to give the mighty hunter his breakfast.

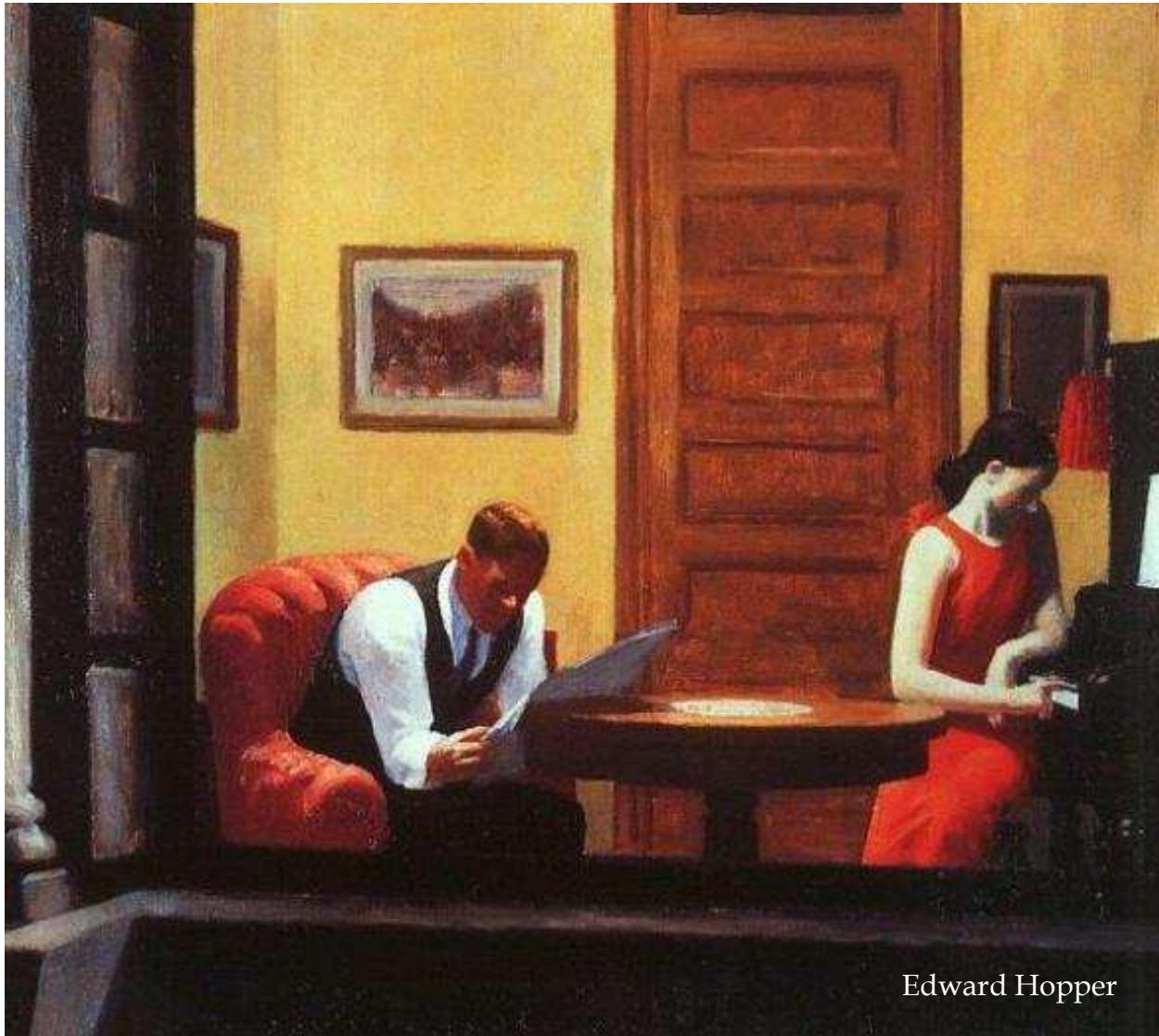
Tabby is stretched out full length, sound asleep  
in the sunny spot underneath the large window.

Then I notice it –  
The mouse, curled up on Tabby's paw looking  
very relaxed. All of a sudden they both look up  
at me, and I could swear that they winked!

Putting heads back down, they both continued  
their nap, as I stood there scratching my head.

# Linda Imbler

spin on the axis of your own invention



Edward Hopper

**Linda Imbler** is an internationally published poet. Her poetry collections include “Big Questions, Little Sleep,” “Lost and Found,” and “The Sea’s Secret Song.” She is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Nominee. Linda’s poetry and a listing of publications can be found at [lindaspotpoetryblog.blogspot.com](http://lindaspotpoetryblog.blogspot.com).

## Centrifugal Force

I should have seen it at our chance crisscross the first night we met.  
Your urgent compulsion to enter every room using your rambling stride,  
your braggadocio with volume on max.  
Your face presenting a smile, an anthropoid sneer, humanoid, yet not as humans do.

Circling the room with what first seemed to be frenetic quirk,  
but was actually calculated, forcing yourself central,  
you, to whom all others should be drawn, on which all others must rely.

Your self proclaimed warmhearted misdeed, to not waste others' time,  
was merely an excuse for steely dissection of their eventual submission to your will.  
Who will allow you to leave your evil stamp on them or theirs?  
More importantly, who will not?

And those who would orbit, once they have tasted your acidic ways,  
once the disillusionment has set in, once they have chosen to escape?  
Yes! It's then you shift gears, increase gravity denser and denser.  
Then your loftiest corruption is well played.

To bribe is to control, isn't that what you told your friends?  
Use correctional ranking to sort your paramours?  
Knowing they'll clamor for tighter intimacy to examine  
your brilliant deviltry up close, cruel and wicked, yet stunning for its planning.

You claim there's no one to blame for the list of names,  
that roster of those populating your lecherous graveyard,  
they, whose relationships with you were killed.  
No, don't bother yourself, you can leave her name on there and also add mine.

I should have seen it at our first chance (?) crisscross.  
Seen the shadowed craze like the first crack seen in pottery,  
evidence that you never had it together.  
How sad that woeful shatter will never touch your mind or heart.  
You will remain the center of your universe,  
will spin on the axis of your own invention.

I will stand with cruciform candor, not clinging or grabbing on  
and let your whirling, twirling self revolution, fast and energetic,  
reel me away, let centrifugal force carry me  
and my disenchanted discontent on a new trajectory,  
now on my own path, where honest conduct reigns.

## **Gladrags**

Bony yet purring, his feelings self-contained,  
but his attitude overt, as he glides while foraging within dark alleys.  
His movement, like a glissade, on tender paws.  
Another forsaken beast, deemed too damaged to consider.  
His few days left, leave him feeling unwanted.  
The same old song playing across nations  
that should know better.  
Abandonment weakens us all.  
Leaves furry corpses in lightless places,  
under and next to crumbling frameworks,  
those ill-gotten monuments to things forgotten,  
including ones whose hearts once beat.

## **Mistrust**

By all who tell lies,  
what is reported  
becomes distorted,  
so all other tellers must also have spite.

And those who do fraud,  
see others as false  
and to them befalls  
using alibis of memories slipshod.

By all who must bluff,  
truth's not apparent,  
their own recall errant,  
no one's integrity will be enough.

## **Huh?**

Tell me what you want to hear.  
I always answer wrong.  
My responses never please you,  
you react badly, strong

the very first time around.  
One day, I'll get it right.  
And then we will see each other  
in quite another light.

For now I will do my best to  
solve the riddle with pleasure.  
Forgive me, as I struggle to  
respond with my conjecture.

### **Emma Jean**

I could tell the night before if she would call,  
whether she would need a ride  
and was about to ask for one,  
as if she needed to.

She slides into the passenger seat.  
You know you can let me pay you for the pick up, she begins.

A cold blustery day with snowy streets,  
ice hidden from view, but not from mind,  
the occasional loosening of the wheel.

#### **Driving**

very slowly,  
eyes kept on the road,  
even as she unfolds last night's  
anecdotes of family humorous events.

She helps me watch at intersections,  
careful never to slam her foot on imaginary breaks.

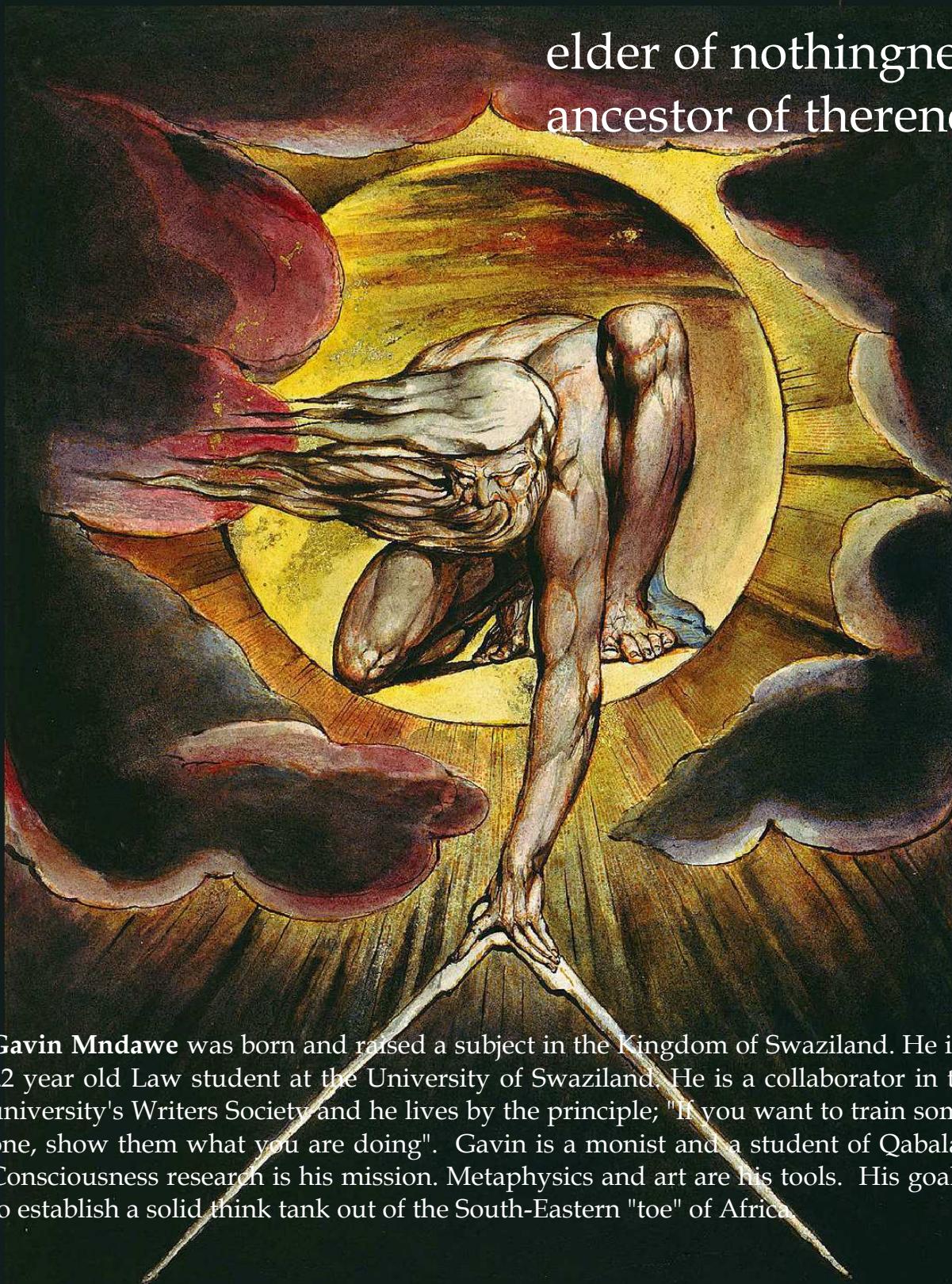
We learned so much about each other that winter,  
and the next and the next,  
seven winters in all,  
learned about my music lessons  
and her attempts to cook new food.

When all the rides we're done,  
she thanked me with a music box  
in the shape of a piano  
that played "The Way We Were."

It's on my dresser,  
and in my mind  
I still ride with her everyday.

# Gavin Mndawe

elder of nothingness  
ancestor of thereness



**Gavin Mndawe** was born and raised a subject in the Kingdom of Swaziland. He is a 22 year old Law student at the University of Swaziland. He is a collaborator in the university's Writers Society and he lives by the principle; "If you want to train someone, show them what you are doing". Gavin is a monist and a student of Qabalah. Consciousness research is his mission. Metaphysics and art are his tools. His goal is to establish a solid think tank out of the South-Eastern "toe" of Africa.

## Beautiful Funeral

Atoms roam round a tomb stone  
It takes more than a fool to know  
That funerals are for fools alone

It is said that he's dead  
What an illusion though  
I don't consider it the end  
Maybe diffusion or moving along

It's sad that he's dead  
At least it wasn't by noose or sword  
Besides, the silver cord must be torn  
For the core to be loosed

Man, you're manure  
For intangible germination  
Ritual killing of kings  
Is sacrificial flogging  
Facing pressure

They make impressions  
Not seeing beyond the vision  
Of decomposition  
And the end of anything definite  
And comprehended  
In a hundredth of a second  
Also known as 'jiffy'

Let the dead in the spirit  
Bury corpses of the flesh

Sacrificing in spite of the tension  
There's a limping longing for lightning  
To reanimate him

They say there's never life  
Without the latter  
Reason why it's got wings  
And a net to snatch us  
That's liberation and captive  
Birth only took us backwards

Chaos has been there  
Since day one  
Before expiry-date-slapped Sun  
Whose fuel will run out  
Was spun by the spit of the one  
When worlds weren't whirled  
Into the wild

It is the sentiment of Darwinism  
Representative of ascension  
One could argue with them  
And say you're the reason  
For existence

To me it makes sense  
That you're inevitable  
But look at all the effort  
They put into pulling the wool  
Over my eyes

You should've known it's arrived  
Clichés for days  
Likewise,  
With you it's the same

They think of you  
As a phantom  
But I beg to differ  
Something about the night  
Makes one deaf to the outer  
Amplifies the inner

Let us be grateful  
For the end of an era

## To Live As a Liver

It's like facing that World War German hating  
When you're germinating  
Life is but a germ  
Contaminating the main thing

See, I'm picketing  
Death's what makes life interesting  
Instinctively knowing that  
Will soften its sting

Hear them testify about death defying  
How many skeptics eyeing?  
How many of you delight in the drama,  
Drained from laughter  
As others kept on dying?

It's not out of spite  
Yes I've been stepped on  
But I'm trying to see it all  
In bird sight

What's right?  
Giving your energy to memory?  
Kilojoules are killer jewels  
A flashback can turn  
A treasury into treachery

The stretching trees;  
Our kin is keen on the kinetic  
Dialogues with the highest god  
Leave them like;  
"Will I die a log?"

It's said that life is marked  
By reproducing and moving  
Even more than just these two things  
But the more we live by this anthem  
The more we tend towards the antonym  
Frugality and vitality are tandem  
Death is like candy;  
The bitter things  
Can deem you glued to cosiness

## Ate The Yeast At Equinox?

Virgin flame  
In blameless air  
Tread not upon the earth  
For you will blacken it  
And some sponge-wielding worker  
Will put her back in it

Rabid rain  
In forebearing firmament  
Hover not above our heads  
Relieve that cloak  
Of its labour pains  
Return in timeless ecstasy  
Return to the way you were  
When you reflected me

The blanket of the baby  
Is the sheet of the corpse  
The room without windows  
Is the belt fastened with force

As the hands run their course  
Motion in its immortality  
Seeks for its cause  
And is left with a crossroads;  
A choice  
Is it specialized heart tissue  
Or a drummer seen with special eyes  
Causing the heart's noise?

## Not in my kingdom

Throns thrown at my throne  
Everyone is respecting  
The majesty of my jesting  
So they digest my jest

They protest for progress  
Then prostrate  
From war cries  
To songs of praise  
Oh what a hoax!

Calling culture a cult chore  
They can't just be conscious  
That these things are part of us  
I wish they would like croak

The beast bestows us feasts  
Yes the table is set  
Steadiness is ruled out  
As they relish in head spinning  
Like roulette  
It's said that elephants never forget  
Except when drunk  
On marula the ruler prepared  
It's true  
I'm a seasonal preacher  
And an annual brewer  
Let intoxicants seize the poor  
So they don't feel like doers

Let the ones with the influence  
Ride Rolls Royces past the ruins  
But they can't make a debut  
Since that's reserved for me, you see

Decorate your home  
With whatever animal  
Save the kings of the jungle  
I ooze with statutes  
My dominion's undiluted

Citizens are victims here  
Your human rights are luminous  
But not in my dominion  
Democracy's a mockery  
So not in my dominion  
They say "it's obvious,  
In God we trust"  
Well not in my kingdom

### **When?**

When the moon brightens as the sun does  
Then shall deathlessness be among us

When mankind consults his cardiac compass  
The future will cease to be a fungus

And when this carnal car rusts,  
The spark plugs will turn to stardust

But when, oh when will doubt die?  
Truth is for the throat and mental mouths are dry

### **Hue-man Be**

Human becoming  
By the grace  
Of the subtle summit  
It's as gross as  
What some eat

Human was  
The universe,  
You were one  
Who would  
Sum it up  
In a single cellular unit

Worse,  
Human will be  
Filthy,  
Filled with greed  
The more we produce,  
The more we need

Human be  
Bedazzled by the simple  
Enamoured with the trivial  
Your answer is trapped  
Inside your tribute

## The Geometry Of A Thought

So there's no ledge  
When it comes to knowledge?  
Education?  
More like the edge you're caged in

Unknowable face  
Wearing secret names  
You are the only exception  
There's blindness  
Etched in your stretched grin

Retina on reality  
As it rips out  
Its birth canal  
Born for a breath  
Only to die now

Warm I am kept in  
My high-browed perception

Concepts are my defence  
I'm comforted by a collection

We are words  
Explaining the mouth  
We came from

Those that use nouns for you  
Are renouncing you  
Accountable, an ounce too cruel  
Some of the adjectives attached  
To the prophets  
Of the backwards' scripts

Such attributes are  
More than a stretch  
The name of a thing  
Is not necessarily that  
The image of one  
Is its essence trapped

To some you're a  
A point of light  
To others you're  
Worlds-wide

The consensus is  
You're outside of  
The senses  
Shouldn't something  
That's tethered to time  
And takes up space  
Be exclusively said to exist?

The mind is fuelled by symbols  
And signs used  
To define the truth

It is indeed believed  
That you exceed  
The reach of logic  
Some say you're often  
Lodged into the  
Space-time fabric

Endlessness,  
Pristine process  
Precedes thought yes  
Elder of nothingness  
Ancestor of thereness  
Beyond the limits  
Of the conch  
That is consciousness  
Which sets limits

I call to you  
You reply in  
My rippling rhetoric  
We are not spectators watching  
The action word  
That you are  
We are the medium  
Of your doing  
Trying to overstand no-thing

## In The Name of the Hydrogen, the Oxygen and the Oxygen

In the wee hours of creation  
Where were we?  
I was probably in the waters  
Swear that's what formed us  
Germs get dehydrated  
Nothing can be dry  
And suffer from inflammation

Pillar of plasticity  
Necessity to living things  
Maidservant of motion  
Anyone lost at sea  
(Whose now obsolete)  
Would say you're master  
Of velocity

Oh how it aches to see  
That there's war to start  
Oh what ecstasy  
To know we won't need an ark  
Floods won't end the world  
But water might run out

Your Moisture,  
The notion of your mindlessness;  
I find it displaced  
I'm pretty sure you recognize  
My eyes  
As you reflect this face

As blood,  
You serve the purpose  
Of sacrifice  
As milk,  
You foster the force  
Of life  
As rain,  
You render the Earth alive  
As sap,  
The trees depend on you  
To move their food supply

Another one of your merits  
Is transparency  
With foam of such purity  
Being the offspring  
Of air and sea

Let's not pretend  
That it shouldn't be common knowledge  
That one hydrogen  
And two oxygens  
Proves the beyond exists

## Worm Eat Worm World

Might I tell an expectant mother she's glowing?  
Even glowworms may have that glory  
For she'll  
Glow as a toaster in the sun  
And end up as toast  
I won't watch her boast  
For although it isn't showing  
She is a host  
Harbouring a parasite within her

Foetuses are bequeathed by God  
But I find it odd  
Carrying a foetus can be a feat  
It even inflames the feet!  
Plus it's hard dancing to two heartbeats

Why summon a soul to have a sorrowful experience?  
Drag it from infinity  
Into the present's eeriness  
Only to lament from all these elements  
I guess parents are selfish  
They want pets for themselves  
And if the first cake is preceded by baneful hell  
They won't even extract stem cells  
For others' help

What are babies but parasites?  
They feast on breasts like beasts  
Sucking milk like it were blood  
As if they were measly fleas

Even before that,  
The sperm worms its way through the fallopian tubes  
Burrowing through till its journey is over  
And one sperm reaches the ova  
Causing an explosion unmatched by Chernobyl

What is a sperm cell but a worm  
What is a birth canal but a wormhole  
Through which a bridge is made in space-time  
What is a womb but a dressing room  
For the soul to wear it's costume

Hasn't the world had enough of soul-summoning?  
Resources are plummeting  
The planet's coming to a tumult and  
One day it will no longer somersault  
For it's bound to come to a halt

It's never been a dog eat dog world  
It's always been a worm eat worm world  
For just as we wormed our way through the womb  
So shall we be consumed by worms in the tomb

# Lynn White

if you only dream harder



Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. Her poetry is widely published and is featured in recent anthologies such as - **'Alice In Wonderland'** by Silver Birch Press, **'The Border Crossed Us'** and **'Rise'** from Vagabond Press and in journals such as **Apogee**, **Firewords Quarterly**, **Indie Soleil**, **Light** and **Snapdragon**.

Find Lynn at:  
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and [lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com](http://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com)

Kazuaki Horitomo

## **Black Cats**

I'm puzzled.  
You can see it in my face, can't you?  
Traditionally, black cats were lucky,  
especially if they could be persuaded to  
cross your path.  
Now they're unlucky.  
No one wants them,  
not even to cross their path.  
So, you can see why I'm curious  
as I wonder what happened  
to bring about this change.  
Did they, ever catlike,  
decide not to co-operate  
with the path crossing business  
and turn tail to scarper  
in the opposite direction?  
Or maybe stand their ground  
and snarl  
and spit  
and bare their teeth  
like fearsome demons.  
Perhaps that was it  
or perhaps it must always  
remain a puzzle,  
a curiosity.

### Only Dream Harder

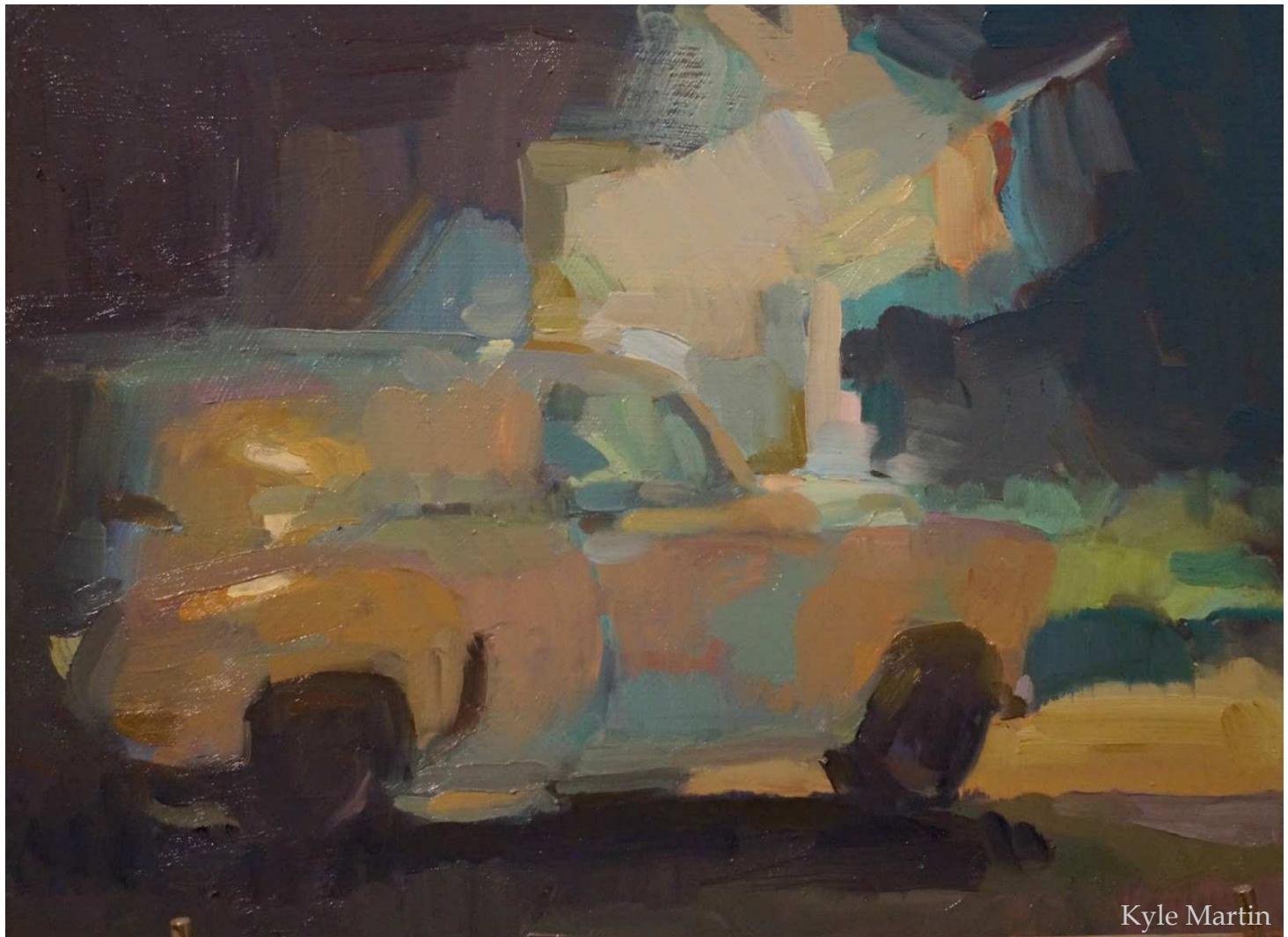
If you dream hard enough  
you'll find castles in the air,  
or build them.  
If you dream hard enough  
you'll find secret cities  
under the waves  
ruled over by a fishy king  
with his beady eye on you  
as you walk on by.  
If you dream hard enough  
you'll find unicorns  
and ride them across the desert  
to discover lost oases hidden there  
amongst ancient cities  
once in ruins  
now recast  
in shimmering perfection  
by harsh sunlight.  
If you dream harder  
you'll rise above the waves of sand  
which threaten to engulf you,  
float in the sunlight  
instead of being buried  
head first.  
It's all possible  
if you only dream harder.

### Goldfish

Her favourite foods were prawns and  
chocolate.  
I wondered if she would be fooled  
by torn pieces of plastic  
heavily disguised.  
She ate them eagerly.  
And then  
spat.  
Spat them out  
her look of disgust clearly expressing her  
thinking,  
'I'm not one of them brain dead sea fish,  
you know!  
Oh, and cut out the raspberries,  
I'm not a fuckin' blackbird either!'  
Then she blew a few bubbles,  
swished her tail  
and went in search of tadpoles.

# Michael A. Griffith

the man from licenses and safety for the city came by



**Michael A. Griffith** began writing poetry to help his mind and spirit stay healthy as he recovered from a life-changing injury and its resulting disability. His poems, flash fiction, essays, and articles have appeared in many print and online publications and anthologies. He resides and teaches near Princeton, NJ. His first book of poetry is slated to appear later this year. Chapbook will be released in fall, 2018 by The Blue Nib.

### **Exterminator**

The exterminator was here again today, mumbling,  
grinning like he'd sniffed his own chemicals  
or killed the neighbor kid's noisy dog.

Handed me a Watchtower and receipt,  
blessed me in Jehovah's true name,  
and thanked me for my business.

Took his hoses and tanks,  
tossed them in his white van,  
and rumbled off to his next stop,  
gangsta reggae low-dub bass pumping hard.

Ten minutes later the roaches and ants held me at bay  
and I couldn't get safely to the toilet or the sink.

Could be I'm not a believer in one true name,  
a meme of the rapture awaiting the end.

### **Perhaps**

fearless except perhaps a fear to stop  
named after an ancestor or a ghost  
perhaps named for God's grace  
perhaps she doesn't believe in  
her own mortality  
until she slows  
to a  
stop

### **In Weatherly, Pennsylvania (For Sandy Drusda)**

Her trees will not last the year, she knows,  
the man from licenses and safety for the city came by  
and left a letter telling her to cut them down.

Tall as any she has ever seen,  
these trees have seen more than five generations of weather,  
winter, and warmth. Infestations and storms couldn't hurt them

until the last bad ice, heavier than lead.  
Tall but deformed now, defaced by this unkind year,  
her trees try for austerity, try for the clouds, try

for strength in April's chilly winds,  
as she tries to catch them with her sketchpad.  
Her trees will not last much longer, she knows.

## **Hate from the Supermarket**

Hit.

Hit her hard on her soft behind.

(Hit that child again and I will—)

Drag.

Drag her through the store aisles by her skinny arm.

(If I hear her cry "Mommy, no!" again—)

Stomp.

Stomp your foot like you are younger than she is.

(If you tell her you hate her just one more time—)

Rush.

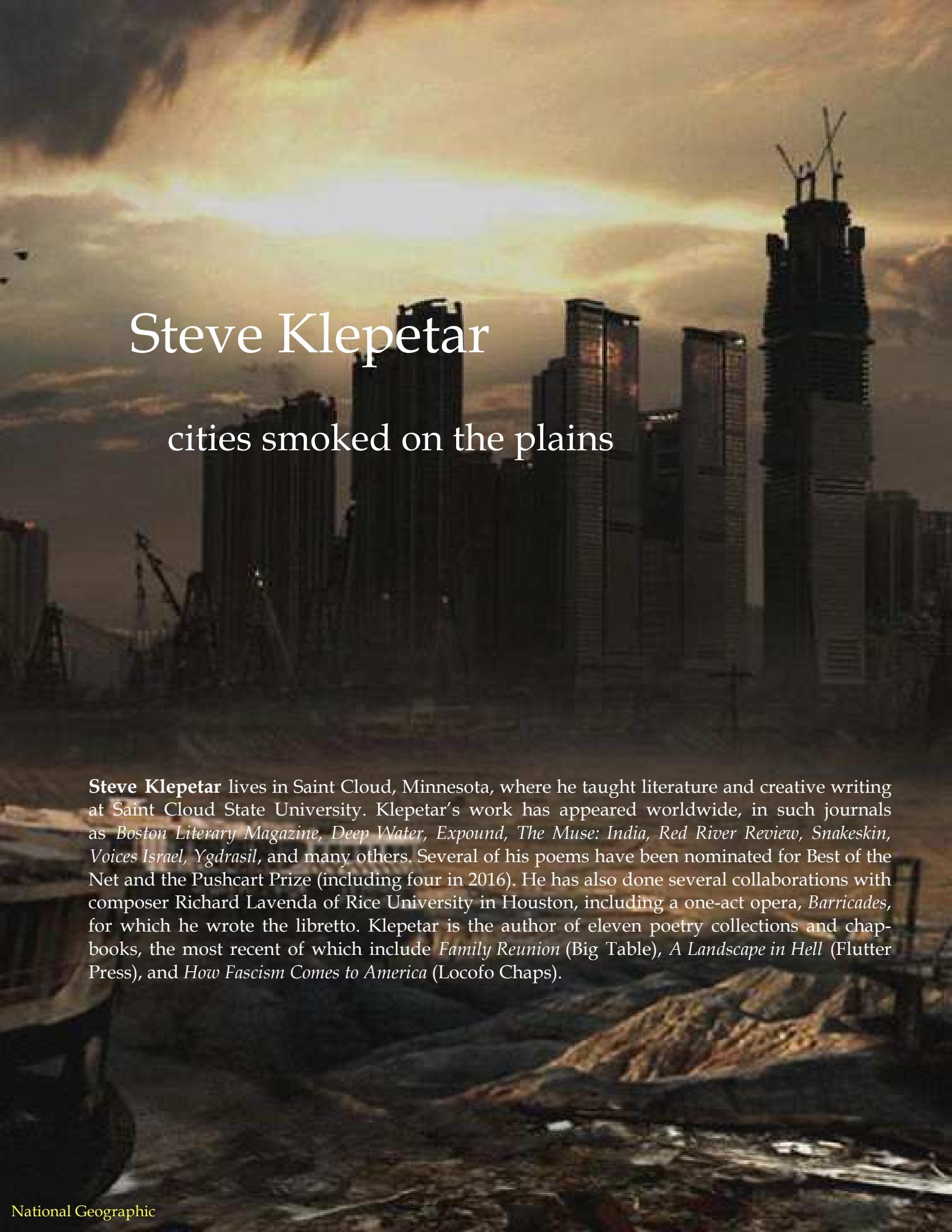
Rush to your car, push her in, slam the door.

(If I'd confronted you it might have stopped you from back-handing her.)

Leave.

You leave the parking lot.

(My smartphone is heavy in my pocket, 9-1-1 so hard to dial.)

A dark, atmospheric landscape featuring a city skyline in the background. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, and the city lights are visible through the haze. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted shapes that could be trees or industrial structures.

# Steve Klepetar

## cities smoked on the plains

**Steve Klepetar** lives in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, where he taught literature and creative writing at Saint Cloud State University. Klepetar's work has appeared worldwide, in such journals as *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Deep Water*, *Expound*, *The Muse: India*, *Red River Review*, *Snakeskin*, *Voices Israel*, *Ygdrasil*, and many others. Several of his poems have been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize (including four in 2016). He has also done several collaborations with composer Richard Lavenda of Rice University in Houston, including a one-act opera, *Barricades*, for which he wrote the libretto. Klepetar is the author of eleven poetry collections and chapbooks, the most recent of which include *Family Reunion* (Big Table), *A Landscape in Hell* (Flutter Press), and *How Fascism Comes to America* (Locofo Chaps).

### Here They Are

I'm falling asleep, then suddenly I'm awake again, and the house feels full of ghosts. It shouldn't be, this is no special anniversary. The dead, certainly, cannot be said to be freshly mourned. No, it must be something in the weather, Humidity, pollen, and heat making it difficult to breathe. And here they are, not breathing, of course, but wandering around the great room, sitting at the dining table or on the sofa near the fireplace. They speak softly, almost murmuring, not unlike the sounds pigeons make, and I can tell by their empty hands that they want drinks, even if that is impossible, even if their tongues were hard and real. I walk around, handing out glasses, as ice cubes clink, and scotch and gin slosh in that sweet, appealing way. I'm not really dressed, just undershorts and a tee-shirt, but no one seems to mind, and anyway, they have not come for me. "Listen," I say, "are you guys staying the night?" but by then the thunder has started to roll. Now it's raining hard. The lights flicker and go out. We watch through the window as red maples bend in the wind. I find the lantern, which throws shadows on the walls, take it with me to bed as the house rattles in the storm.

### **The Man God**

The man god strolled through the garden,  
climbing a path up the high hill. He sang  
as he walked, a song he made for the stars.  
His breath turned to starlings,  
which floated in the air above the trees.  
Every leaf was made of gold and glittered in the sun.  
The man god drank the wind.  
He sat down to rest by a banyan tree,  
whittled a man out of wood, sent him  
scurrying toward the pond.  
He carved a woman from soft stone  
and held her in the palm of his hand.  
Jays screeched, and robins hopped in the wet grass.  
Wearied, he slept, and when he woke,  
the garden was gone. Cities smoked on the plains

### **A Week**

It was a week of rising seas, a week  
of stones hurled against the walls  
of our town. It was a week of men  
bending, peering into mirrors and wells.  
How cold we felt when new winds  
battered our glass, when the temperature  
dropped, and snow fell in quiet sheets  
along the avenues. Traffic snarled  
and stopped. Cars vanished under  
white mounds. It was a week of storms.  
We couldn't see, then, what the future  
might be, whether the money would stop,  
or fish wash up on shore, gills moving,  
dead eyes turning slowly in their swollen heads.

## P.S. 196

When I went to school, I sat  
in the classroom like a little  
madman, imagining a world  
through the window.

The teacher's words went  
through me. She was a cloud,  
a squall in the night.

Always her eyes were wet,  
her hands covered with chalk dust.  
I went on sitting at my desk,  
but my thoughts penetrated  
the earth beyond the schoolyard,  
and somewhere far from home,  
I climbed and I climbed toward the moon.

### Always Waiting

Waiting, always waiting.  
A day and a night,  
and still your absence burns.  
A photograph above my desk:  
you have climbed to the top  
of a hill, and looking down  
you seem empty,  
but unafraid, like someone  
drifting on the clouds of sleep.  
After all this time  
I have woken in the blue chair.  
Now I wait for the light  
to return. Here where frogs  
sing at sunset, where mist rolls  
over the lake, where jays dive  
and shriek, I wait at the corner  
to see whose house is full of sand  
and who has broken  
in a sea of glass. I wait for owls  
and nightingales, for shadows  
beneath the floor. I wait to see  
which couples have made it home  
and who is missing still.  
In this season of returns, I wait  
to hear your voice curl around my bed.



# Joan McNerny

branches etch evening sky

**Joan McNerney's** poetry has been included in numerous literary zines such as Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze, Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Blueline, Halcyon Days and included in Bright Hills Press, Kind of A Hurricane Press and Poppy Road Review anthologies. She has been nominated four times for Best of the Net.

## Night

Slides under door jambs,  
pouring through windows,  
painting my room black.

This evening was spent  
watching old movies.  
Song-and-dance actors  
looping through gay,  
improbable plots.

All my plates are put away,  
cups hanging on hooks.  
The towel is still moist.

I blow out cinnamon candles,  
wafting the air with spice.  
Listening now to heat  
sputtering and dogs  
barking at winds.

Winter pummels skeletal  
trees as the moon's big  
yellow eye haunts shadows.

## Wintry Bouquet

This December  
during wide nights  
hemmed by blackness,  
I remember roses.  
Pink yellow red violet  
those satin blooms of June.

We must wait six months  
before seeing blossoms,  
touch their brightness  
crush their scent  
with fingertips.

Now there are only  
ebony pools of winter's  
heavy ink of darkness.

Dipping into memory of  
my lips touching petals  
tantalizing sweet buds.  
My body longs for softness.

I glimpse brilliant faces of  
flowers right before me as I  
burrow beneath frosty blankets.  
Bracing against that long, cold  
nocturnal of wind and shadow.

### Blue your eyes

Blue your eyes  
this edge of snow  
in silent sky.  
Brown eyes soft  
tree bark patterns as  
yellow flicks  
sparkle in wintry sun.

And now it seems  
your eyes are green  
green as spruce  
turning to grey eyes  
glancing across as if  
from a mountainside.

Your eyes two violets  
hidden beneath frost.  
Close your eyes  
as sleepless stars  
glide through night  
in aerial ballet.

Black coal eyes  
glowing on fire  
red flames leaping  
out of eyes burning  
blue your eyes.

### Wood

Sliding through arches  
of elms sunshine  
yellow and warm as honey.

Moss crawls over mudstone  
while squirrels skip  
around tree stumps.

Imagine to be a bird  
in blue wind pushing  
air through your wing.

After the long rain  
pine trees bending  
with cones.

Branches etch evening sky  
turning razzle dazzle  
purple red citron.

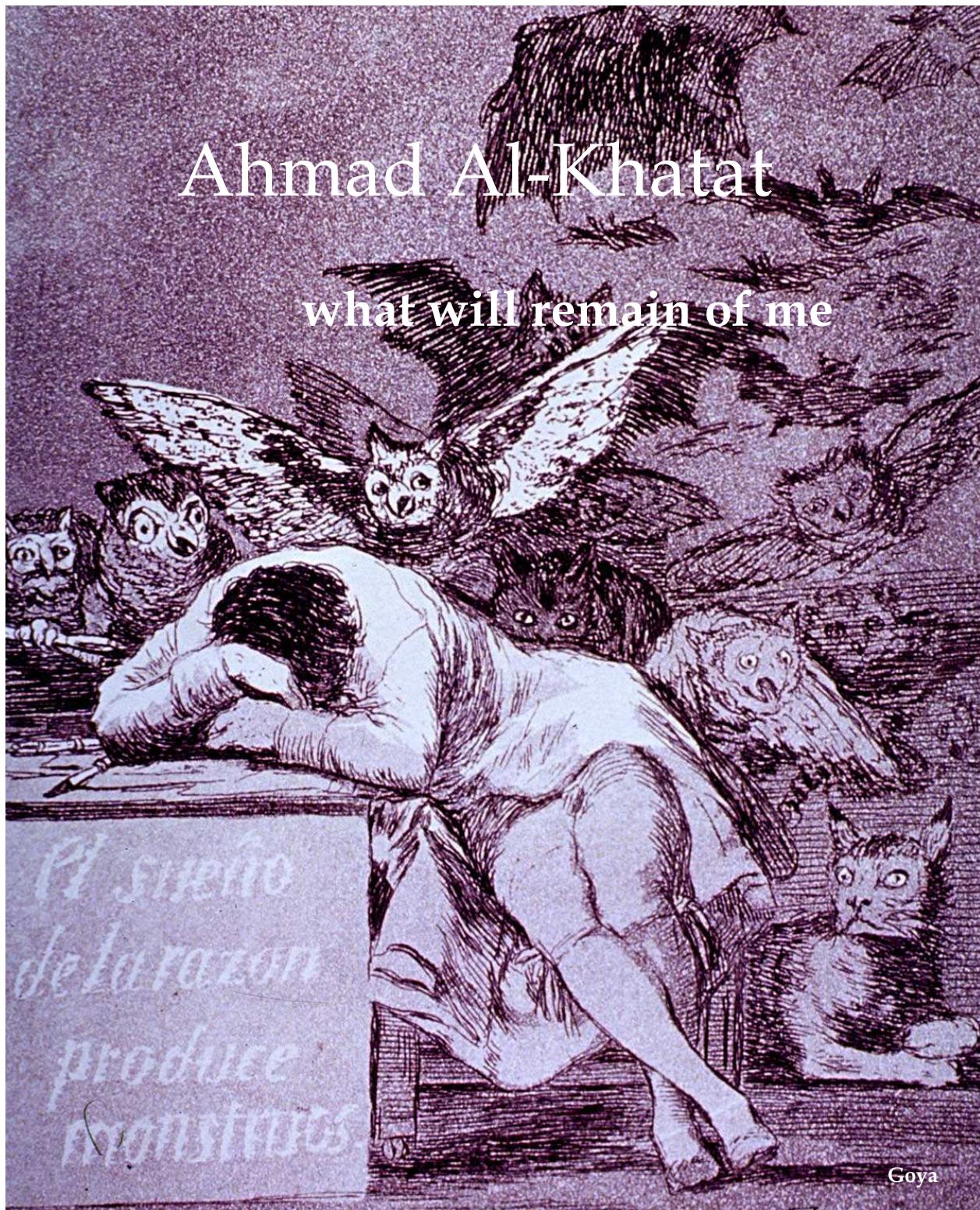
Leaves drop like butterflies  
filling the floor of forest  
with crunchy foliage.

See this snowy storm of  
light quickly quietly  
covering our moon tonight.

Long winters keep  
greatcoats of frost  
wrapped around our woods.

# Ahmad Al-Khatat

what will remain of me



Goya

**Ahmad Al-Khatat** was born in Baghdad. From Iraq, he came to Canada at the age of 10, the same age when he wrote his first poem back in the year 2000. He has been published in several press publications and anthologies all over the world. His poems have been translated into Farsi, Albanian, German, Chinese, and Serbian. Ahmad currently studies Political Science, at Concordia University in Montreal. He recently has published his two chapbooks "The Bleeding Heart Poet" and "Love On The War's Frontline". Find his poetry at Bleeding Heart Poet on Facebook.

### **The Silent Lake**

Sitting in the front of the silent lake, with a wind blowing the tree branches, to hear the voiceless conversation 'tween the leaves and the flying birds the lake is shining like my tears in the night reflecting the light of the hanging stars with the moon watching my grieves covering my woman from the heat of my nerves The wine I drink on my own will never wipe my yearnings from the scent of yours, the smile of yours, and the silky body of yours sliding above my flesh in the times where I was reaching over your lips Life is wonderful because of you, standing in a white dress, with unbuttoned buttons unzipped zipper in the back, waiting on the sunset to unwrap you for a beautiful memory with no end, but a little sleep next to your long hair

### **Death Philosophy**

Someone who loves chilling dancing drinking smoking asks me if I write with an ink?

I answer to her with yes, it's from my pain my ache my lonely my grief with the colour of death philosophy

### **Tears of The Sad Stars**

The other day; I wore my Victorian suit and I poured myself a cup of English tea. As I take my first sip, I saw a giant Viking ship, sinking quickly. In seconds everything was calm as if nothing happened but a flying dragon was eating the cold moon. Meanwhile the cookie monster was eating the cookies of the kids who died in the Viking ship my cup was not filled with tea instead it was filled with tears of the sad stars

### **Accent of Grief**

I stepped above my spirit  
to release the joys from the bottom  
of my belly button  
I broke my heart a few times  
To feel a healthy beat to enjoy  
every misery I face on my own  
I cracked my brain to recall  
the times when my father wasn't a man,  
when he knew about death  
I drank dark roast coffee  
to bitter my words from saying them  
to the clock on the dull wall  
I cried as a powerless musician  
because I knew that my blues and jazz  
have a deep accent of grief

### **Paradise**

Before you, I was nothing but a sinner  
who wanted to be a bird's feather  
to rest my journey by the gate of heaven

With you, I am a different man who  
will be a dove to fly out of the universe  
all the way inside the world of paradise

### **What Will Remain**

What will remain of me  
today or the next coming year,  
will it be worth a bird's feather  
The only grief in my bloodroot  
is the sad song of nightingales  
like a wedding with a mother in a picture frame  
In this life I could live  
foolishly and lost in problems  
with a place in darkness to weep till I die  
The tattooist of previous wars  
asked me about my homeland  
I told him that I was sold to the land of happiness  
With a friend who broke my trust,  
a woman who died before loving me,  
And parents who denied my existence  
What will remain of me, not  
an expensive pen, but an  
unreadable diary of the depths of my soul

## **A Foreign Student and Shaving Blades**

A few weeks ago

I went to the washroom in a  
Coffee shop nearby to my school  
there by the sink

I saw shaving blades

I was shocked and terrified in the moment

I went back to my table  
to study my homework, next to me  
a foreign student was talking on the phone  
he spoke the same language as I do,  
his mouth was smiling, and his eyes were  
watery creating a river of lonesome homesickness  
turns out, the shaving blades  
have a chemistry in his current life  
so do I, but I would use it on some other day of the year

## **Will Be Quiet**

I'm seeking a land, and not a homeland  
Without the aid of Google maps, instead  
I will discover a new land with a loyal pet as  
I gave up from my friends a long time ago  
I want to work like a bee, and fly with  
the birds by the beautiful blue skies  
I create a family of different plants  
with seeds of my own, and rain from God  
being a writer is being a father of griefs, and  
writing about what the city lights hid from me  
the rain drops wash the rooves of leaders  
and damage the shelters of few believers  
with my eyes I see, while nothing stops me from  
crying when I hear my adopted brother's dying  
I jump into the dead sea to cure my wounds  
as I will have new cuts with no pain as long as  
I will be drinking whiskey, and creating an unhealthy  
cloud from the smoke of my addiction to cigarettes  
being happy doesn't mean I'm sleeping without  
counting the stars, instead it's another way to  
forget that I am actually being hanged to death  
since the day, I decided to own a colour of the rainbow  
I will be quiet with the mirror, and hold  
The candle dropping more wax in my throat

# Hio Fae

From place to place



**Hio Fae** is a photographer, model, translator, and writer from North America who is currently finishing a master's degree in Iceland. And although . Hio has many interests, and surrealism, folklore, and perspectives drive pieces that Hio delicately assembles to deliver an emotional message garnished with science and history. You can find Hio on her website at [hiofae.com](http://hiofae.com) and on instagram at @hiofae.

When he was little, he thought he'd grow up to touch the sky. His mother repeatedly told him it was impossible yet he still thought he'd grow to touch a cloud. Lucian was very transparent in his way of thinking so much so that people still refer to him by his childhood nickname even throughout his adulthood: Louie. Though Lucian much preferred to be called Lou at this point or even his actual name. It's weird how nicknames never seem to go away or the manner they spark a memory from another time. This is what Lucian often thought of, the notion of time— the linear implications that constrained spacial reality.

Lucian was consumed with the idea that humans could plan out their lives around an imaginary tracking system and yet they were the only animals afraid of it. After setting up the count, humans wanted to beat their own creation; never coming to terms with the fact that they created their fears and should learn how to be at peace with them, or at least improve upon them.

Lucian was at a crossroad. He wasn't sure if it was better to destroy time or to fix it in order to stop humans from trying to define nature and from going against it.

Lucian believed that if he could figure out the logistics of time, to see if it indeed was linear through the usage of time travel, we could obtain the answers to his question: What is time?

Lucian from the get go understood the implications of his research— time travel is complex and intriguing to the point that there has been many movies and books on the subject. One idea that struck him as possible in each said pop-culture ref-

erence related to time and travel was the idea of a wormhole— an invisible space in time that could potentially teleport you anywhere. Lucian, however, was not suicidal. Yet from the thought of what he could accomplish if he ever did find a wormhole, he was willing to simply walk into it without any preparation, besides bringing a bag with water, snacks, and a parka.

Lucian finally understood why people refer to scientists as being mad— because they are willing to die for their research.

“Maybe I am suicidal... Suicidal for mankind,” Lucian said one late afternoon at a corner bar. However, he said this in front of his friend who happened to be a psychiatrist.

David, the psychiatrist, responded in an unorthodox way by saying, “I very much doubt that. If anything, you’re egocentric and whatever you are referring to is simply to have your name known by strangers.”

“Doesn’t everyone want to be someone?” remarked Lucian.

“Isn’t everyone already someone? That bartender over there probably has a family he goes to every night, not one of his own yet but still his nonetheless. What you’re saying is the same thing someone else says when they use the phrase creating a family. You see it’s all about how you look at things.”

“But that’s your opinion. Becoming someone means achieving your goal, having people besides those that you already know, knowing you. Inspiring and affecting strangers...”

“Lucian. That’s not everyone’s dream. Take me for instance. I see hundreds of patients. I volunteer. I talk to prisoners. I listen. I donate. Constantly. As much as I can afford to. I live in a one-bedroom shack I built next to some wild horses, goats, and sheep. I bike. Everywhere. I listen. I listen. And I know I have inspired at least one person. Maybe a child at career day. Maybe a prisoner. To become better. Not better in the sense of what others think is better but rather what they truly want to be. We all have so much potential. We all have pipe dreams. But to carry out those dreams to be simply known by strangers is superficial. I think there is a better phrase to what you are trying to refer to: doesn’t everyone want to be their best selves?”

Lucian thought of what his friend was saying, trying to see it from his perspective but all he could manage to say was: “I don’t think you understand my point in its entirety. When do you become someone? When you accomplish your goals or when you are recognized by others?”

David sighed, “And you don’t understand my point. You already are someone. When you become the person you want to be, or accomplish what you want to accomplish, then you truly become yourself since you managed to optimize your potential. And my, I can’t wait to meet the future you.”

David raised his glass to cheer on the bright future of his friend without bringing up the grim topic that started this whole conversation. But Lucian could not let the topic slide, as if it were going to linger in his mind.

“But how do you know I’m not suicidal or could even be in the near future?” he

said in an offended tone, as if David wasn't his closest friend. But maybe Lucian only did so because he hated the idea of being predictable.

David just shrugged after a moment's thought. "Because you're not that type of guy. And no, I'm not being generic; I know you very well and have dealt with enough patients to say that you will not willingly die without completing your work. And if you do end up dying, it's because of an accident. And if you happen to die for your research, which I presume is what you were referring to, it is all but a coincidental accident, not a suicide."

He sighed, knowing he could never win an argument against David for he was what Lucian liked to call a superior at reading emotions and intentions, which is why he often asked for advice from his friend, especially when he had to deal with people. It wasn't that Lucian was an introvert but rather he could not express himself clearly to the point that people rarely interacted with him. And he didn't make any effort to change that fact. David always told Lucian that he just needed practice but Lucian was content at just having David and his research— which included his lab.

Lucian's lab was nothing to scoff at. It was bigger than most one-story houses, having almost the same square feet as a two-story, if not more. And it was insanely clean almost as if it were cleaned every three hours, which it was by a control system and a pair of robots Lucian built five years ago. The lab was Lucian's home; he even gave up the lease to his apartment and moved into it only two years ago when he realized that he usually slept in his lab anyways and that he wouldn't want to waste those

precious minutes walking to his lab any longer. However, Lucian rather liked walking to his lab after his biweekly meet-ups with David at the corner bar, where they usually played a game of pool or had discussions.

Lucian rather hated the fact that the corner bar allowed people to smoke inside the place as if it would give it that more rustic feel of a bar from the older days – you know the type of bar you expect to find in *American Werewolf in London* or even *Trees Lounge*. “All right man, I’ve got to get going before I get lung cancer,” Lucian informed his companion.

Lucian got up from his seat, headed straight to the bartender and paid their tab. Then he walked out of the door without uttering another word to David. David, however, was not unaccustomed to this.

“I guess I’ll be taking my *adieu* also,” replied David, a few minutes later at the entrance of the bar, having one foot in the door and the other out almost as if he were in two different states, and the door was materializing that border.

“Stop romanticizing the French,” Lucian shouted as if it were his mission in life to stop David from being a linguist. Lucian remembered how he accomplished said task by opening up and asking every question imaginable. However, Lucian did not know that David deeply wanted to help others and he saw a way to do so by leaving his linguistic dreams behind.

“They changed our language, how could I not. Besides I’m in love with a French girl!”

"Don't invite me to the wedding," Lucian said across the distance.

"Don't count on it," David shouted, knowing fully well that Lucian would never give a proper goodbye, "You're going to be my best man."

Lucian smirked, thinking David was joking and kept walking home. And David chuckled, knowing very well that he was indeed not joking and went back inside the bar.

It would be hard to ask Lucian why they picked that corner bar to be the spot for all their hangouts in the first place. But maybe the answer was in the fact that this was the route Lucian liked to walk home to the most. It starts out on a main road, quiet beyond compare— a trait Lucian much admired as he was a fan of contrast, for darkness is the absence of light and night is the absence of noise. The street then wraps around a neighborhood until it reaches a park, where the famous cherry blossoms and dahlias grow. A tunnel is then seen at the very edge of the park, as if the designers wanted the park to be that green on the other side. Lucian's favorite part of the journey is walking in the tunnel with his eyes closed while managing to see how long he could last without breathing. Lucian liked to test his senses as if it were the only time where he truly felt alive.

Lucian did not realize how worn out and cold he was until he made it out of the tunnel, which is why he passed out as soon as he made it home. In the morning, Lucian had a very rude awakening and it wasn't from his dreams or even his robots but rather a strange woman.

"What are you doing in my lab?" Lucian asked in a too quiet manner for having an intruder.

"I'm just here to give you some medicine," she calmly replied.

"No need. I'm not sick. Now please get out, it's Saturday morning."

"You cannot refuse, Lucian. You know this," she said sternly.

"You're creeping me out, lady. Please leave."

"I'm calling David," she warned.

"Do as you'll like. Tell him to kiss his French girl for me."

"What French girl?" she worryingly asked.

"The one he's marrying."

The lady ran out the door crying. "Guess she was after David," remarked Lucian as he tried to go back to sleep.

David entered the room a few moments later.

"Wow. She really did went out to get you," laughed Lucian.

"You couldn't be nicer to my wife?" inquired David.

"You don't have a wife."

"Not yet. But she's going to be the one," David proclaimed.

"Huh? Last night you said you were going to marry a French girl."

"I didn't see you last night and I don't know any French girls."

After hearing this Lucian got up from his bed, only to realize that his lab was not at all the way he left it.

“Where am I?”

“You managed to escape last night. We found you near the park and brought you back to your room.”

“My room? Where’s my lab?” Lucian asked nervously.

“You don’t have a lab, Lucian.”

“What joke are you playing on me, David? It’s not funny. Not funny at all!”

Lucian remarked raising his voice with each word.

“There’s no joke. You’re sick, Lucian. I’m just taking care of you.”

“That can’t be right. I’m dreaming! I have to be.”

“You’re not. Now, come on. Take your medicine,” David said soothingly.

“Shut up. Keep the pills to yourself. Say no to drugs. Please, just give me some equipment. I’ll prove to you that I don’t belong here.”

David sighed, “We’ve been over this. You can’t research time travel, Lucian.”

“No, not time travel. That’s too vague. Wormholes.”

“Just stop Lucian. Give in already.”

“I can’t and you’re supposed to be my friend.”

“I can’t be your friend. I’m your psychiatrist.”

Lucian was too shocked by David’s news. Yet he knew he could not be delusional to this scale. There had to be another reason. That’s when it hit him. He walked into a wormhole, but when? It had to be after walking into the tunnel. Of course, the tunnel, which lead him to this parallel dimension. That explains everything, he

thought, now how do I get back, through the same tunnel?

"I'm from a parallel dimension, David!"

"Is that right? And what do you propose?"

"Help me get back. Please," Lucian begged for the first time he remembered.

David sighed again. "So you're willing to spend the rest of your life researching how to go back home?"

"Yes. Most definitely."

"And why do you think that?"

"Maybe we are all just trying to get from place to place."

"But you can never go back to the place you're nostalgic for," David remarked.

"No, of course not. Everything has to change."

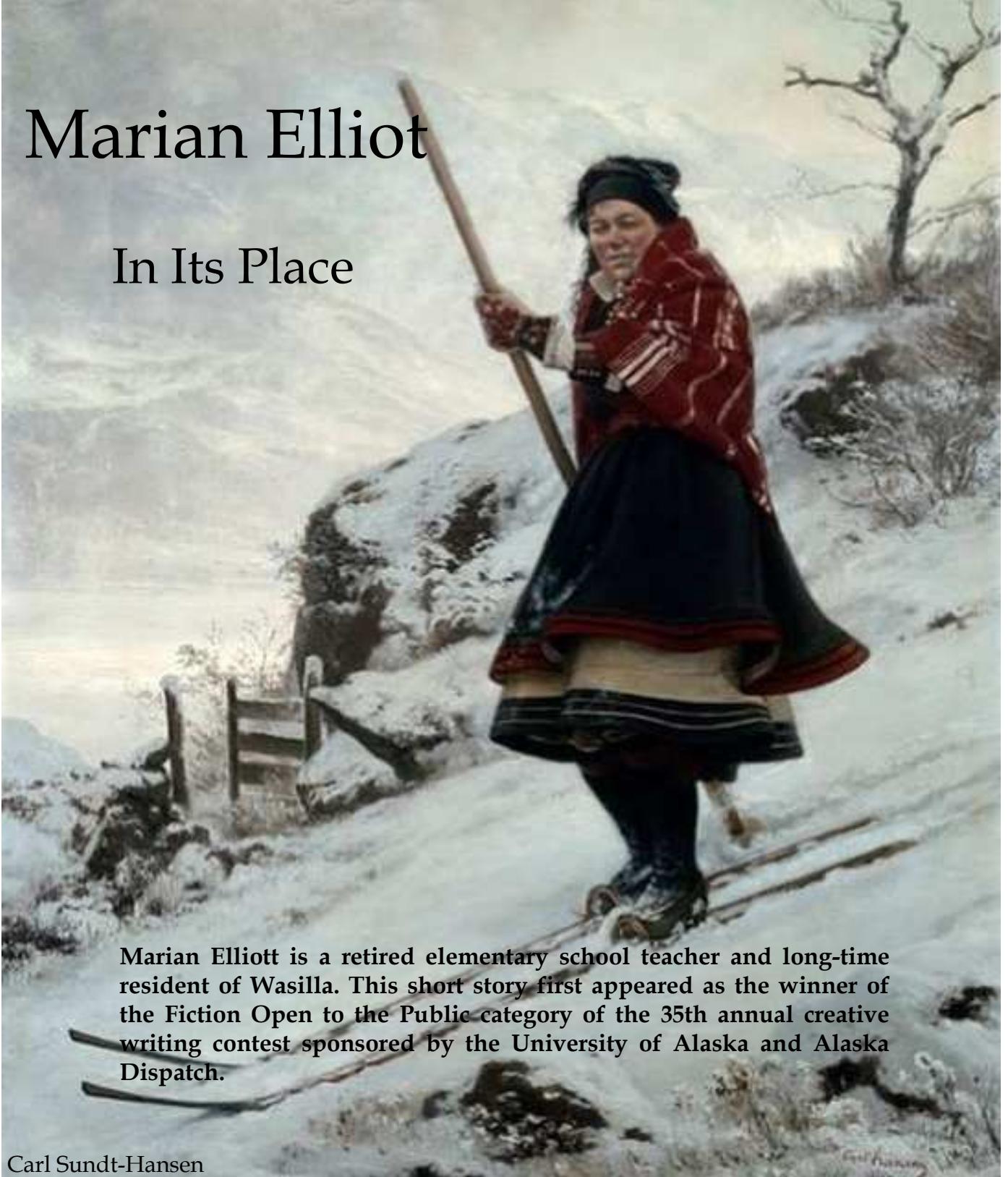
"Then why can't you accept your current state?"

"Nothing changes that drastically!" Lucian proclaimed.

David shook his head. "If you're a scientist, you should know better than that." He then proceeded to force-feed Lucian pills. Not a sound was made after that, the automatic lights dimmed. 'If truth could be found in the light, what could be found in darkness,' Lucian thought before he drifted off to a place no one could ever visit.

# Marian Elliot

## In Its Place



Marian Elliott is a retired elementary school teacher and long-time resident of Wasilla. This short story first appeared as the winner of the Fiction Open to the Public category of the 35th annual creative writing contest sponsored by the University of Alaska and Alaska Dispatch.

Carl Sundt-Hansen

In the early morning dark, the glow of a still-brilliant moon streamed through the cabin window and splashed against the dark logs of the cabin wall. The bright patch of light called Jeanne from her sleep, stirring her in her bed. In her half-awake state, she realized the empty sheets beside her were cold. Dan must have left early to snowshoe his trapline. He would take advantage of the full moon to light his way. She had a dreamlike memory of him pulling the bed quilt up around her shoulders, saying he would be back before dark.

Jack was onto her wakefulness now, in his usual spot beside the bed, his paw pulling at the blankets while his busy tail drummed on the bedside table. She turned to give him a pet. He pushed his muzzle beneath her chin, urging her up with his cold wet nose. "OK, boy, I'm coming." Unfolding her achy joints, she dangled her legs over the side of the bed and lowered her feet into her waiting boots sitting ready to save her from the cold floor. Embers still burning red in the wood stove told her that Dan must have stoked the fire before he left. He would want to keep the cabin warm. She added a piece of dry birch to catch on the smoldering coals and turned the damper down.

At the front door, Jack patiently waited, his nose pointing the way out. Jeanne pulled her anorak over her pajamas and when she opened the door the cold on her face reminded her to get her hat. Outside, the setting moon was throwing long shadows and lacy patterns across the snow. The yard was bathed in the white light of moon glow, bright enough for her to see her way to the outhouse.

Jack stood by the door on her return, happy to cut short his morning romp. He followed her inside looking for a treat. Jeanne lit the lanterns, made coffee and toast, then curled up next to Jack on the couch with her quilt and her book — a good one, Alice McDermott, her favorite author at the moment.

Jeanne could easily read the winter away with so many good books lining the shelves over the bed, sitting in piles on the table next to the chair, on the floor next to the table. They filled more shelves up in the loft. But Jeanne was wary of reading the winter away. In the midst of January, winter was always lurking, and Jeanne was on her guard, lest winter grab hold. So when the chickadees arrived at the feeder at first light, she put the book down and got up to take on the day.

Jeanne was wise to the ways of winter. She knew how it could fill the cabin with the dark and the cold, lure her into her bed, wrap her in down, and when it had her sufficiently seduced, seep slowly into her soul. Winter made it too much of an effort to get out of bed. It rendered her dormant, like a bear asleep in her den. So she kept an eye out, watched for it creeping in, did what was needed to keep it in its place. She kept dry spruce and birch stacked by the stove ready to feed the fire. She burned the lanterns to cancel the gloom. She baked. Bread and cookies often filled the cabin with delicious smells of good things to eat. Whenever it got too quiet, there was music on the radio to fill her ears.

And if winter still skulked in the corners and rattled at the door, she left the books behind and went to feast her eyes on the sun. It had been weeks since the sun stopped coming to Jeanne's cabin, stopped rising high enough in the sky to show its

face above the southern ridge. Since then, her valley sat in a dim light, a subdued world of neutral shades and white. Without the sun, the green in the spruce seemed black and birches' subtle pink and amber faded from the landscape. Willow and alders, rose and berry bushes were still sticking out of the snow, all painted from the same colorless palette of grays. Even the birds were dressed for the season: variations of black and white feathered the chickadees, woodpeckers, gray jays and ravens. Ptarmigans changed to white feathers just for winter. Down by the creek, the elusive dipper matched the dull dark gray of the water without the dapples and gleams revealed in its feathers by the sun.

But when alpenglow warmed the far-off tundra hills and the frosty treetops began to glint and sparkle above the cabin, when she could see hints of blue in the winter white sky, Jeanne was reminded of the sun behind the ridge. She looked forward to the day when sunshine would finally fall on the snow at the top of the south-facing slopes and she would mark its progress, watching every day as it moved another foot or so down the hill and worked its way to the valley floor, knowing one morning, finally, the sun itself would show its face and splash its warmth through the cabin windows onto the kitchen table and up against the pine paneling of the pantry door, and bring color to her world again.

### **Ski to the sun**

And while she waited she went to find it where she could. Today, she would ski out of the valley and head for the north ridge. She knew of a high bench where she would have a clear view all the way to the river. If she could get there in the short window that was her day, she would look to the west and see the sun in all its warm glory when it came out from behind the hill and hung over the river, only briefly, already getting ready to go down.

Jeanne wore her wide backcountry skis with strap bindings that would accommodate her winter boots. Her feet would be warm. In her daypack, she carried a thermos of hot tea and some trail bars. She had dog biscuits for Jack. She grabbed some hand warmers to put in her gloves.

Yesterday's light snow covered the debris of twigs and spruce cones and birch seeds the wind had gathered in the trail. The fresh cover provided the best conditions for a perfect glide, not too slick and icy, not too deep, and cold enough not to pack up under her heels.

Jeanne followed the trail out of the yard and along the narrow ledge cut into the cliffside behind the cabin. Dan had spent a long-ago summer with pick and shovel carving out this trail so they wouldn't have to climb the steep hill, at one time, their only way out of the valley. On the other side of the hill, the way became more gradual. In the canyon below, the creek made hardly a murmur, muffled by mounds of snow along its banks. Jack trotted before her, full of energy, grabbing bites of the snow while his tail spun in circles, his happy way of wagging. Mostly wolf, he was in his element, transformed in the outdoor air to something more wild than the sleepy cabin dog of the morning.

### Uphill struggle

Just past the cliff, Jeanne came to her first challenge, a short downhill slope. Not very steep, but steep enough to get her going downhill faster than she would prefer when she was just starting out, she approached it with caution. It wouldn't do to fall and watch the precious daylight tick away while she dealt with the bother of getting back on her feet. A little snow plowing with the skis, and she came to the end of it, confidence restored for the trip ahead. Ten more minutes along the trail, it was time to work her way up to the top of the ridge. The route rose through a wide clearing, following natural contours diagonally up the slope.

She went straight at the first incline, intent on assaulting it quickly and getting it behind her, only to find herself gliding backward to the bottom in short order. Tromping forward once again, slapping her wide skis down hard for traction, stabbing poles into the ground, using all her strength to hold herself in place, only got her a few more feet forward than her first attempt, and once again she was sliding backward down the hill. All of her effort was only wearing her out. When the next try was no better than the first, she gave it up. She would have to take it one side-step at a time. She moved her skis off the packed trail, into deep snow and set them parallel to the slope. Sinking a good 3 inches or more into the powder, just deep enough for a good hold without making the climb too hard, she side-stepped up the hill. Slow and steady played in her head all the way to the top.

Encouraged by having the challenge of climbing the slope behind her, Jeanne fell into the pleasant rhythm of kicking and gliding across the snow, a new spring in her stride. Jack frolicked along before her, pointing out every weasel track and dainty vole trail and a scattering of tracks she thought might be ptarmigan. He poked his nose in all the holes he discovered, then lifted his head to scan the countryside for what his nose would find. A set of fresh moose tracks crossed the trail, headed toward the creek, and now Jack stood pointing that way, head slightly lowered, on alert. When Jeanne caught up, he would lope ahead only to stop and take up his curious stance a few yards farther down the trail. Since they were alone in the woods, possibly full of creatures they couldn't see, Jeanne found his behavior disquieting but she shrugged it off. If it was a moose, she told herself, Jack's presence would keep it away.

Up ahead, amid a grove of trees just off the trail, Dan had built a bench for summer trail breaks, when the way into the cabin was on foot with all the gear and supplies on his back. A good spot to take a break and have some tea. She found the bench buried under a pile of snow. Remembering the time she carelessly plopped down on the snow-covered bench, and, in her slippery ski pants, promptly slid right down on the ground, she made a point of clearing the snow off the seat, then used her skis to tamp down the snow in front of the bench. Carefully she maneuvered the tails of her skis backward under the bench until she inched up against the edge of it and lowered herself carefully down. She had a comfortable perch. Jack came and sat on the packed snow in front of her, watching her open her pack, knowing a treat was on the way.

Jeanne didn't take long to drink her tea and get back on the trail. She needed to

keep moving to stay warm and the sun wasn't going to wait. Soon she and Jack came to the spot where she needed to veer off toward her lookout spot. In the deeper snow, her progress slowed somewhat, and ahead of her, Jack soon tired of breaking trail. It wasn't long before he decided to follow behind, her ski tracks providing him a path. After winding through a stand of birch and spruce, she came to the top of a small rise and looked out over a field of alders right in her path. Alders were a good thing to avoid. Some lay buried beneath the snow, which tended to collapse into the alder branches and more than a few times had trapped her skis.

### **Worn out**

So she skirted around the edge of the alder patch and found herself on the rim of an open meadow, a deep bowl. She could see where a stream ran beneath the snow by the depression it left tracing its course. Water was probably running freely under the snow and the last thing she needed was to get wet. She scouted out a route where she thought the stream bed appeared narrower, thinking her skis would better span the depression there, but just into her descent she realized she may have cut her path too far to the right. A deep hole loomed ahead. Too late to correct, her left ski would miss it, but her right ski crashed down into the hole, catching her in full glide and sending her sprawling into the snow.

She ended up with one ski buried, the soft powder giving out beneath her. As she got her backpack off and worked to dislodge her ski, her immediate concern was to get away from the stream bed as best she could so that her floundering and sinking in the soft snow wouldn't leave her wallowing in the stream. She began wriggling through the snow, pushing on her poles to get purchase. When she thought she must be a safe distance away, she began the task of getting off the ground. She was well past the age of agility where she could just bounce back up on her feet, particularly in soft unpacked snow with no firm platform to lean on. The open bowl she had gone down had no handy bush or tree in arm's reach. She needed to resort to using her poles to push herself up, but she had never mastered this particular maneuver. Each time she thought she almost could get up, her skis would slide out from under her and she would end up back in the snow. She needed more strength to keep the skis in place. Worn out from her efforts, she laid back in the snow to catch her breath.

Gazing up at the sky, watching the clouds go by, she was thinking how lovely it was just lying there in peace, how pleasant to just wait for someone to come to her rescue. She let the tension drain away. But her reverie was soon interrupted by winter's cold seeping through her many layers of clothes. There was no one in the neighborhood to come to the rescue, and Dan wouldn't come looking for her until after dark. Jack was standing over her, urging her up, impatient with this turn of events. She would have to rescue herself, and that meant she had to face what she was trying to avoid. The skis would have to come off.

Her bindings were not easily released. She would need two hands to open them – one to press the clip holding the strap that went around her boot, while the other pulled the strap out. She bent her knees to pull her leg up and bring the bindings

within her reach, but with nothing to lean against, she found it was difficult to get a good grip. One more dreamy reverie watching the clouds before a last-ditch effort. This time the binding opened and she pulled her boot free. With one ski off, she was able to get up without removing the second ski. It finally occurred to her: she should have just done that to begin with. In a hurry now, aware that this misadventure had used up much of her precious time, she got her boot back once again secured to her ski. Working her way across the depression and up the other side of the bowl, she reminded herself to find another way home.

Deep in the woods, Jeanne skied in the stillness that comes with new snow. Nothing stirred. She noted no calls from the birds. Nothing to hear but the rhythmic swishing of skis.

Then something else. It seemed to come from the skis, a strange and subtle beat. She wondered what could be wrong, if her bindings might be coming loose. But it wasn't her skis. It was somewhere far off, behind her. She thought perhaps the wind, then remembered there was no wind and in any case what she was hearing was far too rhythmic. It beat a more slow, steady pace than was natural for the wind, more human-like. She came to a complete stop thinking to quiet her racing heartbeat, her rising panic dampened somewhat by the lack of any concern in her usually watchful companion. Not even a curious prick to his ears.

"Do you hear that?" she whispered to him, but he merely wagged his tail and looked at her quizzically, his head tilted slightly, like he was trying to understand what the question was. It was awkward to turn to look back toward the drumming behind her, steadily coming closer, but she made the effort to twist about, and, as she did, her gaze followed the sound up into the sky. There, a solitary raven flying above them, his head cocked just enough to look down at the little tableau on the ground, his wings beating with a steady *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. She stood for a long moment in awe watching the raven, listening to its wings moving the air as it worked its way down to the river.

### **Sweet taste of triumph**

When she started out again, the awe of that moment went with her. How to explain it? The full measure of quiet doesn't fit well into words. Words are inadequate to touch the feel of it, the palpable presence, the sense of something alive. She thought it ironic that silence is spoken of in terms of the sounds it brings to the ears. The drop of a pin, the little squeaks in the snow beneath the weight of a snowshoe, one's own breathing, the rhythmic beat of a bird's wings in flight. "Today it was so quiet, I could hear a raven fly."

Pressing on now, Jeanne soon found herself near the edge of the ridge looking down on the valley and knew she was getting close. A new bit of incline was before her and she headed for it straight on. Slapping her skis down hard, getting the bases to grip, seemed so simple when not an hour earlier she couldn't make it work.

At the top of the hill, her destination just ahead, she followed a curve around a knoll, and finally came upon a golden light drenching the snow, gleaming on every

frosted twig and curling tendril. Shafts of light streaming through the gaps in the trees were full of sparkles, frozen moisture in the air glinting in the sunlight and floating gently down to settle on the snow, a dusting of diamonds. She turned west, and there it was: the full face of the sun shining through the trees. It hung framed in the canyon where the south ridge gives way to the river before rising back up on the other side. She moved a few feet for an unobstructed view, and she gazed at the fullness of it, a quiet version of its summer brilliance. Warm shades of pink and yellow painted the sky. With Jack sitting quietly beside her, she drank it all in and let it fill her up with the sweet taste of triumph. As she watched the sun angle low toward the horizon, she was tempted to see it all the way down, but she had to think about getting back. She didn't know what the woods had in store for her, and there was always the chance she could run out of light. She had found what she had come for; she had conquered one more day of dark. She let it go and started for home.

Jeanne took a different route back to the cabin, avoiding the shortcut and sticking to the trail following the edge of the ridge above her valley. She hoped it posed no surprises. Jack, tired now, had lost his frisky edge and was trotting steadily along behind her.

"I know, you're tired, boy. Me too."

Nearing home in the gathering twilight, she looked down from the ridge to a welcoming yellow glow shining warm in the cabin windows. Dan was home. He'd have the fire crackling, something smelling good on the stove. He'd have good stories to tell of his day in the woods. She would have some stories of her own.

She quickened her pace.

# Lucas D. Sutpen III

## Seal Lions at Cape Arago

**Lucas D. Sutpen III** is an educator who lives in Oregon with his wife and 4 kids. His highest Boy Scouts of America rank attained was Star Scout. His favorite novel is **The Godfather** by Mario Puzo

"Hello."

"Hey man, this is Kevin."

"Uh—Hey," I said as my heart began to race.

"I talked with Conner and he told me you'd gone to rehab."

"That's right."

"What would you think about coming over tomorrow for dinner?"

"Really? You'd want to see me after our last—"

"Damn right," he cut me off in a reaffirming way. I didn't say anything. I held the phone tight as the sweat started forming on my palms and my face flushed.

"Hello. You still there?"

"Yeah."

"It's all right."

Silence held its grip on my throat for a few seconds before I was able to respond in a low voice, "You know that wasn't me back then, right?"

"That's why I'm inviting you over. I want to see the *new* you."

"Did Conner tell you I'd changed? That the old me is back?"

"He told me I really needed to call you."

"I'm sure he did. He wanted me to call you, too."

"I hope you know I would never hold anything over your head. I'm just glad you're alive. Please come over. I live on Eleventh and Umatilla."

"By the Hound?"

"Yeah. See you about seven-ish?"

"You know I feel like a real shit bag, don't you," I pleaded. It was unnecessary. "I'm ashamed. Shame burns like a motherfucker, you know? I let a lot of people down."

"I'm sure it does burn, but you didn't let me down. Remember, I did Alateen: I

didn't cause it, can't control it, and can't cure it. I had loving detachment. I had to let you live how you had to live."

"All right, I'll be there."

"That's great. I'll see you at seven."

"Seven. Good-bye, Kevin."

"Bye."

Kevin had been my roommate before the fires of addiction first started, and he'd moved out in response to the disease's progression. I didn't think anything was wrong at the time he'd left and the shield of denial was steadfast in protecting me from any disruption in use. Conversely, it also kept any humanity from getting out. As a result, I lost the ability to relate to anyone except fellow female junkies, and avoided the outside world except when it was time to get more drugs. Snorting gave way to smoking, which in turn, gave way to injecting. And gainfully employed gave way to homeless, jailed and subsequent court-ordered rehab.

I had a lot on my mind when I hung up the phone and then later as I pulled up to his house.

-II-

As I walked up the stairs, trepidation and anxiety pulsed through my veins. It was pissing rain all day, and had been for the past week. I was pretty melancholic, suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder on top of low dopamine levels. My feet were heavy. My arms were shaking as I knocked on his door.

"Good to see you, man!"

"It's good to see you, Kevin. I'm—"

He threw his arms around me. "C'mon in! I need your help getting dinner ready." Surprisingly, any shame I had vanished.

I wiped the beginnings of tears from my eyes. "Can you forgive me? I was

sick."

"Brother—of course I do."

I sighed, loosening the tightness in my chest I'd been holding since last night.

He grabbed my shoulder and looked me in the eye. "It's in the past. As far as I know there aren't any time machines around so let's focus on the future, particularly the immediate future. Can you smell it?"

"Smells pretty fucking good."

We had shrimp and fettuccine noodles in cream sauce. It was his specialty consisting of leeks, garlic, onions and green bell peppers sautéed in butter with a reduction of heavy whipping cream. We put the cold bay shrimp on top of the sauce and pasta and sat at his table with candles and Donald Fagen in the background.

"This feels kind of gay," I said.

"What the candles and music?"

"Well, yeah. And the darkness and the fact that you're not a woman."

"This guy I work with is gay. He says he's 'queerer than a football bat,' and he's the one that got me into it. He said that if I was secure in my sexuality, I should do it regardless of the guest's gender. He said it makes the food taste better. I don't know if it has an effect on the taste of the food, but the ambiance definitely has a positive effect on the mood."

"Yeah, I guess it feels cooler in a way."

Kevin's cat Jimmy jumped on the table just then, and Kevin picked him up and put him in the other room.

"There's a blast from the past. How's Jimmy?"

"He's all right. He's older, but it doesn't seem to bother him very much. He caught a bird yesterday. I looked out the window and saw that he had a feather sticking out his mouth. I went out on the porch and he had a bird next to him. He was showing his catch. He was proud and wanted some validation."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Validate him."

"Fuck yeah, I did."

We both laughed.

"Speaking of pets, I got a beagle. Well, I inherited a beagle when Diane took off never to be seen again."

"I heard she was still runnin' and gunnin'."

"Well, she was getting high the entire time I was in rehab and she was bangin' some other guy. I was at work when she called and told me she couldn't be around me anymore. She told me what she'd been doing and that she was leaving. 'Course she waited until *after* we'd had sex to tell me; asked if I could watch Seth until she got her own place. That was over six months ago and I haven't seen or heard from her since."

"That's a fucking shame."

"I like to think that I made her an addict, but my sponsor keeps telling me she had a choice. I don't know. If I hadn't of given her that first hit, would she have still become an addict?"

"Some shit you just gotta let go. It happened. You've changed. You're proof that a person doesn't have to go on like that. Anyway, you got a beagle named Seth?"

"Yes. I love the name, too. He's fucking huge. Beagles range from twenty to forty pounds and this guy weighs sixty pounds. He's not fat, either. When I take him on a walk it's hard to control him. He's ripped with muscle."

"I'm surprised you decided to keep him being how much you used to talk about not wanting a dog."

"Yeah, well I especially didn't like beagles. They usually yap in that high-pitched bark all day long. But Seth's different. His size makes his barks deeper, huskier. And the longer I've had him, the better I understand him."

"How's that?"

"Well—he's got five different barks and they all mean something different. Like after he's been out for a while, checked the perimeter, and then wants back in, he lets out a little yelp. Not too loud. Just enough to say 'You can let me in now!' When I go to get him a treat, he'll bark short and strong telling me to hurry the fuck up, give him the treat. When he catches a scent, he'll let out this high, sustained howl telling me he's on to something...like if there's a squirrel or cat about. When I leave for work, he bays loud and sorrowful. It breaks my heart sometimes, but then I remind myself its more part of his melodramatic disposition than genuine sadness; his powers of manipulation at work. But my favorite is when I've been gone all day at work and I come home and he hears the gate open and shut. He lets out a series of barks in sets of three and it sounds just like the sea lions at Cape Arago. I call him my little sea lion."

"I know that sound. It's been awhile since I've been out there."

"It's been awhile for me, too. I came home a few nights ago and it was dark. He heard the gate closing and started to bark. Three yelps, pause and repeat. I usually go right in, but this time I sat down outside the front door and listened to him bark. I listened to his bark and its rhythm and just sat there pretending I was sitting on the ledge at Cape Arago. I remembered what it was like to sit and listen to the sea lions barking, the wind blowing hard and mine and Raina's heat keeping each other warm under the big Indian blanket I always carried in the trunk. There were no cigarettes back then. No craving to smoke at all. There was no nagging, addictive voice to fight and convince that sobriety is the way to a happier life. There was just me, my girl, my car, and our bodies generating heat. And I knew that she loved me and I would do anything for her. That was the drug back then. I actually went there as I sat outside my door listening to Seth barking."

Kevin leaned back and lit a cigarette. I could see his face from the glow of his cigarette as he took a drag. "Sounds like a damn fine memory. You'll make many more of 'em."

"Yeah?"

“You bet. Don't let nostalgia trick you into thinking that the best of times have come and gone. That's bullshit. Just keep reminding yourself that you're making the nostalgia of the future every day.”

I nodded in agreement as we sat there. I was full of good food, and a warm drowsiness began to wash over me. I was comfortable and safe. I could hear the faint thrums of the cars as they passed by and realized I was making the nostalgia of the future right then and there. I knew that this might be the first happy memory I'd associate with sobriety when my future self looked back – years down the road. There was no mix of confusion or slurred distortion of reality. I was completely in the present. I was alive, not just existing.

And with crystal clear vision, I saw the street lights and neon lights of 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue as they shone through the raindrops on the window. The colors bent and refracted on Jimmy's grey fur as he lay curled up, asleep on the couch.

# Kendall Evans

## Martian Gardens

**Kendall Evans**'s work has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Mythic Delirium, Strange Horizons, Analog, Weird Tales, Outposts of Beyond, Dreams & Nightmares, Space & Time, Spectral Realms, The Magazine of Speculative Poetry, Nebula Award Showcase, and numerous other fantasy and science fiction and literary magazines. Sold insurance, delivered parts, talked to customers. Father of five. Grandfather of five. He's still doing what's important.

*Even before he reaches the sandstorm, winds buffet the skimmer like a toy. As insubstantial as a scale model, he decides—and not much more responsive. Amazing that the thin atmosphere of Mars can be so forceful. Time and again he fights the nose's tendency to veer in the direction of the wind's sheer. When the computer automatically takes control, he slaps the code that overrides the computer and continues to argue with the force of the storm.*

*Only a tiny portion of the northernmost eroded impact ridge of Hellas Basin is visible; beyond, all is obscured by airborne dust and sand.*

*Riding the lurches as gracefully as possible, he stares fixedly ahead, mentally locked onto his target, the Cyclops Station in Hellas Basin. His one-track mind is so focused on piloting the skimmer, so zeroed-in, that the Russian meteorologist Anatoli Koplov, dozing beside him in the skimmer's cab, nearly ceases to exist.*

*Ahead, it does not look like a wall of sand—more like a brownish fog or haze. But it hits them like a wall, the sunlight rapidly dimming toward darkness, an audible thud followed by lurching of the craft, a series of wrenches and the bucking of a force untamed threatening to tear control away from him.*

*Anatoli startles awake; blinks uncomprehending at the screens. The whine of the wind has become an unremitting thunder of particles sanding and scouring the body of the craft. Both wheel and stick, in left hand and right, fight to free themselves from his clenched grip. He would swear he can hear not only the scratch of sand along the skimmer's flanks, but individual gritty impacts within the overall roar of sound, reminiscent of an ocean surf's roar magnified.*

*Visibility lost, he pilots by instruments alone.*

*"Mother of God, Gregory; are you feeling suicidal today?"*

*Saying this, Anatoli reclaims his existence.*

*Gregory glances quickly sideward, but loses none of his intensity. "I'll climb up higher, see if it's clear ahead."*

*"Climbing higher isn't going to do a damn bit of good." The Russian checks their position; elevation. "The station's still at least forty miles south of us. You know it's just going to get worse the farther south we go. What say I take over the controls?"*

*Ignoring the other's suggestion, he maneuvers the skimmer into a steep climb. After about thirty seconds the sand begins to thin, but it remains a swirling, intermittent presence. He has leveled off too soon. Haven't storms past huddled closer to the surface of Mars? This one, driving north so much more swiftly than forecast, seems like an all-time blow.*

*Anatoli raises his voice to be heard over the storm, and his words join together like a passionate song. "Give this up," Anatoli shouts. "If the skimmer goes down, we are dead men. Even if we manage a forced landing instead of a crash, no one will be able to rescue us for a week or two. Not until the storm blows over. We don't have the supplies for that. I don't want to lose ten-twenty pounds. Hadn't planned on dieting or dying. Turn around, Gregory, my friend. Now."*

*He glances over at Koplov, who has long ago mastered casual English and its colloquialisms, but now, especially now, made distraught by Greg's risky piloting, delivered them in a thick Russian accent.*

*The other looks pushed to his limits. Gregory knows he's been driving himself and the skimmer too hard. Too far. Everyone wants to take control, it seems; the computer, the storm itself—and if the storm doesn't yank control of the craft away from him, Koplov looks as if he might attempt it forcibly.*

*Arriving home late the evening before the storm broke, Gregory said: "Got some Martians coming over to visit tonight."*

Maura barely smiled, if at all, and their son Josh either did not hear or outright ignored him. It was an old joke, amusing the first few times, but growing tired – and perhaps he was the only one who had ever been truly amused.

But beyond the joke there was another layer of intent. He thought of himself as a Martian. This world so far from Earth his adopted home. And he tried to think of his family and friends in the same way. As Martians.

“Robbie and Cassandra?” Maura asked.

Distracted with his musings, he did not notice her words. He had been invited to give a guest lecture to the high school class on the ancient history of Mars. His audience would be a mere handful of students, since the adult population of Mars was so predominant – but Josh would be one of them, and he wanted his lecture to be as interesting as possible. He kept thinking of time traveling back to Mars as it had been in its more active phases, perhaps even possessing an open sea of water, but by itself the image wasn’t strong enough. And then he thought of using the terraforming Cyclops Stations as a metaphor, suggesting they were like time machines. It seemed exactly what he wanted: an unrealistic, far-reaching image, but fun and effective.

“Gregory!” his wife said. Was there anger in the snap of her voice? It seemed she was angry with him all too often, lately.

“I’m sorry? I was kind of lost in thought.”

“I’m asking who our guests are. Are Roberta and Cassie coming over?”

“Right,” he said, still preoccupied. “Of course. Who else? I ran into Robbie when she landed with the spare Cyclops parts. She suggested they stop by.” Roberta Alcazar, like Gregory, worked on construction, helping to expand the colony’s facilities – although more and more of Gregory’s time was spent attempting to maintain the terraforming stations. Cassie Johnson – short for Cassandra – worked with Maura, maintaining the residential and park gardens.

His fourteen-year-old son groaned. “It’s boring when they come over and talk all evening.” At least Josh’s protestations sounded good-natured.

“Is your repair mission still scheduled for tomorrow?” Maura asked.

“The satellite data says maybe. Anatoli and I plan to give it a shot anyway.” He replied in an absent-minded way; his thoughts were still on the lecture.

“I need to dictate something,” he said, standing before the entertainment console. The screen came to life. “Think of the Cyclops stations not as terraforming towers but as time machines, taking us back four billion years ago to the Noachian era of Mars, when the depressed northern polar region of our world known as Vastitas Borealis may have been an ancient ocean.” His words appeared on the screen as he spoke them. “Proponents of this theory refer to it as Oceanus Borealis, which, if it ever truly existed – and I like to believe that it did – engulfed the entire north polar region, which averages 4 kilometers below the mean elevation of Mars as a whole . . .”

It was rough, a verbal draft that would need revising, but it would serve as the basis for his lecture’s introduction.

“We intend to resurrect that ancient sea,” he concluded, satisfied for the moment.

More worrisome than Josh's occasional teenage brooding was Maura's apparent unhappiness. He knew it was there, slowly building, though she had not given voice to it. He had to do *something*, before it became chronic. Was it because he spent so much time servicing the Cyclops Stations, trying to keep them running? The pun in "servicing" suddenly occurred to him. Yet he had never been unfaithful to Maura, even if his work did keep him away from their underground quarters for long stretches of time.

Their subterranean habitat was fluidly modular, cunningly constructed; he raised both hands and made a pushing motion, preparing for their guests – his gestures stylized, like some fictional or cinematic sorcerer enacting magic. The house computer responded to his signals. Airstream cabinets separated and rotated away from him as the Martian hologram receded and the room expanded. Cycles of possible furnishings turned into view and then flipped upside down and out of sight until he settled on a semi-circular divan surrounding a fire pit. Not a true fire pit; there were no flames. But porous rocks like cooled lava, rust colored, surrounded by a circle of bricks, radiated heat welcome on a cold world; and concealed lighting beneath made the rocks appear to glow as if immersed in fire.

He crossed the room to the diorama, much like a museum display, on the opposite side of the living room. He had seen the diorama so many times he tended to forget it was there, but it caught his eye now and he stood as if mesmerized by the small garden – a real garden – backgrounded by a 3D computer-generated hologram of the Martian landscape as it would appear once the terraforming project had been completed. Or as it had originally been theorized the world ten meters above their underground complex would one day look.

So beautiful, the gardens Maura had designed; one to every home in the warren. Each garden unique and beautiful, possessed of *feng shui* simplicity and elegance. The garden before him contained rich succulents. Blossoming flowers dominated in the Iguala's home, that of their nearest neighbors. One of his favorites was the rainforest garden in Anatoli's residence, big colorful bromeliads, with, higher up in a dwarf tree's branches, clustered tillandsias, growing every-which-way, an otherworldly look to them.

Like all the gardens in all the underground homes, designed by Maura; planted by Maura; maintained by his wife and her crew. He had always admired her work, amazed by a talent that he did not possess. New domiciles were slowly being completed; new gardens created. And she also kept the hydroponics tanks in balance.

Unfortunately, the latest computer simulations – as detailed in Koplov's report – contradicted earlier suppositions, as they learned more about Mars and its present meteorology. The outlook now suggested a sub-arctic bleakness at best might one day be achieved, unless financial and technological investments enabled new terraforming strategies.

Koplov had suggested a fleet of computerized satellites, vast orbital mirrors to reflect and concentrate sunlight onto Mars' surface. It was extremely problematical whether a project of such magnitude could ever win approval back on Earth. There was even talk the next world congress might vote the present terraforming efforts, already far over their initial budget, out of existence, shutting down the cloud-spitting Cyclops Towers.

Terraforming Mars would require centuries of dedication; yet after mere decades Earth's commitment was already wavering.

He was still staring into the illusory depths of a green, hypothetical Martian plain rich with vegetation, craggy brown mountain ridges rising beyond, unreal as a mirage, when Cassandra and Roberta arrived, the entry door's buzz breaking his trance.

He opened the door upon the maze of passageways honeycombed beneath the Martian surface, leading to all the other residences, to the hydroponics gardens, the spacious subterranean park, the air-circulating and recycling cubicles, cafeteria, recreational and educational facilities, and assorted maintenance and power generation chambers. There were many doors, each capable of air-locking the underground maze into separately pressurized zones if an overall drop in pressure ever occurred.

Roberta and Cassandra: a couple. Husband and wife? Wife and wife? He didn't bother with definitions and distinctions; they were friends and co-workers.

Tall Cassandra, red-brown hair clipped short, ducked through the low entry followed by her partner. Roberta's face appeared almost expressionless as she entered, and there was something sheepish about the way she lingered behind her partner — perhaps a reluctance. Gregory believed that he could see this atypical mood in his friend, read it, and yet he had no idea what it meant. And Roberta's evident hesitancy emphasized the slowness of walking in a gravity not too far over a third of Earth's

Cassandra smiled and embraced him. "So good to see you, Greg!" Always so warm and sincere, her smile; difficult to resist such a winning personality. As if she cared deeply about every colonist she encountered. Perhaps she did.

During the initial polite chatter, hellos exchanged, he led them forward into the living room, split-level expansiveness opening before them, spacious horizontally and high-ceilinged, to compensate for and conceal the fact that they lived like burrowing animals dug in below a hostile surface world, shielded from radiation.

He held up a deck of cards and gestured, but Roberta shrugged the suggestion aside. "We need to talk." And the words, which might otherwise sound an ominous note, were contradicted when Cassandra produced two carefully wrapped gifts from her carry-all.

"And we brought a new game along with us," Roberta added.

Both gifts surprised him. One was obviously a wrapped bottle of booze, suggesting a celebration was in order. Usually the couple brought an expensive, exotic coffee imported from Earth, so that Maura could brew it up for the evening, and it never came giftwrapped.

Cassandra, he noticed, looked flushed with good health and happiness; "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were pregnant," Maura said, anticipating his own comment by an instant.

Cassandra said nothing but grinned broadly. Roberta smiled too, saying, "Let's get this champagne into some glasses, first. Then we can talk."

"I'll take care of that." Gregory accepted the bottle and carried it into the kitchenette. When they were all seated on the cushioned sofa circling the living room, he asked: "Is it true? Is that what we're toasting?"

"Well, of course she's not pregnant. Not yet. That's too risky. But we've definitely decided to start a family. Victor Anderson, in maintenance, has agreed to be the donor. -And you might not be as pleased as we are about the other part of it. We've decided to return to Earth."

It hit him like a gift-wrapped explosive. "You've got to be kidding. Roberta, the Martian activist, the speechmaker herself, returning to Earth?"

"Listen—" Roberta started, but it was the only word she managed.

"You've got to be kidding," he argued, repeating himself. "How many times have you told me this was your home, forever?"

"Gregory," Maura cautioned, "You're spoiling the toast."

Cassandra held her champagne glass at ready. "We've already picked a name. And she's going to share our DNA, along with Victor's."

Momentarily he relented, trying not to dampen his friends' good mood, lifting his glass along with the others - smiling, meanwhile, an awkward, artificial smile that felt all wrong. He knew that genetic advances allowed what Cassandra had said to be true.

"To Jillian," Cassandra said.

Of course the child would be a girl, he thought. The choice he would have expected them to make. He had no deep opinion about genetic tailoring. He preferred the idea of natural childbirth, accomplished the old-fashioned way; and yet he liked the idea that science might one day resolve the physical problems of childbirth and development that humans faced on Mars. The lesser gravity and resultant bone-mass loss had taken a severe toll; children born on Mars, it turned out, suffered skeletal defects and crippling spinal distortions. One had been stillborn.

The problem hadn't shown up in experiments with mice. It had been discovered the hard way. Fortunately Josh had been born on Earth, six years before they applied to become colonists.

He could understand why the planned pregnancy meant Robbie and Cassandra must leave Mars and return to Earth; they had to, for the sake of the child. Yet it still felt like a betrayal.

"I'd forgotten your contracts were up," Maura said. "You've both been here eight years?" Cassandra nodded. Her smile said everything.

They clinked glasses, Josh included. "And to Earth." Roberta insisted, draining her glass.

Sipping the champagne, Gregory wanted to ignore the toast, but held back protestations – forcing himself to relax.

Inside he seethed with anger, feeling betrayed by one of his best friends. Roberta had never given him the slightest hint that this was coming. They talked frequently, they maintained a closeness that he had always appreciated, feeling that they were allied politically and philosophically. So why had there been no warning?

“To the Earth”, Maura said. The words, as she spoke them, seemed to illuminate her. And in his wife’s eyes, so suddenly alive with both reflected and inner light, he saw his dreams – their dreams – dissolving. All at once he comprehended her accumulated resentment – the many changes she had gone through, without communicating them. She, too, longed to return to Earth.

He looked quickly away, groping for a way to cope with unexpected revelations.

*He maneuvers the skimmer into an even steeper climb, believes he hears the shrill lament of gyros partially lost within the constant of noise. He levels off too soon again; there are still intermittent scarves and tendrils of wind-blown sand. Climbing higher, he peers ahead, trying for a glimpse of Hellas Planitia, but as immense as the basin is, the storm completely obscures it. Instruments inform him he’s twenty-two degrees of latitude south of the equator, but there is no point in flying farther. Once they hit the storm he knew, deep-down, that it was pointless, but his mind has been set on repairing the Cyclops in the northwestern sector of the basin. Malfunctioning over a week ago, the Cyclops tower had shut itself down. Roberta Alcazar had brought pirated parts from the long-dysfunctional terraforming Cyclops in Elysium, flying them down to Isidia the morning before. Now, though, the Hellas Cyclops will not be able to go on line again until they repair it after the storm. And storms are known to last weeks.*

“Turn north,” the Russian scolds. “This serves no purpose. We need to outpace the storm as soon as possible. It’s spreading north too quickly; this isn’t the classic pattern.” Peripherally he notes the Russian’s taut posture has eased somewhat.

Though still fueled by his own turmoil, Gregory acquiesces. His turn, though, is to the northwest rather than the northeast, and Anatoli seems not to notice his hedged response.

Good. Perhaps he can get one last look at Huygen’s Crater.

Gregory still feels terrible. He started the morning, the flight, both hungover and still a little drunk at the same time. Now he’s merely hungover, his head throbs, but he senses a lingering brusque irrationality in his thoughts that resembles angry, leftover drunkenness. Every convolution of my brain feels coated with tongue fur. Still, he believes he’s past the worst of it, pretty much in control of his emotions, until he backsides on the slope of pain, wondering whether he should feel more betrayed by Roberta or his own wife, and a sudden new unexpected wave of anger crashes over him, curling into a tight little homunculus of intent, like an ugly/ornery miniature demon within him with a will of its own, emotions ambushing him – he fights the viscous urge to twist the wheel, thrust it forward, put the skimmer into a dive; a spiraling dive toward the surface of Mars, a spinning fierce plummet which will settle all issues unarguably and forever. . . . The fantasized sequence is so vivid in his mind that he can hear the shriek of protesting thin atmosphere, see himself fighting off a desperate Anatoli as he completes the maneuver, as if determined to become so many humpty-dumpty pieces on impact they’ll say why bother, it’s not worth the effort of gathering him up, just let him be buried here on Mars.

*So he sits with his hands locked on the three-quarter, off-centered circle of the wheel, rigid, appalled by his own thoughts and emotions: the brute primitive urge, the cave-man stupidity of it. He wants to erase the thoughts from memory, tell himself they never happened, tell himself it was just one of those stupid little impulses everyone gets and dismisses, but for that one moment when it came he felt balanced on the edge of a precipice, the abyss below awaiting just one wrong reflex of foolish, hateful acquiescence to be real: tossed coin landing on the wrong side, tails not heads, a quantum opposite too close to becoming his reality.*

Starting with the champagne, when they initially toasted Cassandra's pregnancy, and continuing to drink while the others were content with the initial uplifted celebratory glass, he had finished off the bottle more or less on his own, and then moved on to the hard liquor he and Maura kept for rare celebratory evenings.

Maura, her small hands so perfect and graceful, unwrapped the long flat box, revealing the display on top – “Martian Monopoly,” she read out loud. She unfolded the board and opened it.

“Look.” Roberta pointed to a rectangle on the board labeled “Martian Gardens” – an obvious pun on the Marvin Gardens property in the original Monopoly game.

“Hey, Martian Monopoly, Josh,” he called across the room to Josh. “Want to join us, son?”

“Monopoly? No way. You play one game of it, you’ve played them all.”

“Josh,” he began, but Cassandra cut him off, laughing.

“Well, he’s right, isn’t he?” she asked. “And this is just a gimmicky new version of the game, marketed for wanna-be colonists.”

They rolled the dice to see who would go first. The railroad rectangles on the board had been replaced by Marsport Terminal One, Terminal Two, Three and Four. Boardwalk replaced by Park Walk Properties. All the squares on the board had been given Martian references.

He retreated into his own thoughts. Normally he did not drink, close much of his life to being a teetotaler, but this seemed like the night for it. He had lost track of the time and much of the conversation. The anger he felt earlier returned now with a vengeance. The deck of unused cards had somehow made its way into his hand; he sat fanning and shuffling the cards as if preparing to deal a game of solitaire, barely listening to what the others said, barely participating as the Monopoly game progressed. Brooding, he realized, and doing it drunkenly; that’s that I’m doing.

The line from an old song came to him: “You just can’t win . . . with a losing hand.”

Roberta and Cassandra were not the only colonists who had recently reached that point. It was like an epidemic. And support on Earth, among politicians and public alike, was rapidly eroding. “Bring the colonists home to Earth, where they belong,” had become one of the standard catch-phrases.

Maura and Cassandra were smilingly engaged in talk about due dates and an explanation of how the couple had come to choose the name “Jillian”; it seemed to him a barrage of words, spoken too quickly to be deciphered. How did I get this drunk? He wondered.

Bunch of monkey-chatter, he thought, interrupting loudly to override them. "Robbie, the speechmaker herself," he said. "Abandoning Mars. I can't believe it. Tell me the speech again, Roberta. Speak it. Enlighten me."

"What speech are you talking about?" Roberta asked

"You know; *the* speech. The one about home. How no one has ever called anything but the most hospitable areas of Earth home. Antarctica and the moon never colonized. But we will make Mars our home. That one."

"Greg, this isn't the time for that. Lay off, will you? Cut me some slack. It's me, Roberta; remember? You've maybe had a few too many."

"Stop it, Greg!" Maura shouted, the volume of her words astonishing him. "What's the matter with you tonight? This isn't like you, Greg. I mean sure, you're always stubborn, it's your nature, but you're never hateful like this. Quit being such an ornery bastard. The truth is, I want to go home, too. Back to Earth, I mean."

I already knew that, he thought. I saw it in your eyes tonight.

She continued to talk, and he tried to focus his booze-addled thoughts, wanting to truly hear what she finally, belatedly had to tell him on this so-long avoided subject. At least, he assumed she had not changed her mind overnight; the transition had to have been gradual. For she, years before, had been even more adamant than he in her determination to colonize Mars and bring up their children here. It was the shared dream that had been the foundation of their relationship and their marriage. Their love, wherever it had gone.

"There are only one or two girls here who are Josh's age. That's no life for a young man. He'll be fifteen next year. We owe it to him to go back. I can't tell you how weary and sick of this place I am, living underground all the time. It's just so, so claustrophobic. Mars is a little hive of underground cubicles; Earth is a whole world. Josh needs a world to grow up on. You can't deny him that, take that away from him.

...

"And Josh, he gaining extra weight because of the bone-mass loss medication. He wants to go back to the Earth even more than I do. He's afraid to tell you, because you are always so resistant and stubborn, but he talks to me about it all the time, practically begs me to convince you—"

Self-pity made him want to say: Cities and forests call out to me, too. Sunlight and oceans – the Earth itself calls to me. But I've resisted. I've endured the discomforts; the hardship. Despite them, I've been prepared to live here the rest of my life.

-He detected a whine in the tone of these thoughts that he did not like at all.

Still, though not denying his desire to return to their true homeworld, he had ignored it. From now on, he had long ago decided, this was his *home*.

But he said none of this. Instead, he said angrily and with far too much volume, "Have all of you been planning this behind my back? Making plans to return to Earth, no matter what I have to say about it?" Paranoia sneaking in too now, he realized after saying the words.

For the first time that evening, Roberta totally lost her temper. "You're not just

drunk, you're being a fucking bastard. I think we'd better leave."

Ignoring Roberta, he focused blurrily on his wife, and wondering whether he'd ever used that particular tone on her before, he said viciously, "We'll talk about all this tomorrow, Maura!"

"Yes," she said coldly – a chill in the words far beyond any he could recall hearing in the past. "We'll talk."

And even though he had known he should sober up, switch to coffee, he kept sipping at the whisky and pouring more. It seemed only moments later that he looked around and he was alone in the room. Had Roberta and Cassandra departed while he was in the restroom? Hell, the entire evening was a shambles. And where was Maura? And at what point had Josh disappeared?

Crossing the living room to the diorama, he felt trapped in a slow-motion walk. The same ponderous progress that had captured his attention earlier, when Roberta first entered. Over the past six years he had grown accustomed to Mars' gravity; it had come to seem completely normal to him. But for some reason tonight he found himself acutely aware of it.

The diorama still displayed Mars at night, but he used the switch to illuminate it, as if magically displacing night with day. Except that the Martian world revealed in synthesized sunlight was a lie. A well intentioned lie, perhaps. Thought to represent a future truth at the time that it was created. But Koplov's report had transformed it into mendacity.

A beautiful bit of mendacity, he thought drunkenly.

At that moment the ladybug caught his eye, crossing from one leaf to another and crawling along its serrate edge. It startled him. Had ladybugs been imported, to keep the gardens healthy? But that would imply there were pests here, such as aphids. Surely they had managed to keep from bringing aphids to Mars. The ladybug crawled at a place very close to the second glass, which divided the real garden from the hologram of the diorama. He could not quite focus his inebriated eyes well enough to tell: on which side of the second layer of glass did it reside? A real insect, or an illusion? It appeared so at home, so at one with its environment, he wanted it to be real. Could ladybugs stay healthy in the Martian underground? Yet what could he know of an insect's state of mind? For all he knew it might feel ill; it might sense the alien-ness of its garden enclosure on Mars. He considered opening the entrance to the garden to investigate, but wavered so much in his stance that he lost his momentary interest along with his balance.

Real insect, or an illusion? The answer should be obvious, but he was too befuddled to think straight, and the unconsciousness that claimed him was more drunken stupor than it was sleep.

*His hands, still knotted on the controls, slowly relax. He takes a deep breath.*

*Far above the storm now, he gazes down upon dark jet-streamers of sand, liquid-looking in their atmosphere-born flow. The storm is vast and rapidly spreading. There are no clear spaces back to the south, as he has continued to hope. The tower of the Cyclops Station, even*

*the single eye of beacon light that burns atop it is lost in the opaque fog of sand.*

He recalls someone comparing—article or conversation?—one of the Cyclops stations to an antique Saturn V rocket from the early days of space exploration, mounted upon the football-field sized tractor that transported it to the launching pad. Though the Cyclops towers themselves bear little resemblance to a Saturn V, certainly their mobile platforms are similar in appearance to the tractor, and it's an excellent comparison in terms of scale—save that it fails to mention the nearly equivalent tonnage of metal beneath the terraforming platform, burrowing and drilling and digging deep into Mars, grinding away at the raw materials needed to extract the hothouse gasses that could build a livable atmosphere.

To the north he sees a Martian landscape nearly lunar in aspect, though more extreme in its peaks and valleys. As sterile as the moon, and like the surface of the moon bathed in the UV radiation of the sun—like all the planets and asteroids in the solar system lacking Earth's bountiful atmosphere. Thirty years of the Cyclops Stations churning out hothouse gasses has made little difference. Terraforming Mars is, in truth, a long, long term strategy. Certainly it has not changed the patterns of the storms. So unlike any of Earth's weather patterns – astonishing how one of these storms can engulf the entire Martian surface.

"Is that Huygen's Crater?" Anatoli asks. "What is our altitude? Those double rings; they tell me that is Huygen's. Why have you veered so far west? Do you think we are on some sight-seeing tour?"

"In a way. My wife seems convinced we're returning to Earth. It looks like we might become some of those turn-coat colonists I was talking about. So many seem to want to leave Mars these days, and your damn report didn't help any."

"My report . . . is good science. Is honest!"

"I know; I know." Gregory shrugs. "Anyway, I wanted to see the crater one more time. This might be my last skimmer flight. And if we maintain our present altitude and course, I should also have an excellent view of Syrtus Major on the way back." There's still a bullying tone in his voice, he realizes. So many over the years have remarked on his equanimity; his self-control. He imagines he's totally blown that image these last couple of days—blown it certainly in terms of his own opinion of himself.

"Well, and shall we divert ourselves all the way to Valles Marinaris while we're at it?" The Russian's words ring heavy with sarcasm—for the landmark canyon system, several magnitudes grander than Earth's Grand Canyon, is located virtually on the opposite side of the planet from their base, Marstown, in Isidis Planitia.

He could stay, of course. Stay on, while Maura and his son returned to Earth. But he wonders whether he could bear to lose them. No, they are too much a part of him; too much a part of his dream of colonization—without them, it would all mean so little.

It would not matter so much in the long run. There were plenty of others on Earth who wanted to be colonists on Mars. He and his family could be easily replaced.

He recalls climbing once, shortly after his arrival on Mars, to the summit of a nameless rampart crater's rim—knowing, at the time, its longitude and latitude, though they are now forgotten—and standing looking out upon the wide-angled view of impact craters and what might be several caldera, sand dunes and bone-dry lowlands, his mind naked to the complexities of the Martian landscape. Ferrous pink, he thought at the time; not red. Overcome by some mix of awe and a sense of oneness, he had spread his space-suited arms wide, as if embracing all of Mars. The embrace, it seems, not strong enough to hold on to this, his adopted world.

Now, yielding, he leans back, a half-slump of defeat and relaxation. A letting go.

"All right, Anatoli; you win."

*He closes tired eyes and rubs them; spikes of migraine-like pain from his hangover recede slightly. "You take over now, Anatoli. Go ahead, take the controls. Take us home."*

# Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso

## Under His Gaze



Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso is an MA graduate of Creative Writing, Swansea University Wales. A collection of his stories, *The Haunted Grave and Other Stories* has been published by Parallel Universe Publications. His short stories appeared in different anthologies around the world.

*This is from the blog of Eric Ian Steel: "Today it's my proud privilege to introduce author Chukwunonso Ezeiyoke. A Nigerian-born writer, he is one of a wave of Afrofuturist writers who have recently been taking the world by storm. Afrofuturism has been defined as "a cultural, aesthetic, philosophy of science and history that... addresses themes and concerns of the African diaspora". Writers of these stories typically use magic realism, fantasy, supernatural and science fiction to achieve their aims, and share a highly distinctive prose style that is both fresh and engagingly non-Western."*

It stared back at her, her nudity in the standing mirror. The mirror was with polished brown wooden edges. On the flat top of the mirror were her cosmetics, mainly of small white plastic containers. About fifteen of them were littered with their tops covered. Her eyes caught her breast. The boob her Obi described as things fall apart because it lay weak, flat, sleeping on her chest. She had protested that his comment was offensive but he smiled and accused her of taking every little silly joke seriously.

"English girls, can't you leave your feminism and enjoy a bit of banter for once?" Obi asked.

She insisted that the remark was still everything but witty and had gone on to remind him that he wasn't more Nigerian than she was. By the way, her both parents were Nigerians. That she was Manchester born made no difference. He had left her on the sofa, banged the door, and called her nagger. If she could, she would have wanted her breast to be straight, pointed like ripe banana. It had been that way then in her twenties. But with the toll of age, its sun set at dawn, it became tired standing erect and had decided to lay down and to take some nap. It wasn't only that that perturbed her. Her protruded stomach that made it impossible for her to wear bikini in a beach during the summer was too. She knew that it wasn't like she was fat. She hated that word being used around her but had found herself consistently using it on herself. Inwardly, she concurred that her stomach wanted to shame her, not even caring of her unlimited days of going hungry but still remained as it was, with thick layers of fat. Her hand reached the wooden top of the standing mirror where she packed her cosmetics. She grabbed a cream, opened it and dipped her hand on it, and began rubbing, smacking and pressing it on her stomach as she sighed.

"Uju, you will be fine," she whispered to herself.

The alarm in her phone lying on the top of her bed set off. She came closer, picked up the phone, turned off the alarm, and dropped the phone on her bed back. Time for work unfortunately. She sighed again. Uju quickly picked up her phone. Watched it for some seconds. She opened her WhatsApp, scrolled to the pictures she sent to her boyfriend, Obi. He hadn't replied yet. She looked at the time he came to the WhatsApp last, it was twenty minutes after she sent the photos.

Didn't he see the alerts that she sent an image to him?

Uju's body tensed.

"Be strong, my soul be strong". Uju whispered to herself.

\*\*

Crappy Manchester weather.

Uju stood at the door weighing the decision to either go back and pick her umbrella or move out into the showering rain. Cold breeze came through the opened door, hitting her face and hands and made her shiver. Rain, breeze and cold, freezing. She felt like going back to her bed and calling her supervisor to cancel her shift with an excuse of an ill health. Then she remembered her bills that needed paying. But most so, she didn't want her boyfriend to taunt her for skipping her work.

"Lazy cat. Thank your God for benefits. Thank God you were born in England.

Had you been born in Nigeria where there is no government benefit, you would understand".

She had insisted that that was a stereotypical way of thinking about government benefits. She had told him that it wasn't everybody that lived under the benefits and living on them didn't imply laziness too. But that often led to an endless argument between them.

Uju struggled to keep the voice away from her head as she then lowered her black leather handbag, rummaged through it to get her black gloves. Her fur black coat slipped under her flat black shoes and she cursed it as she staggered to maintain her balance, her hand leaning on the wall.

There was bus 7 approaching its stop.

Uju dashed into the rain managing to use her handbag to protect her afro-kinky hair from being hit directly by the rain. She was rushing to the bus stop.

\*\*

Uju flashed her bus ticket to the bus driver as she forced out a customer-service kind of smile.

Why was his face mean? The kind of face Obi often described as a face of someone eating a bitter-kola. Uju had forced Obi in getting a sample of the kolanut when he travelled to Nigeria during his summer vacation. Damn it, coffee which Uju abhorred because of its moody taste was sweeter than it.

A slim chocolate black girl, wearing a purple dress, flashed her ticket too. Her face was mean but the bus driver smiled. Uju watched with the corner of her eyes as she walked to take her seat at the end of the bus.

Uju didn't want to think of it but she couldn't help it either. Each time when her face was ignored and the next person to come received an acknowledgement, it made her feel like writing a petition to God with words like "It isn't fair, God, it isn't fair! Were you lacking materials the day you created me? Why this burnt face, eczema on my eyes? My shape like an amoeba? What would it take you to make all the girls in the world pretty"?

The day Obi called her pretty after their church service and they were drinking tea and socialising, Uju would have spitted the drink on herself as her heart fluttered. But she had as much as she do to hide the surprise and act classy. She had responded 'thank you'. Inwardly, Uju knew that she wasn't cute. It wasn't just her mirror that told her so. Her mum since she was young had constantly sang that to her like a lullaby.

The girl with the purple clothes was coming to sit nearer to Uju. Uju hated that. Hated how girls seek cheap comparison with their follow girls as if this life was a beauty pageant.

"Smmh basic bitches. She isn't putting nice coat. Looks like a coat from a charity shop. Smmh..." Uju murmured.

Uju buried herself on her phone. Her hand went straight to her WhatsApp.

\*\*

Obi hadn't replied to the loads of the pictures. Was he alright?

Uju knew that Obi had gone to his best mate Mick as he often did when they had arguments but she couldn't bear thinking that something was wrong with him and she blamed herself for that. Obi had once called her temper a naked wire, shock once touched. Uju often saw that as her life, act first and cry later. It had happened to her when she wrote a five paged letter raining all her anger on her father for abandoning her and telling him never to think of coming into her life again no matter what. Uju had wailed weeks after she had sent off the letter to the mail. Last night she had poured her anger on Obi for calling her breast, 'things fall apart'.

Was it too harsh on him?

Tears were gathered on her eyes. Uju fought hard not yield to it, not on the bus, not when she was such that the girl with the purple dress was watching her. That would be her funeral. To be a mess, an emotional freak.

Uju watched the WhatsApp message again. Obi had not come online yet.

He should know that she had forgiven him of the insult. He should know that the photos were her apologizes for arguing and nagging. But why his silence?

She scrolled at the three photo shoots again which she had randomly taken in the gym. She was wearing Nike Pro Training Tights and a Long-sleeved Zip Top. She had signed up in the gym after meeting Obi about 7 months ago. She wanted to be for him a perfect figure. Even though he kept telling her that she was his idol, the one that spins his world, something in her mind was yet to be convinced. So she had decided that even if it wasn't true, she would work hard to get it fulfilled so that by the time the infatuation of love at first sight would be off from him, he would still see a princess who - before God had finished His creations - He had taken a week off from duty because he was going to create the prettiest of all the pretty. That was her favourite from Obi's compliments for her.

In one of the photos, she was smiling, giving him a thumbs up, lip sucked out. At her back was chest and shoulder muscle machine. The other she was using the leg machine and was looking at a different angle from where the blonde girl she had asked to help her take the picture was. And at the third one, Uju was in the abdo machine, exercising.

Had her beauty turned already to a shadow to him? Or was there someone else?

Uju took a sharp breath, the thought was suffocating to her. Uju didn't want to think of him cheating on her. Her mum broke up with her dad few months after her birth because she caught him pants down with her best friend. Uju's mother had taken an oath with old and new testament to have nothing to do with any man again. Deep within, Uju felt that that was the reason why the relationship of her and her mum had always been on a sour note. Her mum transferred aggression from her father to her. And since she had been eighteen, Uju had moved out of the house to be

on her own. Uju had never regretted it even when the journey of her life made her to soak her pillow with tears instead of sleeping. She preferred whatever than the constant reminding of her mum that her look was an unreserved inheritance of her father's ugliness. He had eczema on his chest. Uju's stood on her eyes where it proclaimed to the whole world, 'here am I, an eczema'.

Uju knew that it was because Obi created a perfectly opposite world to that her mum created for her that made her fall for him. Uju couldn't remember the last time Obi called her by her name. She had always been his pretty cutie.

"You are my diamond, Uju, my pretty cutie. If you are on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, I will swim across it to bring you a glass of water just to see your face. Because each time I see your face and your smile, I feel younger and my heart melts. I would never get tired of admiring you, I will not be old worshipping in the sanctuary of your beauty".

Uju's heart beats fast hearing those words of his.

Has he gone bored already? Uju shrugged her shoulder.

"God remove this ungodly thought from my head", Uju murmured.

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Uju lifted her hand to press the red button in order to stop at the next stop. Behind the bus stop was a tram rail and across it was Morrison's food store where she worked. Uju's eyes met in contact with the girl in the purple dress. The girl was startled and awkwardly picked up a copy of the Metro Magazine somebody left at the seat near to her and began flipping through it.

"Why was she on me?" Uju asked herself.

Uju knew that she had had the urge to wail but had handled herself in a classy manner. She found it difficult comprehending why the look from the girl in purple. Perhaps she was calling her fat or ridiculing the eczema on her left eyes and calling her ugly. Uju's heart began to race and she began to fume. Uju knew how inferior she always felt when such ideas crossed her mind but she couldn't help feeling it each moment she saw a stranger staring at her.

What else was the point of the attraction if not her ugliness? She was sure it wasn't her dress. No matter how costly it would be, without a perfect figure, it was a mess still, so said her mum. Her mum often reminded her and had told her too that she didn't need to be wasting quid in the purchasing of designer clothes and all sorts of make-up because there is no redemption for bad looking. Often her mum would sum up the state of her look in this term 'even if a pig wears a tie and suit, it is still a pig'.

Uju had grown up to fit into those words. And off and on wouldn't care about her dresses or make-ups. Even now Obi came into her life, she wasn't so bothered about the clothes and Obi often didn't worry about it.

"Basic bitches", Uju whispered as she alighted from the bus. She didn't care to greet the bus driver in a courteous way as she always did whenever she alighted from a bus. "He only care about the pretty bitches. To hell with him,

smmmh....”.

\*\*

At Morrison, there were the chatting, metallic crashing of trollies, asounds of playing kids, sounds of the self-servicing machines and the machines in the tills beeping and with its endless parrot-like chant of ‘scan your marching club card, place your item in the bagging area....’ Uju stood still and inhaled heavily.

Again on this?

Uju didn't want to walk straight behind the tills, at the gazing of the customer, to the staircase near the kiosk. Her manager had insisted on that, so she could tell those coming later. But Uju did see that as an unnecessary bureaucracy. Clocking machine is there to take record of them, why the ordeal of passing through the staring eyes of the customers? Uju hated customer glaring, detested the fact that they all seemed to gaze on her, taunting the eczema on her eyes, pitying her for having a chubby body and laughing that she wouldn't be with any man. But see how they were wrong now. Before Uju met Obi, she had often cried in the restroom, door locked behind her when sure thought of her inability to attract a man overwhelmed her but not any longer. Not since her Obi began writing her the endless poetry that she read first whenever she awoke and lately before she slept.

Uju had the urge to bring out her phone to check her WhatsApp to see whether he had replied but her eyes caught their security guard outside chasing a shoplifter. The shoplifter was in his early twenties judging by his look and wore a brown trousers and a blue jacket. He ran like a kangaroo. The guard, in his early forties was on a black trousers, long sleeve white shirts and a hi- vest with security written at its back, was pursuing the thief notwithstanding that the gap between the two widened every second.

The shoplifter wanted to run across the road to the opposite side of the road and safety away from the shop but the traffic was heavy. The guard saw this and began advancing, faster and faster. The thief watched the traffic, glanced at the guard, his eyes darting to and fro between the two as he calculated to making a quick decision. The guard saw the situation and was pushing further and harder. He was nearer, closer. The thief watched the advancing car, stepped with one foot, brought it back. The guard was almost within his reach. The shoplifter surged to the road, the incoming car driver beeped his horn and the shoplifter headed on, ignoring the warning of the incoming vehicle, the car hit him and he fell beside the road.

Inside Uju closed her eyes as she screamed when the impact happened, the world spun, her memory clouded and blurred. Her mouth tensed and dried. Uju regained herself later, she couldn't watch anymore. She briskly ran to the changing room, leaving the shop floor where most of the customers stood watching the incident.

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“Did you know it is only a biscuit did the dead shoplifter stole?”

Uju eavesdropped Sophie telling Henry in the canteen. They were her col-

leagues at work.

"The guard is too mean." Henry replied. "So a biscuit got the thief killed?"

Was the guard mean? Did he know that the thief would take such a risk? Was this the normal sympathy such a situation brings upon? Uju kept forcing herself not to think about any of that but the chatting of Sophie and Henry couldn't help the matter and it was irritating her. Uju quickly galloped the remaining liquor in the brown plastic cup of her hot chocolate, binned it and headed to the changing room.

\*\*

Inside the changing room, Uju picked her hand bag where she locked it up in her locker and rummaged through it as she searched for her phone. She saw where her phone was tucked in between her sanitary pads. She brought it and straight she went to her WhatsApp.

No comment yet.

Uju checked the time Obi came in last to the chatting room, it was 30 minutes ago. Yet he bothered not even to check out her pictures or talk more of giving her a compliment. Uju's body tensed. Uju scrolled through her phone contacts and reached where she saved him as 'Mine'. She dialed. The number wasn't available. She redialed again. It was the same thing. "What the hell?" Uju whispered as she smacked her lips. Uju's hand went again to the phone contact and she searched for Mick, she dialed the number. The number went through.

With each ring of the phone, her heart rang with it.

Why was he wasting time to pick? Barely for the phone to cut, had she heard him pick up.

"Hello darling" Mick tensed. In a good day, Uju would have been in a playful mood. She would have asked him whether he needed an eyeglass to know how Rose, his girlfriend looked for him to mistake her for Uju. But today it was beyond a joke. Kidding shouldn't be when her heart was at stake.

"Is Obi with you?" Uju asked him, her heart literally somersaulting and her voice sounded like a stuck tape in a player.

"No I have been away from Manchester since three weeks."

Three weeks? Uju held her breath. The word rang like the fierce calling to prayer of her uncle in Lagos who is an Imam. She had known this when she visited him in Lagos with her mum three years ago. A surprise to all of them on how a Muslim leader can come from a staunch Christian family like theirs.

But where has Obi been going almost every other night when they quarrel? Uju asked herself.

"Are you there?" Mick's voice brought her back to the moment.

"Yes."

"Are you having a problem with him?"

"Not really", she replied as she cut the phone without saying goodbye.

Uju checked her phone, two minutes more for the break to be over. She

quickly put the phone back into her bag. Locked the bag in her locker and headed down to the shop floor with a trembling body.

\*\*

"You alright Miss?" A customer, a girl in a blue tight jeans trousers and a white blouse asked Uju. Uju was scanning her items: banana, cornflakes, milk, pear, and a bread at the till.

"Yes sure". Uju sounded as confident as much as she could and managed to give her a bold smile to assure her that everything was the same.

"Are you really sure?" the customer persisted.

"I am ok". Uju said. "Do you need a bag", Uju asked her, trying to take the discussion away from herself.

"Five pence extra?" she asked.

"Yes", Uju replied.

She sighed. "England has turned to Wales now", she said, "Five pence on a useless bag".

Uju gave her a hearty laugh. Uju wasn't in the mood to start telling that woman that it was an environmental policy by the government aimed to cut down the demand of those plastic bags. Uju just watched the woman as she squeezed in her items in an old sky-blue nylon bag she came with. Uju's attention was caught by an Asian man of about forty approaching her till. He was wearing a red kaftan. Uju wondered how she would attend to her many customers with her state of mind before she breaks down.

Uju checked her watch, five hours more to end her shift. Uju swallowed her saliva.

The food items the Asian man bought were within the reach of Uju. Uju grabbed the and started scanning each of them with her scanning machine beeping. From a corner of her eyes, Uju saw her supervisor coming. The supervisor as always wore her mean face like her uniform which was black trouser pants and grey top. Unconsciously, Uju pressed the yellow button. As fast as she could, Uju finished scanning the man's item praying that no other customer would come to her at least for now. This was one of the reasons she loved working on Tuesday, it was always dead and quite.

When the supervisor came, the Asian man had already left the shop. Uju was happy that the supervisor responded right away. Normally, she would take ages before answering.

"What is it? The supervisor asked with a headmistress voice.

"I am feeling poorly, I think I will not be able to finish this shift" Uju replied.

The supervisor looked at her watch and looked around the shop. "You can go", she said.

\*\*

When the bus dropped Uju off, all in her mind was self-blame on why she had

driven her man away. She knew that he had left the house for her for five times since last three weeks when they had quarrelled. But it still puzzled her of the new heaven Obi now take recourse to. Uju started smacking her lips, biting her finger nails, head bent on the ground as she walked home.

Uju resisted the impulse to bring out her phone to call Obi again. Calling him was what she did throughout her journey home from the Morrison's in the bus but his number was switched off. Uju was confused on what else to do but she just had the urge to go to her house, maybe to cry or to sleep with the hope that upon her waking up, everything will be alright. Whatever, she needed her own space to mourn on how she drove her man away.

Her key fell off from her trembling hand. Uju stoop low to pick it up and ended tripping on her coat and stumbling to regain her balance. She had after picking the key struggled with the key hole in putting the right piece from her bunch of keys. About three minutes later, she succeeded in opening her door. Uju walked through the corridor straight to the living room with the hope of resting her weak body in the sofa to wail and to console herself.

At the living room, it hit on her nose, a fresh smell of his aftershave and a wisp smell of a strange perfume. Her eyes caught an outdated coat lying atop the edge of their red double sofa. There was something familiar to the coat but right away the data was in that part of her memory that plays hide and seek for her. From where she couldn't foretell, energy surged into her body.

Is he cheating? Did he bring a girl in?

Uju tiptoed to the bedroom and violently pushed the door open. Her eyes went straight to the bed. On the bed was Obi and the girl she had seen earlier on the bus wearing a purple clothes when she was going to work. The two lovebirds were startled, clinching to the duvet, hiding their nakedness.

Uju screamed.

\*\*

"Give me Egusi soup and garri", Uju told the waiter.

The whole restaurant had changed since Uju came last and Uju couldn't help but to notice it. It had been months she stopped eating out and had always been in the service of Obi. As she sat toying with her phone, she knew she would eat heavily today but for the first time she wasn't bothered about her fatness and it surprised her so, giving her a morbid sense of joy. In unexplainable way, the image of the shoplifter flashed to her mind.

"I am not going to die for the hunger of anything, not for food like the shoplifter, nor for love". Uju murmured unconsciously and smiled at herself.

# Kyle Hemmings

curve outward

**Kyle Hemmings** has visual art work in Tower Journal, Sonic Boom, Scars Publications, Peacock Journal, and elsewhere. He loves street photography and obscure garage bands of the 60s.



red sundown  
cracked windows  
familiar snipers



Kyle Hemmings

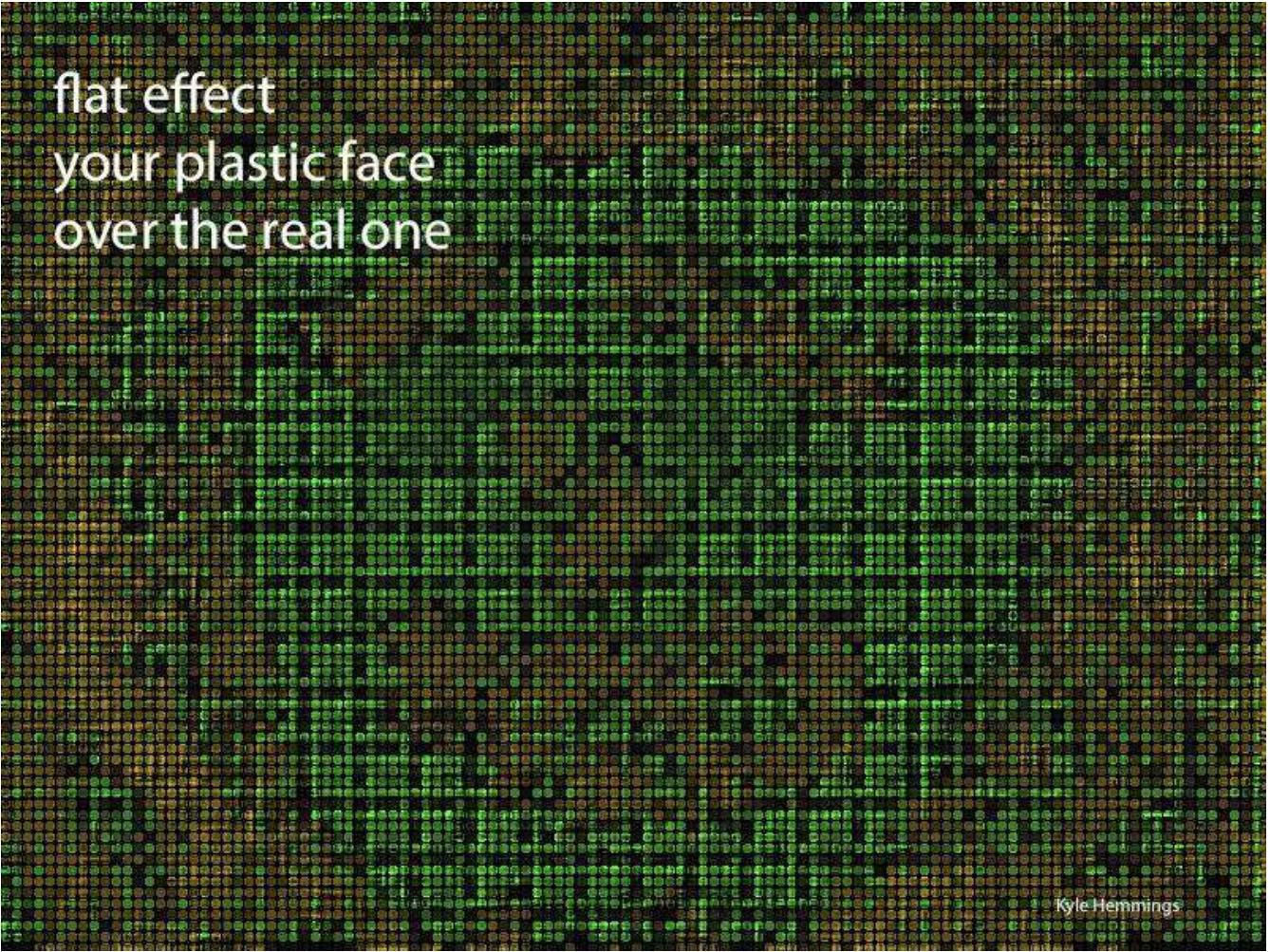
*jigsaw puzzle*



*your mind has  
missing edges*

Kyle Hemmings

**flat effect  
your plastic face  
over the real one**



Kyle Hemmings



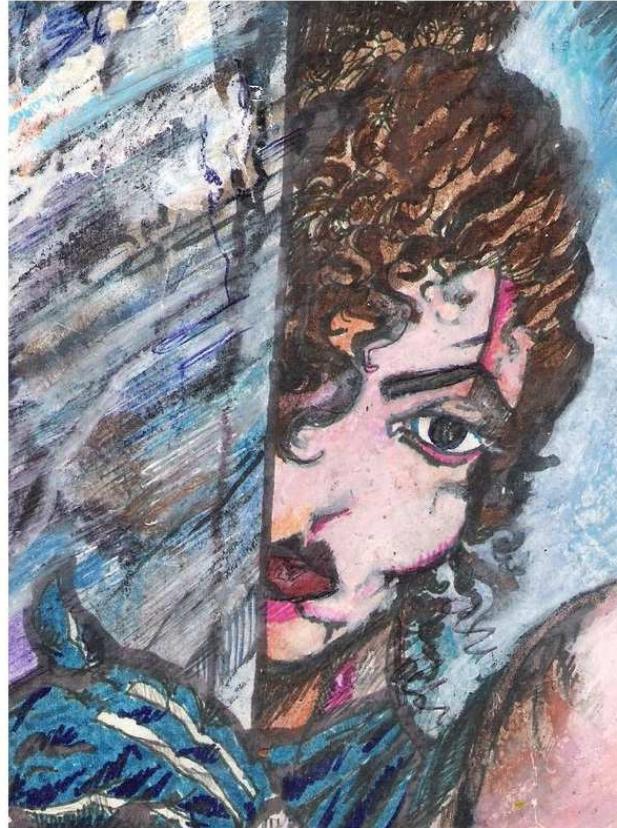
summer in the city

we curve outward

Kyle Hemmings

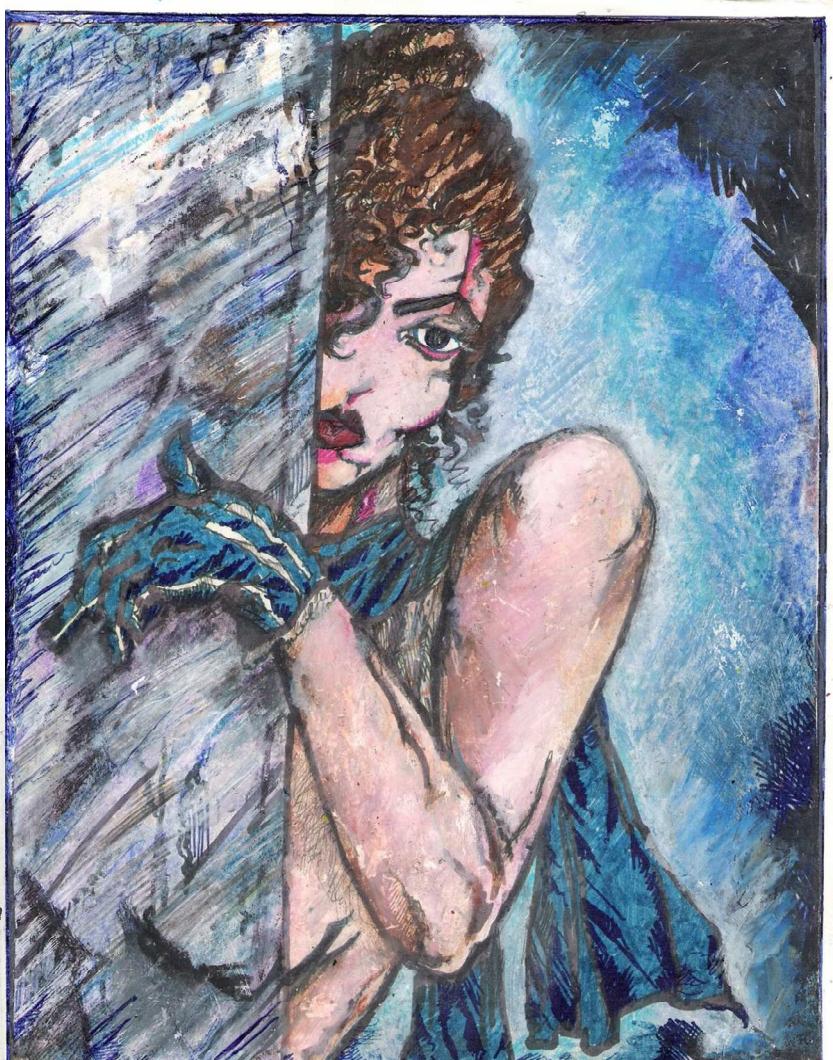
# Anthony Accri

## character studies



Anthony Acri is a cartoonist and blogger from the suburbs of Pittsburgh. He reports that he was "taught sexuality, decline and fall, and speech and drama by the brethren of the end of the Golden Age" and that "he's devoted to the Republic as Roman boys ought."





# Kendall's Column

Kendall Evans

## Of Love & Theft

The view through the viewport above my computer desk is awe-inspiring: particles tortured by the Schwarzschild Radius into the full-spectrum vivid wonder of ultra violet purple to infra-red, with radiant unnamable colors shading from the yellows, greens, blues, oranges, and everything unknown in between. And, in the intervals between spurts of writing, I'm admiring my private view of the cosmos.. I do not rent this outer-space place; I own it. And I live here, at least metaphorically, when I write these columns for you.

This time, I've been meditating for several days about "Love & Theft." And, while there will be much here in today's column that deals with writing, there will be multiple levels of meaning that will make it, I hope, valuable to all readers.

When we write, we commit theft in many ways at once. We have other authors who have inspired us, and we steal from them mercilessly while never even plagiarizing them. How is this possible? Well, it's called influence. A good writer needs to be influenced by everything and everyone he reads. Because we use the inspirations, they provide one way of creating something new, something that takes a given thought or idea and examines it from a totally different angle, in a completely alternate concept. In other words, the author transforms the source, making of it his own, and hopefully adding some depth to the original concept.

T.S. Eliot suggested that "A bad writer borrows; a great writer steals," or words to that effect. Nor was he the first to say such a thing. Should we give credit for the quote to Steve Jobs? Pablo Picasso? T. S. Eliot? Igor Stravinsky? William Faulkner? All of the above have made similar statements, many of them nearly the same identical wording. And consider this quote from Thomas Edison, which applies the same idea to science rather than art: "Everybody steals in science and industry. I've stolen a lot myself. But I know how to steal. They don't know how to steal."

But theft goes much deeper than this. We write with words. We employ a specific language. Every word ever formulated, written, or pronounced has been present, honed, evolving, and often possessing multiple meanings, ever since we made our first utterances in caves. So we can use the word theft, or we can speak of things like learning and inspiration. It's all pretty much the same. We would be mute naked animals without the tools, both technological and linguistically that civilization has provided.

But let us consider love and death in other terms, applying it to other specifics. Because, my friends, everything is stolen or given freely or purchased, or we would all have nothing. Consider, for example, personal relationships and romantic relationships. Whenever we are involved in any kind of relationship, it doesn't really matter whether we love or hate the other person. We share with friends and enemies. We steal from them. We steal from their facial expressions, their habits (even though the habits we sometimes inherit from them are hateful to ourselves and others). We steal their finances if any money is shared at all. We learn from their kindnesses and cruelties. One of the reasons why it is so important to choose our friends and enemies and lovers so selectively. Because, over time, the more time we spend with another person, the more alike we become. This can easily become deadly in long term relation-

ships. A husband and wife can become so alike in appearance and opinions and personalities that they repel rather than attract each other. Think about the scientific truth of this: Opposite charges attract; like charges repel." More commonly and culturally expressed as "Opposites attract." And the gathered numbness of a static relationship over time can result quite literally in people wanting to kill each other – and sometimes they do!

All this tells us how and why personal change is so important. We need to change independently from one another. Become more different from friends, family members, enemies, acquaintances, etc. Otherwise we become too like everyone else, a cliché, useless to ourselves and empty of self-respect or self-assurance. A quote stolen from Bob Dylan, "Everyone wants you to be just like them." From Maggie's Farm, perhaps?

So now let's get back to writing. A list of writers I've stolen from is very much like a list of my favorite authors. And I've stolen from Coleridge - the author of Rime of The Ancient Mariner, from Edmund Spencer, WB Yeats, Keith Laumer, Roger Zelazny, Samuel R. Delaney, Jack Vance, Kendall Evans (yes, from myself; and quite frequently), Bob Dylan, William Stegner, Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, The Animals, Tim Powers, Martin Cruz Smith, Joyce Carol Oates, Ruth Rendell, Richard Wagner, The Bible, Robert Silverberg, Bruce Boston, Jan Potocki, Grimm's Fairy Tales, nursery rhymes, Lewis Carroll . . . well, the list goes on and on. And on. Truthfully I've most likely stolen from every author I ever encountered. And suffer no guilt whatsoever, because I believe that I have never come close to plagiarizing anyone. If I'm quoting someone, I attempt to make clear that it's a quote. I'm talking about love, as well as theft, remember.

And I should also reveal that the title of this piece is also stolen; Love and Theft is the title of a strikingly original CD by Bob Dylan. I recommend it.

# Protect Our Public Schools



## Rosa E. Del Castillo Elementary School Brownsville, Texas

*The authors caution that they can only hypothesize about why some schools and cities have done better than others, and that further study is required. But local leaders from Brownsville quoted in the report mention the heavy presence of homegrown teachers, and strong networks of social services as possible reasons for their city's success.*

~ *Hechinger Report*

