

# Firefly Magazine

II



*A Journal of Luminous Writing*

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## The Artists

# POETRY



## Featured Poem

### NOT THE SUM OF OUR SADNESS | *DMG Byrnes*

We are not the sum of our sadness, all the horrible things our minds and bodies remember.

We are not the cracks in our hearts that seem to spread like breaking glass after being beaten time and again.

We are not nothings and forgotten pieces of futures that have been swept away.

We are not weak when tears are the only way to show what something makes us feel, when words are not enough to impart what our souls are trying to convey.

We are all of us broken.

But we are more, if we choose to be.

THE BLUE HELIANTHUS | *Tobias Haglund*

Ripping and tearing through a field of sorrow

You plant sunflower seeds of past regrets

Nothing grows in dead meadows, but in my cave

the roses turn towards the sun that is you

Bring us threads, and keep mending

before we lose the parts

we had in common

ABANDONED LOT DIAMOND | *Lucas James*

Forget what I said before:

We're just two dead kids dreaming baseball fields

Dragged drugged feet and three cheap beers

Pour one for a lost ball

One for wild weeds and twobyfours

Never mind all my excusing

of losing sleep and sneaking

redblind on fighting wired nights

Decide what you're gambling, we're

dice playing God at university

Whatever you thought I meant

Is draingutter forgotten

Gold turned to lead, breath, sweat

Pour one for a bad plan:

A baseball bat, a car, and you.

BORDER PATROL | *Annabel Banks*

(little fingers

popple through

your keyhole)

(stretch to give

a tickle-tap)

(a pull of purchase)

(think of bleach)

(think of scissors)

(the radio)

(cut-plugged

in a gesture of absence)

(but wake to find

another note

on your pillow)

**CAME BY BUT**

**YOU WERE OUT**

## JIANGO à la PLAGE | *Lucas James*

The summer tide at 8:35 pm

Now the club's doors open  
Now the people's mouths open,  
hundreds of mouths to sound words of excitement, knowingness  
smug hope.  
I've read reviews. He's supposed to be good.

They are well dressed, in line, moving forward, finding seats,  
checking watches.  
Anticipation has a music of its own,  
a hiss that fills every ear with a whisper of the future.

Now there is a stage, pregnant with expectation  
and slowly filling with absence.  
No instrument.  
No player.  
The well dressed people decide to leave.

had not yet lost the gentle warmth of the day.

She sat cross legged, barefoot in the embrace of salt and foam  
head turned towards the sheer heat of each note he played.  
Every chord burned for her.

The waves whispered as she listened.  
She was there for him each night.  
Not tonight.



## TWO SIDES; ME | *DMG Byrnes*

I am weak

A huddled mass of dark clothes and tear stains

Sobs between each heartbeat

Every intake of breath a reminder how deep each trauma lies

Wanting only to know that someone desires to scoop me into arms that are warm

No lies woven into their threads

Just one heart protecting another

Safe

I am strong

A warrior with honed blades and sharp eyes

Scars aplenty on toned flesh

No battle too bloody or too long to fight for the worthy, the innocent

Death is an inevitable friend, no fear stands between us

My back is bared to take the lashes that pure hearts do not heal from

I am not a savior

I only want to save

MAGICAL REALISM | *Annabel Banks*

Forget beauty.

We were too old,

too long in fangs

and our failings

for velvet coats

or ringlet's gloss

but showed the claws

we couldn't sheath.

Our kisses clacked,

exchanged venom

that made lips ache

but didn't kill.

Didn't heal us

either, did it?

No sudden WHOOSH

to reveal some

thinner, inner

us perfected –

just two sad beasts,

still fat with lies

about coping

strategies, cash,

and nothing changed.

So we broke up.

EARLY | *Lucas James*

break my character bundle me back into forget

fulness

waking it's the first day (always) and you realize me the need to

only every other word

breathe

(some obligations fill my lungs with you or tar) and

darling tuck me in pour me out

break my fast kiss me

there's something morning in your dress

two lungs two suns one rise one me one you

# FLASH FICTION



## Featured Flash

### BACK TO THE BEGINNING | *Jack Buck*

By not talking about it, we both believed it gave an exciting feeling to our friendship with its unspokenness of what could have been. I never intended to act on my feelings, yet I knew if there was ever a moment to tell her, it had to be now, on this bench, overlooking the city's lake.

Looking, but not really looking, we sat on the bench. Probably a 7-year-old ran by in circles with a mother telling her daughter to keep near.

"Nature does nothing uselessly." Aristotle said that, she said, glancing over at me, smiling.

"Is that right," I replied.

She thought I would go on to say more, but I didn't.

I came close, once, to really saying it.

We met back in undergraduate. We kept in touch over the last 8 years. When I would visit Michigan for a week or two in the summer months, we

always made a point to have dinner together, walk around the lake to talk and laugh.

I wanted to go back to the beginning, when and where we first met. I want to wander the old Michigan roads that lead into the woods. I want to stand on the bridge that overlooks the river, where I jumped off in hopes of trying to scare you; where we both sat under the bridge in the late afternoon to watch the train overhead roll off further north. I wanted to tell you then.

"Twenty sixteen."

"Sorry, what?"

Martin turned to the older man nestled in the corner of the bus shelter, shrouded in darkness. He hadn't noticed him until now.

"Twenty sixteen," the man repeated. "Our bus was due at 20.16. Which means it's" - he stepped forward out of the shadow and checked his watch - "twelve minutes late and counting."

Christ, Martin thought, here we go: there's always one, and they always want to talk to me. He studied the bus stop on the other side of the road. A group of teenagers were huddled round a mobile phone, laughing and pushing and pointing at one another.

"What age are you, son?"

"Thirty-one."

"Thirty one. And have you a family of your own?"

"No, no," Martin laughed. "I'm not married. A couple of near misses, but long runs the fox, wha'?"

"I have a son your age. Had a son your age. I mean, a son who would be your age now."

Uneasy, Martin turned away and stared up the wet road for the bus. Cars' tyres sizzled past on the slick surface.

"He died."

"Oh. I'm – uh – very sorry to hear that."

"Ach." The old man shook his head. "Long time ago now."

"Still....." Martin replied. He had no idea how to finish the sentence.

"It was my fault. Or so Nuala - the wife - always believed. Never said anything, but I know that's what she thought."

Martin was uncomfortable with this sudden unbidden confession. Where was the bus?

"I was minding him. At the house while she was out shopping. I was supposed to be watching him, but I was fixing the garden fence. He'd wandered to the wee brook at the bottom of the garden. I didn't hear a thing."

"You shouldn't blame yourself."

"Shouldn't I?"

"Well....no. Accidents happen."

There didn't seem anything else to say. Martin winced at the platitudes. Was that the best he could do? 'Accidents happen'? Jesus.



“What about your dad, son? Is he still living?”

“Yeah, he’s in a home now. Well, sheltered accommodation. Since my Mum died – he couldn’t really look after himself. There’s just me and my sister, and she’s abroad.”

Martin didn’t know why he was telling him this. He didn’t want to talk about his father. He knew he should visit him more often. Bring him things, the things Mum used to get for him when they lived at home: plain chocolate, his History magazine, a J T Edson or Zane Grey book.

The arrival of the bus broke Martin’s reverie, and he stepped back to allow the older man to get on first.

“No, you’re all right, son. I think I’ll have a wee smoke and get the next one. Twenty thirty-nine.”

Martin got on the bus and sat down. The old man waved as the bus pulled away. Martin fished in his pocket for his phone.

Unlock > Functions > Phone > Contacts > Dad.

“Hi, Dad? It’s Martin.....Yes. No, no reason. Just thought I’d ring.”

## THE EYES HAVE IT | *Christina Taylor*

Everything's blurry yet I notice her as she enters the room. She comes into focus like a ghost. It's the thick, black rimmed glasses that attract me. Fluorescent light dances across the lenses so she's lost behind the glass. She's staring straight ahead but I don't think she sees me.

'What seems to be the problem, Mr Smith?' she asks, all business-like.

'There's something in my eyes,' I explain.

I'm debating whether or not to ask for her number when the room goes dark, scrambling my senses.

'Let's take a look,' she whispers in my ear, flicking the beam into my eyes.

I fall into the light. Red shapes dance before me like bloody phantoms. I want to close my eyes but they're fixed wide, streaming tears like cobwebs. My breath comes in bursts as fast as gunfire as she leans forward, my mouth desert dry as I attempt to form words. This is the closest I've been to a woman in years; I might not get another chance.

'Look up.'

Her command steals the moment.

'And down.'

The proximity makes my heart high jump in my chest. Her knees brush mine; the touch scatters electric shocks through me. When she shifts, the gap she leaves is a million miles.

'Your eyes are just perfect, 'she gushes.

She takes them with a swift, gentle motion. I peek through her fingers and she's smiling at me. Now I can see the whole world.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS  
KIND OF A BEAUTIFUL METAPHOR | *A. Joseph Black*

She asked me today what it was about fire that I love so much. Eventually they all ask this question, or a variant thereof. Some of them ask it straight out in the first session, others leave it until they've 'got to know me better'. They try to figure me out first, such that by the time they ask the question they'll know (they think) whether I'm answering truthfully or not. Imbeciles.

Self-evidently, there is no answer to the question "What is it about fire that you love so much?" To borrow that most frustrating of logics: if you have to ask, then there's no point telling you. In fact, I go further: if you think it's a valid question at all, then you're never going to "get" me. Why does the earth turn? Why is water wet? Why do birds suddenly appear, every time you are near?

And so I have a number of pat answers to that question, one of which I'll trot out according to my mood, or the therapist who's asking, or the time of day.

"Fire purifies. It cleanses and purges. It allows us to start anew, unencumbered by a lifetime's impedimenta."

That's the default. Sometimes my love of fire, and my evangelical defence of my activities in that area, angers them. Most unprofessional, in my opinion.

"What about the people who died, Mason? What about them?"

What about them? Pigs. Most of them died going back into their burning sty to retrieve something pointless - wedding photos, a pet lizard, an iPad. One lot perished because they'd taken the batteries out of the smoke alarm to use for the TV remote. I thought that was kind of a beautiful metaphor, don't you? Anyway, I can't think about any of them. They were stupid and now they're gone. Up in smoke.

The ones who survived are different. They interest me, the ones who have prevailed in their own personal trial by fire and have emerged, blinking and reborn, on the other side. They're the ones I'd like to talk to. I have some questions for them.

"How does it feel - to lose everything? To have to start again, the slate not just wiped clean, but smashed into a million pieces, and burned to ashes?"

I've set them free and I wish they could see that. Possessions possess. I don't expect gratitude, but in the fullness of time I'd like to think they'll see what I've done for what it truly is - their liberation.

Anyway, Ms Therapist didn't like the answer I trotted out today. It was one of my best, reserved for those I know it will offend most. She tried to remain calm, implacable, but I could see that she was already mentally drafting the email requesting that I be transferred to another therapist. I wonder how long it will be before *they* ask me...

# SHORT STORIES



## Featured Short

### THE CARPET | *Nod Ghosh*

It was the devil that made me do it.

Chris's folks, Faith and Vince, call every year. I make out I'm as broken as they are about their daughter's disappearance. She's been gone nineteen years, but Faith says it feels like yesterday to her. Eleanor hovers nearby, but I turn away so she can't hear my empty platitudes. I don't want my wife to think I'm still sweet on my old girlfriend.

Faith's voice chokes up.

"Do you think we'll ever find her, Mannie?" She sounds like her daughter. Whining. Simpering. "Vince and I are going to Morocco again in March."

And that devil makes me say, "you've got to try, Faith. You've got to try."

\*

I don't think about Chris often. It's when I see that damn Moroccan carpet though I remember what I did. I should get rid of the fucking thing, but I can't. Not when I think what it's worth.

You can't throw out something that cost someone their life.

Chris and I started dating when we were sixteen. By the summer I turned eighteen I was ready for adventure. I needed to escape from the small town mentality that was eating me up, and threatening to spit me out onto the conveyer belt that led to meat and two veg, wife-and-a-mortgage. Babies. It's what she wanted, a ring on her finger, and a semi on the street where Faith and Vince lived.

It scared the crap out of me.

I wanted to travel. I wanted to explore realities that were different from my own. I wanted to feel the danger and excitement of alternative life-styles.

Then everything changed, Chris's parents gave her a ton of money for her birthday. They wanted her to 'broaden her horizons' before she married and had kids.

"Go see the world," Vince said. They paid for me to travel with her, so she'd be safer. That kind of shames me now.

So instead of hitching round France on my own, I found myself with an inter-rail ticket and a timid girlfriend tagging along. The trains across Europe made Chris travelsick. The rickety boat from Algeciras to Tangier was even worse, vomit swilling about on bathroom floors. Our adventure pretty much ended when we came ashore in the turgid Moroccan heat. She started throwing up within minutes of entering our hotel room.



Chris lay on the hotel bed like a mannequin. She stared at the beige paint peeling off the ceiling. Her hair splayed out on the pillow like wind-blown wheat. Her paper-white skin made her look like a corpse. I did what I felt I ought, a fly caught in a web, itching to break the strands of her sticky embrace.

I went to the market, bought fruit that Chris sunk in sterilising fluid and ate in little chunks. She ran to the toilet every hour.

"I'm sorry Mannie," she said.

"What for?" I asked, choking back the resentment. "You can't help being sick." I bubbled with anger and tried not to think about what I'd be doing if I weren't playing nursemaid.

By rights, I shouldn't have been with Chris anymore. But if I hadn't stuck it out, I wouldn't be in Morocco. Go figure.

On the third day, Chris told me she was feeling better. Her skin had stopped burning. She even managed a meal of flat bread and kefta. I suggested we go out. We pulled djellabas from the market over our heads to blend in, so the hawkers wouldn't hassle us. It didn't help. I felt the hot breath of traders on my neck, offering gold, slippers, porcelain. Anything. Chris leaned on me and took little steps, like a spider heavy with eggs.

We turned left then right, right then left, ended up getting lost. Boys with menacing grins dashed about looking important. Hooded figures hunched over hookahs. Women with secret smiles, heads wrapped in coloured cloth.

We stopped at a bar and ordered beer for me, mint tea for her. Chris disappeared to the bathroom. I got chatting to a guy called Mustapha, my French broken and basic. Chris came back, smiled and nodded. Her French was worse than mine.

Mustapha offered to take us to places the average tourist didn't know about. Said he could show us *the real Morocco*. He spoke really fast, over the twang of tuneless instruments. He talked about cheap carpets and jewelry in his uncle's shop. My French wasn't brilliant, but I thought he said something about getting some shit hot hash too. The stuff I'd picked up at the souk was all right, but I wanted some black.

Mustapha whistled and a boy trotted over. He was about eight, wore a pair of holed shorts and a 'Manchester United' T-shirt. They spoke in Arabic. The kid ran off.

By the time the boy returned, it was dark outside. Mustapha led us to a battered turquoise taxi. We wound through narrow streets, all the time feeling like we were being sucked into the guts of a giant creature.

We stepped out of the car to face a tall narrow building. The hot air wrapped itself around me like a blanket. Chris walked slowly, like everything was a huge effort. We followed Mustapha into a building that had no shop frontage, no signs, no indication that we were entering anything but an ordinary apartment block. Chris looked back at me once, questioning, silent, as

if checking how precarious our situation was, appealing for reassurance. I forced a smile.

The uncle's carpet shop appeared to have opened just for us. A toothless man greeted us.

"Most welcoming. You for shopping come," he said, obsequious and foul. "Many, many goods we had. Come, come." He led us up narrow wooden steps, through a door with a faded sign on it. 'Tiger Carpets', with a cartoon animal, paint chipped, Arabic beneath the English letters.

One of the men urged Chris and I to sit on two low wooden stools. Two skinny guys brought out stacks of carpets. One of the guys was a midget. Mustapha stood in the corner looking as if he'd been given a reward, his teeth shining eggshell white in the light of a flickering bare light bulb.

"Many month to make," the toothless uncle lisped. He threw rugs about like he was dealing cards. "Childlen from stleet work loom. We feed. Like own son and daughter." A woman scuttled in with a tray holding a long spouted pot and pastel coloured glass cups. She broke pieces of loaf sugar into the cups, bowed and padded out again. One of Mustapha's uncles served steaming tea. Mustapha passed me a pipe, and I took a toke without question. Chris nodded it away, so I passed the metal pipe to the old feller. My head spun with a thousand coloured cobwebs.

Then *the carpet* appeared. I'd never seen anything like it. The size of a bath mat, but beautiful. Like the pattern on a dragonfly's wing, laced with peacock iridescence. I ran my finger through its deep pile, imagining a child working for months to make the intricate pattern. Blues and golds. Chris's eyes lit up. Her face glistened in the odd light.

Toothless asked how much money we had. Chris gave me a warning look, and I put my hand on her shoulder. She was hot again. I offered forty Dirhams. He dismissed my offer like I'd slapped his face.

A hookah appeared. More tea. Photographs of grandchildren. The room was spinning by the time I parted with 370 Dirhams. It was half our budget for the week.

Toothless bundled our carpet in a brown bag along with a 'Tiger Carpets' card. The same goofy cartoon tiger we'd seen on the sign outside the door.

I slid the pack into my shoulder bag, and listened to the thumping of my heart within my chest. There was the promise of something exciting in the air. We'd blown a huge amount of cash, but I didn't care. We were on the gateway to something incredible, the real Morocco. Chris was shaking.

Mustapha offered to show us gold jewelry. I told him I didn't want that. I wanted to see *the real Morocco*. I wanted to get hold of whatever had been in that pipe. That was what I'd come for. That was how *my horizons* were going to

be broadened. That was my gold. The men mumbled to each other, and indicated we should follow the short guy.

The midget spoke little French or English, but he said enough through gesticulation for us to know he would take us where we wanted to be. His drooping eyelids gave him a sleepy appearance. Chris and I followed the man out to an alley. Mustapha didn't come. We entered another tall narrow building. I followed two steps behind the midget as he climbed a poorly lit staircase. I could hear Chris's heavy breath rasping behind me.

Three men sat on mats around a low table in a dimly lit room. They looked haggard. Chris lay down on a mat in the corner. She was shivering. Reddish lamplight cast shadows on sandy walls. I shared another pipe with the men and stared at the ground between my feet. An industrious ant marched in a circle on the floor. I felt isolated. The ant went round. No one said a word. The ant went round again, in ever decreasing circles. Chris looked like she was dead and I didn't fucking care. I was buzzing. The ant went round again and again and again.

That ant was my last memory. The last memory until a one-eyed man woke me. He pushed his foot against my head. Chris was moaning. A coal-dark man had a bunch of her hair in his hand. There was a knife against her throat.

I leapt up, but One-eye kicked me and I crashed onto the floor, smashing my jaw. Someone growled in Arabic. Coal-man pulled Chris's money belt from

beneath her waistband and cut through it with his knife. There wasn't much in it. I had all the traveller's cheques. The man spat on the floor in disgust. I stared up at One-eye's empty socket.

"Open," he said, kicking at my money belt.

One-eye counted the cheques, held them up to the light.

"Go. Fetch Dirham," he said. "Ten thousand. Back before night. No Police."

As the one-eyed guy spoke, Coal-man drew his blade, ever so slowly, across Chris's neck. A crimson bead trickled towards her T-shirt.

"Don't leave me, Mannie," she screamed.

\*

I was cold and disorientated. My jaw ached. I followed my instincts and walked in a zigzag. I found the souk. From there, it was a short walk to the bank. I shuffled from one foot to the other, waiting for it to open. I cashed every single cheque. Then I rolled a joint and sucked hard on it, like I'd suffocate if I stopped.

I headed towards the narrow building, but when I reached the souk, I realised I had absolutely no idea where it was. The card. I needed the card. The 'Tiger Carpets' card had the address on it. I'd beat the shit out of that bastard Mustapha, if he didn't take me straight to his short-arsed friend. I opened the brown bag. The carpet twinkled like a soft jewel. Nothing. I spread the carpet

out on the ground and tipped my bag out onto it. I checked my money belt, pockets, everything. No card. No address.

I rolled another joint. That's when I found the remains of the card in my hash tin. I'd used it for the roach. The address was gone.

And that's when the devil tapped me on the shoulder.

\*

I came back home months later, hollow-eyed and underweight. I had the stupid carpet, but very little else. The story I told the police in Tangier was partly true. We *had* been held captive and robbed. But I never said how I left Chris to go find *the real Morocco* on my own.

\*

A few months ago, Eleanor and I were in a thrifty store in Kingston, looking for clothes pegs or some shit.

"Look," she said. "Those carpets. They're the same as the tatty one we've got in the lounge."

My heart did a crazy dance inside me.

It was the size of a bath mat, but beautiful. Like the pattern on a dragonfly's wing, laced with peacock iridescence. I ran my finger through its deep pile. Blues and golds. Turquoise and velvet.

I fingered the label, 'made in Taiwan'.

I found the price tag. How much did it cost? How much was a life worth?

Five pounds. Just five sodding pounds, reduced from eight.



## THE FARMER'S SUNSHINE | *Rebecca Harrison*

Past a bustling town, an old man lived on a small farm. He spoke to clouds and crow flocks but stood hushed when townsfolk passed by. Every morning, he gathered grains from his green fields. He polished each grain with a magpie feather, wrapped them in his handkerchief and trudged to market.

One day, the farmer heard a bugle bellowing. He looked up as fast horses thundered red carriages towards his land. The carriages halted. Soldiers swept into the fields. A tall man unravelled a scroll and barked: All sunshine was possession of the crown, he said. The prince and princess had spied peasant children with golden sun-streaked hair. They had pestered the king until he said all the sunshine in the realm would be theirs. The farmer watched as the king's men knelt and rolled up the sunshine. They shook the oak tree until all the sunshine slipped from its leaves. They stormed the farmhouse, scraping sunshine from the dog's paws and the cobwebs. Then they hung nets across the sky to capture sunbeams. They crammed the sunshine into the carriages and sped away. The farmer stared at the dim scene until moonlight caught in the nets. Then he stumbled to bed.

The next morning, the farmer was woken by a thump on the door. He tramped downstairs, gripped the door handle and looked out as a red carriage raced into the distance. A broad barrel sat on the path. He unfolded a letter: Generous rations from the king, it read. The king's leftover sunshine was to be

divided between his loyal subjects. The farmer nudged the barrel and listened to the sunshine slopping about inside. He looked at his land. Drab skies hushed the birdsong. The silent fields swayed with grey winds. He opened the barrel, scooped out a handful of sunshine, carried it to a field corner and carefully spread it on the seeds.

Each day, he scooped another handful of sunshine from the barrel and spread it on the field corner. He measured the seedlings with markings on a crow feather. Then he lit a match and slowly paced his dim land. He watched the fields wither and the flowers fade to scraps. He sat the match embers in acorn cups along the hedgerows to light bird paths. He gathered fallen leaves and tied them with twine to the ragged branches to keep the trees whole. The dog curled by the barrel and leaned against the warm wood. Every day, the red carriages came to collect sunshine. When soldiers lowered the nets, sparrows swooped and snatched beakfuls of sunshine. The grey trees glittered with nests crammed with stolen glints.

Weeks passed. The farmer scooped the last handful of sunshine from the barrel and sprinkled it on the patch of wheat. He measured the stems with his crow feather. Then he plucked the few grains, ground them with a pebble, and baked a single loaf of bread. He cut the loaf into crusts and crumbs, and shared it with the dog and the sparrows. There were no grains left. He sighed and sank to sleep. In the morning, he lingered on the path, watching for

carriages carrying rations. All day, he waited, and all day the dog howled at the empty barrel. Then he trudged to bed.

Drab days drifted by. The farmer watched tree hollows widen. He listened to hedgehog footsteps on the shrivelled earth. He freed thin wind gusts trapped in cobwebs. He measured the dust puddles. He gathered broken flowers and settled them in the farmhouse. He shook his head as he looked over his ragged land. Then he wrapped the last crust of bread in a handkerchief, and put the brightest match ember in a jam jar, holding it high to light his way. With the dog at his side, he walked from his land.

So the farmer and his dog trekked towards the palace. They saw red carriages racing over grey hills and bridges, gathering sunshine. They stopped at an alehouse and ate crust chunks while townsfolk grumbled about the nobles wading ceiling-deep in sunshine and building walls to the sky around their golden gardens. All night the farmer and his dog listened to tales and mumbles: knights studied sunshine at the castle and the finest glints were combed into the prince and princess's dull hair. Village folk and peasants squinted at their rations measured in thimblefuls and eggcups.

At dawn, the farmer and the dog trudged from the alehouse. Across the dull land, they saw folk paling under the dim air. Townspeople sat candles on rooftops. Old folk carried lamps and shuffled slowly round sundials guessing at the hours. Shepherds grated their sunshine rations into fading meadows. Damsels dropped their sunshine rations into cool wells and wished for bright

skies. Choirboys pressed their sunshine onto church windows and sang under the stained-glass gleam. The farmer and the dog sat on wide logs and nibbled the crust. They watched rebels leaping for the sun nets from the tower tops but landing on dark mud. They heard rumours that in the palace, the royals slipped and skidded upon the squeezed sunshine and the king floated from his throne on a tide of thick golden light.

The farmer and the dog plodded in ember light through dark valleys and black woods. They shared their last crumbs as they walked below wilted rainstorms. At night, they reached the palace. Sunshine leaked from golden windows and tangled with bats' wings. The farmer thumped on the vast door. The dog barked as the door heaved open. The farmer squinted as golden light billowed and flopped over the dark stone. Servants grabbed at the sunshine and pulled handfuls back inside the palace. The doorman nodded for the farmer to enter. The dog howled as the door heaved shut behind the farmer.

The doorman and the farmer waded through golden corridors and halls. The farmer stared at stalactites of sunshine hanging from high ceilings. He saw old dukes trapped in floating patches of gold. He saw duchesses nibbling sunshine whisked and baked by the palace chefs. The farmer stepped through an archway and rubbed sunshine from his eyes. Across the hall, servants clutched the king's robes as he drifted from his throne. 'Who goes there?' the king's voice wobbled through the sunshine. The farmer told the king about his fading farm. He pulled a dust puddle from his pocket and showed it to the king.

Then he asked for more sunshine rations. The king peered at the dust puddle. 'No' he sniffed. Doormen gripped the farmer's arms and hurried him from the palace. As they heaved the door open, the dog leapt up and bit a chunk of sunshine from the palace air.

The farmer and the dog looked at the shut door. Sunshine clung to the farmer's clothes. They turned and walked back through the grey woods. The dog gripped the chunk of palace light between his jaws. As they trudged, the sunshine began to peel and drip. Mice scurried away golden flakes left in the farmer's footprints. Moths gathered round drops of golden glow stuck in the dark air. As they walked across grim plains, a low wind brushed past the farmer and swept sunshine into the night sky. The sunshine seeped and dwindled until only the dog's chunk was left. When they reached the ragged farm, the farmer put the chunk in a jam jar and sat it in the middle of the fields. He walked the edges and corners of his land, measuring the dust puddles and counting the fallen leaves. He listened to the hushed air and remembered bright birdsong. Then he went to bed.

In the morning, he was woken by shouts and cheers. He pressed his ear to the wall and listened. Crowds sang and laughed: the palace had been ransacked, the sun-collectors tied up in a truss, the king bundled in a sky net, and the sunshine was free at last. He rushed downstairs and opened the door. Twenty sacks of sunshine sat on the path.

## ROSEWATER AND RESOLVE | Kathryn H. Ross

Louis looked at his handy work: a row of grand rose bushes lay in a heap atop a tarp on the garden path. Wiping his brow, he stood and slapped his hands against his acid wash jeans. The planter was now vacant. The roses sat in the low evening sun dolefully, their petals already withering in the late summer heat.

“Doing some gardening?”

Louis turned to see his neighbor, Mrs. Fields, leaning against the weathered picket fence. She was gripping the hand of her young grandson, who was smelling the flowers growing through the slats of wood. Louis smiled mechanically. “Dad wants me to clear out the planter,” he answered as he stripped off his gloves.

“Have the flowers died?” she asked, eyeing the pile of wilting roses.

“Just needed a change in the landscape, I guess.” He still smiled, but he stood stiff-backed, facing her with his fist clenched in his pocket. *Walk away*, he thought, but she didn’t move.

“Louis—,” she said.

Louis clenched his jaw, bracing himself. “Louis, your mother wouldn’t have wanted you to pull up her roses. We could get more...replant them...she loved those flowers, you know.”

“No,” Louis said in a falsely cheerful voice. “I don’t think she loved anything, really.” His cheeks were beginning to ache from holding his smile in place. Mrs. Fields opened her mouth and then closed it. He saw her chest fall as she exhaled. She bade him good day and walked off with her young grandson in tow. Turning his back on her, Louis wrapped the roses in their tarp and, with some effort, lifted them into the trashcan at the top of the driveway.

\*

It was dark and dank inside the house, like a small cave. Louis walked blindly forward as his eyes adjusted to the low light and he was soon able to see his father wrapped in a thin blanket, huddled on the couch where he had been the night before. The television was flickering, but Louis knew his father wasn’t paying it any attention. He stared ahead of him, his eyes unfocused and bloodshot. At his feet were an array of brown bottles and metallic cans.

“I’m finished,” Louis called to him as he walked past on the way to his room.

The house was messier than it had ever been. As Louis made his way through the kitchen and down the hall, he stepped over pungent piles of garbage and dirty clothes. The odor was especially powerful in his father’s room. Louis felt a small twinge of annoyance and something else as he moved down the hall, picking his way through the filth that had been steadily piling up. He entered his bedroom, which was slightly cleaner, and looked around. Suddenly a crashing sound came from the front of the house and Louis knew

that his father had dropped another bottle onto the floor at his feet. The sound seemed amplified in Louis' head. He slammed his bedroom door to drown it out and threw himself onto his bed.

He lay there, the smell of dirt and his own sweat filling his nostrils. He had been watering the rose bushes up until the week before when his father, in a sudden furious outburst that had come at the end of weeks of unresponsive lethargy, had screamed at him.

*"Who the hell do you think you're kidding, Lou?"* his father had yelled, clutching a slender brown bottle in his fist. *"You think you water them damn flowers and it'll make a difference?"*

Louis had said nothing, but stood there as his father raged, listening to what he knew was nothing more than five months' worth of diatribe not meant for him. When his father had yelled himself hoarse and thrown himself back onto the couch, Louis had run to his room and sat in the dark crying. It had happened without warning as he sat there replaying his father's voice in his head, the same way it had been happening ever since he'd started watering the roses. The first one had happened at school, the next came in the middle of the night as he slept and dreamed of his parents yelling. He thought, by now, he'd be able to tell when they were coming, but before he knew it he was soon screaming and yelling for help. His father had come in to find him huddled on the floor, sweaty and shivering.

*"You crying, Lou? You crying like her—?"*



Louis sat up, suddenly panting. His face felt warm, clammy. He placed a hand to his chest and could feel his heart hammering beneath his damp t-shirt. Taking deep, calming breaths, Louis closed his eyes and repeated in his head *I'm okay I'm okay I'm okay*. He laid back down, repeating his mantra and breathing slowly. His body felt tight and a raging need, a betraying desire to see his mother gripped him. Her image billowed before his closed eyes like a plume of smoke; he could see her, her lips twisted into a smile that did not meet her eyes, the only smile he could ever remember seeing on her face. She had worn that expression so often the last few years; he could see her sitting at the dinner table, on the couch, in the car—a thin ghost wavering on the fringes of their lives. It had always been so quiet, but when the silence got loud things began to change. She left for work early, came home late, and the days when she was home, she was always in the garden—knee deep in dark soil, bent over her roses, her fingers covered in red pin pricks from their many thorns. The sun would set and he could still hear her just outside his window, talking to them as if they could hear her, as if they could understand. And once, when he had watched her, once when she did not know he could see, she had smiled a smile that reached her empty eyes, a smile that filled them with a light she never had when looking at her family...

His chest ached at the thought of her and he sat up again, gasping and sucking at the stale bedroom air. Louis clawed at his chest, his heart suddenly stampeding—wave after wave of burning chills running down his skin. He clenched his jaw and cried out, “Dad!”

\*

He doubled over, unable to breathe properly. He could still see his mother's face flickering in his mind.

"Dad!" Louis cried again, wheezing and sputtering. He scrambled towards his bedside table until he got his hands on a half empty water bottle. He gulped the water down, spilling some on his neck and chest, all the while feeling his heart slow, his body cool. He pulled the bottle from his lips and sat shivering on his bed.

"What're you yelling about?"

Louis jumped slightly at the sound of his father's voice. He looked around to see him leaning against the doorframe still wrapped in his blanket, one hand gripping the wall. His eyes were still unfocused and he was looking at Louis as if he'd never seen him properly before. "What's going on in here?"

Louis frowned at his father, still shaking, and turned his back on him. "I— nothing. It's nothing."

"Then what the hell were you yelling for?"

"I— it just happened again, that's all. I'm okay now." His throat felt tight and his eyes were burning. Deep inside, like a distant drum, he could feel his heart still thumping hard.

"What? You went *choking* again?" Louis didn't answer but the drum was getting louder; what had been little taps were turning to heavy knocks against his ribs.

“Lou,” his father said, and Louis heard him stumble into the room. His body tensed as he felt his father come closer. “Lou, turn ‘round and look at me.”

A moment or two passed and then, without warning, Louis felt his father grip his shoulder and turn him around. He tried to shut his eyes so his father wouldn't see, but it was too late—

“You crying, Lou?”

Louis kept his eyes down. His chest rose and fell and he bit the inside of his cheeks. “Crying,” his father said. “Just like her. You just like her.”

Louis looked up at his father, barely daring to breathe.

“Crying in bed...at the table, in her damned garden...all over the place...” Louis' father squinted at him again, and then raised his eyes to the window that overlooked the front yard. “You got rid of the roses?” He asked brusquely, turning to Louis.

“I just did—you told me to—,”

“Good,” his father said. “That's the only thing she'd come back for. Not you...not..., nothing but those damned roses.” He watched the window, as if seeing them, the grand rose bushes, still on the empty landscape. To his surprise,

louis saw that his father's eyes had become suddenly bright.

“Dad—?”

His father made no sign that he had heard Louis at all. Breathing hard, Louis reached again for his water bottle, brought it to his lips and drank a series

of quick gulps. His chest hurt, but he could feel his heart slowing its pace; he exhaled. His small movements seemed to bring his father out of his reverie—He grunted and ran his hand over his face like a bothered animal.

“What were you yelling for?” he said again, frowning at Louis. He looked numb from drink and delirious with thought. Louis shook his head.

“Nothing...it was nothing, Dad. I’m okay.”

His father watched him, frowning and swaying on the spot.

“You...you go to bed, son,” he said, and then stumbled from the room.. He closed the door with a snap and Louis sat, watching the space his father had just vacated—

*I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay...*

\*

The room had grown dark and cold as the sun set and the moon took its place. Louis still lay fully dressed in his bed, now fast asleep. Down the hall his father was dozing in his chair, once again stationed in front of the flickering television. The house was quiet and still, save for the sound of slow breathing.

Louis slept poorly. In his dreams he heard strange, distant voices accompanied by dull scraping sounds like an animal pawing at the windows. He twisted and turned, saw his mother’s retreating back disappearing through dark doorways and heard his own voice, crying like a child, for her to come back. Early in the morning he woke with a start, jolted to bleary reality by the sound of his father shuffling down the hall to his room. Louis heard the door creak and listened to his father moving around his bedroom for a while before

falling silent. Louis checked his phone for the time and saw that it was nearly five am. Ignoring his pangs of hunger, Louis rolled over and sank back into fitful sleep.

\*

When Louis awoke his room was cool and bright. The sun was shining through the slats of his blinds and the house was still quiet. He sat up, checked his phone, and saw a series of messages from friends inviting him to hang out. Louis stared around his room, thinking fast. It would be good to get out of the house, and if he was back in enough time, his father might not even know he had gone. He checked his phone again; it was already ten, leaving only a couple hours to get ready and meet everyone in town. Making up his mind, Louis sent a few texts back and got up. Quickly, he threw together some clothes, made his bed, and headed for the bathroom. As he passed his father's room, he saw that the door stood ajar. He paused, hovering outside, and could just make out a tangle of blankets under which his father's bulky figure rose and fell slowly. Two bottles stood on his bedside table. One was empty and the other half full. Feeling reassured that his father wouldn't be up for hours, Louis continued on his way to the bathroom.

After grabbing a shower and some breakfast, Louis left a note for his father on the kitchen counter, placed his wallet and keys in his pocket, and headed out the front door. It was nearly noon now. The day was warm and bright; Louis could hear the neighbor children splashing around in their pool and a strong smell of barbecue was wafting down the street. He pulled out his

phone to send a text to his friends, letting them know he was on the way when a voice startled him:

“Good afternoon!”

Louis looked around and saw Mrs. Fields sitting on a lawn chair in her front yard. A tiny inflatable pool was set up where her grandson was splashing around with a water toy while her husband watched. Louis hitched his mechanical smile onto his face again and waved to her. His heart sinking horribly, he saw her lift herself from the chair and make her way across the street.

“I’m so glad to see what you’ve done, Louis,” she said as she reached the fence. She gave him a kind smile and her eyes looked misty. He furrowed his brow, taken aback.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Fields said, shaking her head. “It brought tears to my eyes when I came out this morning and saw them. I’m so glad, Louis. I really am.”

Louis’ smile faltered and then fell completely. He frowned at Mrs. Fields, looked around, and then stopped as his eyes fell onto the planter. The soil looked dark and loose, as if someone had freshly tilled and watered it. In two straight rows that ran the length of the planter were what looked like spindly stumps, but what Louis knew to be the beginnings of rose bushes. He stared, momentarily forgetting that Mrs. Fields was with him.

“I think she’d be glad to know you kept a small part of her, even in spite of...of things,” she said from a far way off. “You’re a good boy, Louis.”

Louis turned back around and saw that her eyes were as bright and glassy as his father's had been the evening before. He opened his mouth and closed it, and opened it again.

"You didn't...?" he began, but his voice trailed off. He shook his head. "Mrs. Fields, the roses—,"

"They'll take some time to come in like they were before, but you'll care for them." She touched his arm gently. "And I can help you, you know." She squeezed his hand and, after a moment, turned to go; Louis saw her husband watching them with a sad smile on his lips.

"Mrs. Fields?" Louis called before she crossed the street. She turned. He did not know what to say to her. His mind was racing and he could feel his heart thundering, but this time it was born from a nervous curiosity he had not felt in a long time.

"I—," he said. "You..." He shook his head. "Thank you."

Looking slightly bemused and tearful, she nodded at him. Then, waving, she made her way back across the street. Louis watched her for a moment and glanced back at the roses. His eyes burned at the sight of the bare sticks that would soon grow into lush greens and flowers, and his throat felt tight. He turned to head on his way down the street towards the bus stop at the street corner, then stopped as a glint of something shiny caught his eye. Squinting, Louis made his way back up the drive towards the planter. As he came closer he could feel his heart hammering again. His eyes widened as dawning comprehension gripped him: there, lying partially hidden in the dirt, was a

slender brown bottle. Louis stared. He looked back at Mrs. Fields, but she and her family were no longer paying him any attention.

Carefully, Louis crept into the planter and allowed the contents of the bottle to drip into his outstretched hands. He lifted them, shaking slightly, to his nose and inhaled, but could smell no trace of alcohol. Frowning, Louis watched the clear liquid slowly seeping through the cracks in his fingers and brought it, instead, to his lips. He touched his tongue to it and, closing his eyes, smiled as the taste of cool water rippled through his mouth.



# The Artists

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*Annabel works in both poetry and prose. See [annabelbanks.com](http://annabelbanks.com) or Tweet @annabelwrites. She would love to hear from you.*

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## Jack C. Buck

*Jack C. Buck, originally from Michigan, lives in Denver, Colorado. He loves Michigan and Colorado just the same. And, baseball and reading just as much. Find him on Twitter @Jack\_C\_Buck*

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*DMG Byrnes is an author with a reading addiction. She blogs every Wednesday at [dmgbyrnes.com](http://dmgbyrnes.com) and also reviews books. Currently she's working on short stories and a full-length novel.*

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*Nod Ghosh lives in Christchurch, New Zealand. Penduline Press, TheGayUK, The Citron Review, JAAM and Landfall have accepted Nod's work. Writers are like humans, but they watch less television. <http://www.nodghosh.com/>*

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Rebecca Harrison

*Rebecca Harrison's best friend is a dog who can count. She's been nominated for Best of the Net. Her stories can be read at Maudlin House, Axolotl Magazine, and elsewhere.*

Lucas James

*Lucas James wants to lead a socially conscious urban lifestyle but also doesn't want to feel like a tryhard whilst singing the blues. This passes for angsty internal conflict nowadays.*

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