

# Front Porch Review

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Dear Second Love  
- Louise Robertson

The black and yellow heart of the tulip  
has peeled itself

in the sun,  
made of itself an eaten orange.

That's us.  
Already open.

Doing Time Tidewater Beach  
- Mary Lou Maloney

We always tied our shoes  
on the abandoned steps  
at Tidewater Beach  
one side halfway in the sand

David used to carry plastic buckets  
pour salt water  
over Mom's corned feet  
wash seaweed off her toes.

I want him out of those  
khaki two piece johnnies  
those state issue T-shirts  
and fake leather work boots.

I want to see him jump  
on his Harley  
rev those side handles  
brace his back  
  
kick into the starter  
move like hell  
onto Penders Beach  
Ride that bike all the way

down the wooden stairs  
run into the black-eyed surf  
and scream so loud  
the sharks will get out of the way.

It's time.

Fashionable Façade  
- Kelly McNeal

Rest  
Let her blue eyes  
Worship you

Imagine her as  
Naïve  
Self-absorbed

Forgive her  
As she whispers  
Your name

For she dons a  
Fashionable façade  
For you

Forgiving  
You, for your  
Fancies

The terrors  
She's endured  
Are tucked away

They've  
Fashioned her  
To fascinate you

## The Elephant in the Room

- Bruce Harris

No one sees the elephant in the room for good reason. The elephant is no more. Effective 2018, Barnum and Bailey have announced that their circus will be elephant-free. The lovable Babars will go the way of the eight-track tape.

I'm not certain why this is bothersome. Three, four, or five rings under a big tent do not appeal to me. I never went to the circus as a child. It's not on my bucket list. I didn't take my children to the circus. Animal rights activists applaud the decision. They make a persuasive argument against animal abuse. Yet, it gnaws. Trapeze artists, jugglers, clowns, and elephants define a circus. It's like banning cherries from ice cream sundaes.

And then there's Jumbo. Is the gentle giant turning over in his grave? Or, does this news make him happy? Jumbo was the Babe Ruth of his time (although Jumbo didn't hit as many homeruns or sign as many autographs as The Babe). But he received about as much press as The Sultan of Swat and was just as friendly to children. Jumbo was a marketer's dream. Everything, from beverages to peanuts to cartoons to matches to charm bracelets to books and many other souvenirs and products, utilized Jumbo's photo or name. Despite only a three-year stint with P.T. Barnum's circus, Jumbo defined "The Greatest Show on Earth." His image was plastered on numerous advertising posters.

The Humane Society's president, Wayne Pacelle, praised the decision to eliminate the elephants as, "... good news" from Ringling. "For wild animals whose natural habitat is outdoors, life in a traveling show is filled with unending misery ... all so they can perform silly tricks."

Elephant sanctuaries exist all over the world. The soon-to-be retired circus elephants are destined for Florida. According to Kenneth Feld, Chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment, "The elephant has always been a symbol of The Greatest Show on Earth. The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation will ensure that people will be able to experience the joy and wonder of Asian elephants for generations to come." Like thoroughbreds put out to stud, elephants at the conservation center will mate and grow their herd. That, along with food, water, and daily baths replace a life on the road working for, well, peanuts.

I guess it's all good, just as long as no one tries to remove the iconic horse-drawn carriages from New York City's Central Park. Oh, wait a minute...

Deer Fence  
- Bill Pieper

So there she sat, on a padded chaise behind the house, keeping watch in the July dark, saved from the buzzing mosquitoes by the stinky repellent she'd sprayed on herself. Something had been raiding Robyn's garden, despite a new fence, and even if seeing the culprit accomplished nothing, she meant to put a flashlight on it.

But the chaise was soft, comfortable. Lulled by a thin sliver of moon and the ostinato of crickets in the surrounding brush, her mind wandered to how it was that she had this nice address in the first place, not to mention the nice car, though she certainly thought she deserved them.

After decades of raising two kids into successful adults, she'd buried both parents and a husband in the last five years, and through everything, been a dutiful daughter and a good wife. She had also responsibly downsized from the family home and from that old boat of an SUV into a standard sedan.

Sure, the sedan was electric and cost twice what the big boat had, and the house was custom-designed in one of the new gated communities along the river – two bedrooms, stone-and-glass prairie-style, plus a special loft in hopes of visits from future grandchildren. But only now had Robyn come into money of her own, with no scheming involved.

She and her sibs had inherited equal amounts from their father's will, and even as a distant cousin of the Moffat clan, he'd always been able to live as if financial considerations didn't matter. The Moffats were old money, big-time California money from the 1800s, the class of people who endowed museums and after whom universities named buildings. In context, then, a peaceful spot along the San Joaquin, on the northwest edge of Stockton, not far from where she and Lloyd had lived, wasn't that indulgent. And she did deserve it. Why not?

But the rules here were a pain. She'd bought a premium lot, no, *the* premium lot, on a nose of high ground forming part of the levee, and still had to fight for permission to build toward the rear of it, where she now treasured her view of the wooded channel and patchwork stretches of open water. Nor was that the end. Once she moved in, fight after fight over her choice of landscaping for the back patio, and later, over the deer fence.

She never used to be that combative and didn't want to be a crank, but the arbitrary way the Barn Hollow Homeowner's Association did things just set her off. She and Lloyd, over his long career as an administrator at Bay-Delta College, had learned not to rock the boat and were typically rewarded. Now it seemed that if she didn't rock it, she'd be run over.

The idea of an edible landscape, for example, really appealed to her, not merely herbs, but compact things such as cherry tomatoes, zucchini, Japanese eggplant, multi-colored Thai peppers, and okra, a close relative of hibiscus. All of which the Association regarded as the end of civilized life, if not of the entire world.

"No, no, no," Mrs. Stur-gis, "ornamental plantings only." To this day, she could hear the annoying voice of the Association Manager – his patronizing weariness, and his elongation of her name's first syllable. "Everyone is bound by the same restrictions, stated in their deed. In return, everyone shares in the greenbelts, the clubhouse and the other amenities."

"These *are* ornamental," she'd insisted. "What could be the harm if my beautiful peppers are also good to eat?" So she fought them on it, first at the Landscape Committee, and then on appeal, the full board, where she won. But the deer soon trampled and devoured her initial effort, spread just outside the masonry of the thirty-inch patio wall the rules did allow.

Meaning that she re-planted, and a bit beyond the wall she had the handyman from her

married years build – a discreet, six-foot barrier of what he called hog wire supported by redwood posts. She owned the land. Shouldn’t it produce something? She knew she was taking a risk, and that the neighbors terraced below her place would undoubtedly see it. But only after her new plant babies had produced their first harvestable tomatoes and okra did a formal complaint arrive; so she fought them again.

Yet all the while, there’d been steady predation. Deer, in her experience, leveled things to the ground. Not this beast— a possum, or whatever it was. Some of everything that seemed ready, and this month her peppers and zukes, which were flourishing, would be gone every few nights, no noise, no scat, no tracks, nothing. How it reached that far up through the mesh, she didn’t know. Her only defense was to stay out here in the dark.

And to stay awake, which got harder and harder. She stretched, tapped her foot on the flagstone patio and did yoga breathing, but still caught herself dozing when unrecognizable little sounds would snap her eyes open. But there hadn’t been any intruders, just a weak flow of marine air, dissipating the daytime heat. Then she didn’t catch herself, and must have slept ninety minutes, until a jostling noise and tinny thuds forced her into consciousness.

A shadowed form – no, two forms – stood close against the outer fence. She flicked on the LED beam and saw a deer up on its hind legs groping a foreleg in through the mesh near a pepper plant. “Hey!” she yelled, to frighten it, her body tense.

“Oh, crap!” the deer said, but it was a man in a full-length buckskin coat, locks of silver hair down to his shoulders, a silver beard and a floppy, frontier-style hat. “We’re sorry, we’re sorry,” he said. “Please don’t call the cops.”

Partially behind him was a short, dumpy woman holding a metal pail. She had stringy gray hair, a complexion like oiled teak, a woven skull cap, and from the shoulders down was swathed in exotically contrasting saris, or something similar to saris, made of woven fabric. Her eyes looked as fearful as Robyn’s probably did.

“Who are you?” Robyn asked, but her voice came out squeaky. Yet at 5’10,” she was a tall vigorous woman and they could likely sense it. She kept the beam on them full force.

“River people,” he answered, dropping his head and blinking. “Or mainly *she* is, but she don’t speak English. Like I say, we’re sorry for bein’ grabby.”

“Well, you should be,” Robyn said, voice recovered, and now advancing to almost ten feet from them. “I guess I won’t call the police, but this has to stop.”

“You got my word on it,” he said. His skin was pinkish, healthy and clean, his clothes reasonably clean as well. The woman was grimier than anyone would want to think about.

“Do you have names?” Robyn said. “I want to know who I’m dealing with.” She lowered the beam and let it play across their knees.

“Faulkner Briggs is mine.” He put out a hand for Robyn to shake, but she didn’t respond. “Hers is AbNag,” he went on. “She’s Hmong...from Vietnam.” At that, the woman bowed slightly in Robyn’s direction. “She lives down in there,” he motioned toward the river, “but her garden ain’t bearing yet, so...well...” He cleared his throat. “Anyway,” he continued, “everybody calls me Faulk. I didn’t get what you go by.”

“Just Robyn...with a Y.” She hadn’t meant to let her guard down like that, but since she had, she brought the light toward her face, so they’d see she was about their age. Her auburn-toned hair would have been as gray as the woman’s too, if it weren’t dyed.

“Nice name,” he said. “And real good that you’d take it easy on us. We was thinking rich folks wouldn’t miss a few peppers and the like. Ab’s a great cook...veggies only.”

“Don’t the deer wreck whatever she grows?” By then Robyn had switched the light off,

so only the skimpy moon worked against the night. A breath of breeze from the delta rustled the cottonwoods in the channel behind him. "The powers that be," she added, "are making me remove that fence you reach through. These plants won't have a prayer."

"Ab knows a special trick," Faulk said. "Puts down a boundary of coyote piss that deer won't cross."

"Where does she get that?"

Faulk gave a mouth-closed chuckle through his nose. "From coyotes, a' course. They're all over these woods."

"We have coyotes?"

"Can't believe you don't hear 'em some nights."

"I thought that was dogs."

He gave another of his chuckles. "Yeah, in a manner a' speaking. But you're somethin' else, Robyn. Far as my young niece and I are concerned, anybody we ever see in this Barn Hollow place acts like theirs don't stink."

Robyn felt herself smile. "Well, mine does, I assure you."

Faulk laughed uproariously, from deep in his chest, and she hoped he wouldn't wake the neighbors. "Just have to trust ya' on that one," he said, taking Ab by the elbow and guiding her off into the dark.

In bed the next morning Robyn awoke remembering that she'd dreamt of strange half-deer, half-coyote Centaurs marauding in her garden as she helplessly watched, and wondered if she'd dreamt the whole thing. Yet out back, carrying a coffee mug across to her table in the post-dawn light, she noticed near the outer fence a crude pail. A #10 can, actually, with a piece of looped coat hanger as its handle, and inside, a double handful of cherry tomatoes, okra and peppers. A tingle ran the length her spine. Dream or no dream, the rest had been real – the Hmong woman, the guy in the buckskin coat, and she *had* told them her name.

She took the pail inside and washed it in the sink, along with the produce, which she bagged to go in the fridge. Then, after dinner, with the sun hanging low in the sky, still in her golf clothes from the round she'd just played, Robyn put the bag of produce back in the pail, added a handwritten note, and hung the pail in plain view on the mesh. Her note read: "It was lovely meeting you. This is yours, and I'm happy to donate what's inside. When I can, I'll put out more that you can have, as long as it's me doing the picking."

Sure enough, the pail was gone when she went out with her coffee ten hours later, but there was a new note, scrawled on the reverse of hers. "Thank you kindly, Robyn. You're a good friend. –Faulk." Which not only made her smile, it lifted her mood all day, despite the nagging knowledge that early the following morning her handyman, Ralph, would knock on the door to undo the wonderful fence he'd built less than two months before.

He was right on-time, too, and the minute she greeted him and unlocked the side gate, he brought in his tools and went at it. But unexpectedly, his voice came through the screen, "Hey, Miz Sturgis, there's weird stuff out here and a note with your name on it."

She'd been doing kitchen cleanup and wore her apron when she joined him outside, standing near the metal pail, its top sealed with her former plastic vegetable bag and an old shoelace. With it were a folded scrap of cardboard and a closed mason jar of rusty yellow liquid with pieces of what looked like scat settled at the bottom. "Oh," she said, "no problem. I know what this is." gingerly, she picked up both items, as well as the note. Ralph seemed baffled. "Whatever," he shrugged, causing the wire cutters and claw hammer slung from the loops of his work pants to sway against his legs.

Back inside, she read the note. "Hi, again, Robyn. Here's some of Ab's special potion and a pot of her veggie stew. What you gave us is in there with all the rest. – Faulk." Smiling, Robyn poured more coffee, refrigerated the stew in a proper container and put the jar with her gardening supplies. She checked at the window and half the deer fence was down already. Well, she thought, how perfect, assuming the potion worked.

Wearing rubber gloves, Robyn carried the jar outside shortly before dinner, shook it, then eased off the lid. The cloudy liquid looked and smelled vile. There were no directions, but deer supposedly had sensitive noses, so dribbling the perimeter with a third to half the jar seemed like plenty, and she kept it well away from her shoes and clothes.

Ab's vegetable stew, however, was beyond delicious. Thick and flavorful – some of the peppers must have been smoked beforehand – it was right at her tolerance for spicy hot. The sliced okra pods, chick peas and celery chunks bathed in the mix provided satisfying texture, but guessing the seasonings was hopeless. She perhaps picked up cardamom, star anise and possibly fenugreek, along with salt, basil and lots of garlic, all of which stood up beautifully to the rice, cucumber salad and sauvignon blanc that rounded out her meal.

Crossing the patio at dusk to leave the pail, scrubbed and dry, where she had found it, Robyn heard what she now knew were coyotes, as tonight's slightly larger moon pushed above the horizon. The pail held a return note: "Faulk, Please tell Ab the stew was utterly great. The fence is gone, and I've applied some of her potion, so these next nights are the test. I'm truly grateful, and the way to show it is by hosting you both for a visit. Please come next Monday at 3 for iced tea and snacks on the patio."

She awoke later to the sound of hooves somewhere behind the house but forced herself to stay in bed and eventually slept. Then in the morning, coffee in hand, per usual, she didn't know which delighted her most: finding the garden unmolested, or the piece of folded paper under a handsome new greenish rock near where she'd left the pail. "Your note touched our hearts. We're almost never treated like real people. Yes, 3 o'clock Monday. Hope you don't change your mind."

Monday morning Robyn was excited, as if this would be the most interesting thing she'd done in years, which in many respects, it was. She made a big pitcher of mint-chamomile tea, tomato and garlic crostini, celery stuffed with herbed goat cheese, and a bowl each of salted almonds and Nicosia olives. Shortly before three she staged everything on a large tray in the kitchen, but at ten after, she was clenching her nails into her palms and at a quarter after, had all but given up. Then, from behind her garden, she heard Faulk's voice before she saw him. "Hey, hello! We're late but we're here."

She couldn't exactly run with the tray in her hands, but she wanted beat him to the patio, and did, because he stopped to wait for Ab. Robyn stood smiling as they found the gate in the low wall and stepped tentatively through, as if the flagstones could be landmines. "Come in, please, and sit." She gestured toward her Pottery Barn table and matching umbrella. This time, as Faulk extended his hand, she shook it, then exchanged a Namaste genuflection with Ab and slid out chairs for them.

"Gorgeous up here, Robyn," Faulk said. "You can almost see Ab's little island."

"Island?" Robyn answered.

"Yeah, we'll tell ya' about it. Your garden looks good, too."

"No problems, not since I put out the potion. And that rock is beautiful."

Faulk's fingers traced rapid patterns in the air. Ab smiled, less with her lips than her cheekbones, and made similar gestures in return. "She's glad it worked," Faulk said, "but you

gotta' refresh it 'bout once a month, 'specially if there's rain. The rock's for luck, she tells me." He turned toward Robyn and the table. "My God, look at this food!"

"Help yourselves," she said. "I'll pour tea." She watched them load up the tapas-sized plates she'd put out, not the behavior of her usual guests, but it made Robyn happy – or happier, because she already was happy.

Clearly, too, Ab had washed and dressed for the occasion. Her hair had a fresh lift to it, and her teakwood skin, unusually translucent, showed fewer wrinkles than Robyn's did. Her wrapping of coarse fabric was clean as well, and in different colors than before: turquoise, orange and purple.

Face flushed, Faulk held out his glass for a refill, but still wore the full-length coat, open like a robe, along with the floppy hat. Robyn was in shorts, while these two could be Bedouins in the summer heat. Of course they *were* Bedouins in a way, though Faulk was as clean or cleaner than he'd looked that first night, his silver hair shiny and his beard newly trimmed. For all the time he spent at the river, how could a camp account for such neatness?

Ab caught Robyn's attention, patting her tummy and pointing to the celery as if it was an unparalleled treat. "Please, take more, both of you," Robyn urged, adding olives and almonds to her own plate so they'd feel at ease.

Eventually Faulk hung his hat on the gate, exposing a head of Santa-Claus/mountain-man hair with a bald oval at the crown. "You can't imagine how special this is," he said, chewing a big bite of crostini, "and we're dyin' to know about you, Robyn. Why would ya' trust us and do it?"

"Maybe later," she said. "I'm boring. I'd much rather know about you."

And what Robyn learned was wild and unbelievable and made her feel more boring yet. To start, the AbNag that Ab was short for means precious rain in Hmong, and she'd come to California via the Philippines as a former boat person. Both in Vietnam and the US, illiterate all the while, she'd been a midwife and shaman, and before being homeless, had lived in the Stockton attic of some loose-knit family members. But a disastrous fire broke out, killing two children and one of their mothers, and Ab was thought to be at fault. Not by the authorities, but by neighbors and certain of her family, and she was shunned for bringing a curse. She, too, blamed herself, wandering the woods, penniless and babbling. She had no idea how old she was, then or now, or how long she'd existed as a dumpster-diving hermit.

By chance, one day at the river several miles from Robyn's area she met Faulk. He was then recovering from twenty years of alcoholism, mainly through a program run by Bread on the Waters, or BOW, which offers services to homeless people throughout the city. He had also qualified for Social Security, reunited with his niece, and just been hired by BOW as an outreach counselor, scouring the riverbanks and sloughs on a daily basis to save souls. "In a physical sense, that is," he added with a chuckle. "I don't give a hoot for religion."

More recently, he'd been living in his niece's garage, in an ordinary subdivision eight blocks from Barn Hollow. He had his own entrance, a cot, a window, a hotplate and access to laundry machines, the entire arrangement begrudgingly tolerated by her husband. A bus pass took him back and forth to BOW, where he showered and often ate their free midday meal. His remarkable coat had been left behind by an ex from his niece's hippie days, and the hat, someone stopped him on the street and gave him because of the coat.

Picturing that, Robyn burst into a laugh, which he freely joined. "Kind'a my touchstone, this coat. Wear it year-round and seems to let everyone know...river people or regular folks ...that I ain't too badass to deal with."

How he and Ab communicated was also remarkable. They each spoke some Vietnamese, and he knew sign language because in Bakersfield, growing up, his mother was deaf. Then at BOW, once he got Ab to accompany him there, a Hmong-speaking nurse in the clinic also knew sign language. By then Ab had given up on English and wouldn't try, but she took to sign language like no one in the nurse's experience.

By default Faulk became her American brother, in part to atone for things he and other GIs did along the Mekong during the war. He moved her to a safer part of the river, near his niece, kept in daily touch, and acted as her agent to obtain food stamps and cash assistance from the county. Winters, he knew the ropes and could get her into shelters most nights, but summers, she and sometimes a group of deer lived on an island that she had to hitch up her clothes and wade to, where nobody bothered her or her near-invisible garden.

"Oops!" he said, glancing at the sun, "we stayed too long."

"No, no, you're fine," Robyn assured him, then was shocked that her watch read 5:15, and she was due to attend a seven o'clock chamber concert that night.

"Really," he countered, pointing downstream. "I got work to do, and Ab has her rounds to make."

It seemed natural that these visits would repeat more-or-less weekly, with the green rock serving as a message drop. Robyn soon learned, for instance, that Ab's "rounds" were to local markets, scrounging for discarded produce. Also, her potion wasn't strictly coyote piss. It was coyote scat plus twigs, leaves and earth they'd peed on and marinated in Ab's own urine. Robyn would have been fine with less detail, but the truth wasn't as far-fetched as persuading wild animals to pee in a jar.

Gradually her guests supplied more details about Vietnam, and Robyn revealed things about her marriage, herself and her kids she didn't often bring up. She hadn't planned to, but Faulk's manner put her at ease. She didn't mention her lineage, though, because she never did. People got weird, like they were supposed to curtsy or ask for her autograph and had forgotten how. The neighbors, no surprise, took note of her visitors' comings and goings, which she deflected by implying that Faulk was an old family friend whose wife was Thai, and they liked to walk the riverbank pathways. If the truth came out, the Association, on some ridiculous pretext, was bound to file more complaints.

But one thing Faulk spoke of on his fourth or fifth visit haunted Robyn's mind. "Before *the drinking*," he used those words like a proper noun, a tangible thing, "I had a wife, a house, kids and worked at the big Moffat Industries plant in San Leandro. When they shut it down and sent those jobs to Mexico..." He lowered his eyes and slumped his head, as though studying his own hands, where they rested on the table, and not recognizing them. "...I went straight downhill myself. Lost everything...years a' my life. Funny part is, I've seen pictures of the Frisco skyline, and that big Moffat headquarters don't look like it wants for paint or upkeep. Guess they just couldn't afford runnin' their own factory."

The summer turned out to be perfect for gardening, not too burning hot, so she and Ab made Faulk their courier for an ongoing vegetable swap. Any bag Robyn put out would cycle to her again in a few days with things she didn't grow, like green beans, tiny melons, full-size tomatoes and long, slender cucumbers.

At her desk, mid-morning, paying September bills, Robyn Googled BOW and explored its website. Impressive. Very, in fact, with multiple programs operating out of the old Navy base to address basic needs and some she'd never thought of – like veterinary services for homeless people's pets, a library and computer room, sending volunteers to visit homeless jail inmates –

all without taking government funds. She then phoned the director's office to confirm that donations could be kept anonymous, wrote a \$5,000 check and mailed it.

That same night she was watching a Netflix video when her cell rang. "Hi, this is Julie Adorno, Faulk's niece. He said his friend Robyn gave him this number?"

"Yes, I'm Robyn." She felt a rush of alarm. "Is he all right?"

"He's OK, but he can't find Ab. Have you seen her?"

"Not in days, since the last time they were here."

"Oh. He's frantic and still out looking, but he asked me to call."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Robyn said. "I have his work number for emergencies."

"Thanks, and thanks for being so good to him. The rest of the family hasn't forgiven his ...well, you know, but he's always been my favorite uncle."

"That I can understand. Where are his wife and children?"

"Ex-wife. They're all in Texas and just hang up if he calls."

"I don't think *he*'s forgiven himself yet, either."

Robyn walked down behind the garden to the base of the flanking levees, and repeatedly called Ab's name as loudly as she could. Some phase of a full moon was up, either waxing or waning, and she didn't need a flashlight, but distant coyotes were the only reply.

After breakfast, no sign of Ab, and likewise when Robyn checked every hour until lunch. But Ab had never visited alone anyway, so what could she expect? Then her cell rang, and it was Faulk. "BOW found her," he said, almost breathless. "In jail."

"Safe, I hope. But why?"

"Shopliftin'. At a bottle store over by I-5."

"Liquor?" Robyn couldn't believe it.

"No, they have veggies, too, and sometimes the stuff's so mangy she don't wait for 'em to throw it out. Kumar, the guy who runs the place, has warned her before."

"Have you been down there yet?"

"No, no...I'm hell-and-gone upstream along the river. This here's my BOW TrackPhone. They called and filled me in, but afternoons like this, there's nobody they can send. I need to move that way fast as I'm able."

"Hold on, Faulk. I've got this. I'll have a lawyer post bail and pick her up myself. Just head over to BOW. I'll ring you on this number."

Her father had called it a *white-shoe* firm and they'd handled his estate, but one of the senior partners, Willard Bowen, was an old family friend, and they had a local office with departments for every kind of case. So in less than three hours, Ab was scheduled for immediate release, and Robyn had signed on to guarantee bail. By further agreement, Robyn would also underwrite any restitution, fines or fees associated with a hearing that the lawyers would handle when the time came. Robyn picked up Faulk on her way to the jail, and before sunset, both he and Ab were in the sedan heading north toward Brookside Road, agog at the thing's silent, surging power, which Robyn still was too.

Ab looked frightened and exhausted, but someone must have coaxed her into the shower, since she was clean even if her clothes weren't. Faulk didn't translate most of what she told him about it, their hands busy as Robyn drove. She pressed Ab to stay in the guestroom, but Ab insisted on returning to her island, and Faulk on making sure she got there OK. Faulk realized that money had been involved, Robyn's money, but he had no idea how much. He just told her, emphatically, that she was "the best person on earth," and Ab all but dislocated her neck making Namastes as they left.

In the morning Robyn called BOW with instructions to re-budget the \$5,000 she'd sent as a quarterly amount and also set a 1 p.m. meeting with the executive director to formalize things and discuss another idea she had. She then called her realtor, the one who'd handled the sale of her former house and overseen the deal on the new property.

"OK," he said, "I pulled the file."

"Double check for me," Robyn asked. "I have title all the way to the bottom of my little hill here, right, and it's not part of the levee along the channel because it's a natural feature of the land?" She heard papers being flipped on his end.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "Right here on the site map. It's why you paid thirty-percent more than the places around you. Not only for the view, but their property lines and the Association boundary quit at the top, with the rest controlled by San Joaquin Flood Prevention District."

"Thanks," she said. "Just what I remembered."

"But you can't remove any earth or build down there, not even a fence, nothing to cause debris build-up and backflow during a flood."

Robyn smiled. "No problem," she said, ready to head downtown right after lunch.

From her car, where she'd parked during her meeting at BOW, Robyn called Faulk. "Got a minute?" Homeless people, alone or in groups, carrying grimy blankets and backpacks, streamed by in both directions outside her windows.

"Yeah, but this phone's work only."

"It *is* a work call," she said. "Next season, I'm putting in a community garden at the base of my hill along the river, and I want you and Ab to run it. BOW says they'll pay you."

"Won't be easy," he said. "There's rough folks in them woods."

"Trust yourself," she told him. "We'll figure it out. What do you say?"

She heard one of his beguiling chuckles. "Well...square between yes, and hell yes."

## Iowa Back Roads

- Flo Hayes





Instinct

- Julie Ramon

We never taught him how to move  
to music. It was something he picked up  
on his own like the small items people  
pick up while walking and find  
worthy enough to place in their pockets.  
Pockets are a funny thing. Some are loose  
enough to fit oversized wallets and phones  
while others press items so close to your skin,  
that they hold onto your warmth when removed.  
He was that way. Before birth and now in his bed.  
When I separate his skin from mine, I can still  
feel the warmth of him after I close the door.

Off Interstate 40  
- John McKernan

A few miles  
From Bucksnort, Tennessee

Next to a Shell Station  
A large blackbird  
Has built a nest

Inside the word SNACK  
Straw Feathers Paper Hair  
Inserted beak-carefully  
Within the bright yellow A

I love the Roman Alphabet  
Might give my life for it some day  
Travelling from one silence  
As I do To another Blessed to use it  
To pull a flight plan from this bright empty air

Karl  
- Jo Taylor

Jonathan heard the resort bus coming long before it pulled into the circular drive in front of the lobby and heaved its door open for the guests. He was first in line, on an early mission before Katie woke. "I need to find Karl," he said, eyes searching for recognition of the name on the dark face in front of him.

"Yah, Mon. We find him."

He sat on the left side, in the next to the last row, and fixed his eyes on the horizon, letting the patchwork of buildings blur into a single streak of color as the bus picked up speed. Seventy-eight humid degrees came in the bank of windows set open on the top, smells of salt water and stale sweat mixed with the breeze of forty-five miles an hour. The painter's name was Karl; that's all he knew for sure. He lived somewhere in town, but no one would give an address for the local master. He only worked now if you asked him yourself, or so they said.

The bus stopped in front of a shantytown area, crooked walls and corrugated tin roofs, more poverty than artistry, but the driver nodded his head at the unspoken question. "Fifteenth place down on the right, red paint with a porch."

Jonathan handed the driver a generous tip, ensuring a quick return when he'd acquired his prize.

"Evry'ting Arie," the bus driver said and closed the door.

Jonathan walked down the dirt road, counting the shacks where the artists showed their work. All the places had hand-painted signs and each gave an idea of what he might find inside.

Sister Love

Art & Craft

Nice 'n Easy

Welcome

Shop 62

Proprietors shouted to each other; friendly calls of "Yah, Mon," carried on the heavy island air. In the blanketing breeze, Jonathan felt strangely at home in a place he'd never been. He passed Alda's Gift Shop, bright blue accordion doors opened wide to the tourists to lure them inside, to paw through shell and coral and wood art, or pass over necklaces and bracelets crafted by the boys behind the counter. Older women with their hair up in burgundy wraps sat outside the doors on plastic chairs and called out to those on the street to "come look."

Fifteenth place down, right side. He sat on the porch with a young boy at his feet. Together, all knees and elbows, they appeared the contrast of age, one of coltish growth, one of waning might.

"Are you Karl?" Jonathan asked.

"Yah, Mon, I'm Karl. Whatch you want?" He turned toward the sound of Jonathan's voice and from the few feet that separated them; Jonathan saw gray cataracts covering both of Karl's eyes.

A blind painter. How would a blind painter create a portrait of Katie? He dropped his arms to his sides and stammered, "Uh, Um, Uh..."

The boy jumped up and motioned Jonathan into the shack, eagerly waving his hand. "Karl paint for you. I mix de paint for him, but he still as good as when he could see. Come and look. Start here."

Jonathan stepped into the darkness and faced the right wall, waiting for his eyes to adjust,

a single, naked bulb the only source of dim light. Portraits sat on the floor, tipped back and resting on the wall and hung all the way to the roof in no pattern or order, Black, White, Asian, and Indian faces rendered in all the colors of the rainbow which described humanity. He didn't need to step in any direction, the room no bigger than his walk in closet. The boy talked about all the paintings and Karl's great talent, which he could see for himself.

"Show me a piece he's just done," Jonathan said, afraid the boy would bring garish and unclear brush strokes on canvas.

"Here," the boy pointed to a minor collection, set aside on the left. "Dey dry here."

Jonathan drew in a quick breath, realizing he failed to consider a painting would have to dry. He would not be able to take it to Katie today.

The boy squirmed, smiling, while he showed off the pieces as though in a museum instead of a dirty, sad little shack. Jonathan's cool hesitation began to melt as he looked at these newer works. A bit more impressionistic, more Van Gogh than Rembrandt, the likenesses were still real, the colors vivid. The portraits seemed alive.

"Karl paint for you?" The boy looked less like a little beggar and more like an usher, sure of where he placed a patron.

"Yes, please. A portrait of my wife."

The boy brought an easel to where Karl sat and prepared the paints and brushes. Karl felt for the canvas and directed Jonathan with pointed finger and a nod of his head to sit on the porch rail in front of him.

"Tell me about her," Karl said.

"I have a picture." Jonathan offered it to the boy who dutifully took it to Karl, and held it steady until Karl turned back to the canvas.

"Tell me about her," he said again.

Jonathan described his wife's features, thinking Karl had only been able to see color and shape from the picture. "She has blond hair, five feet six inches tall. Square face and rounded nose. Blue eyes with long lashes. She smiles a lot."

Karl laughed softly. "No, Mon, tell me about *her*. Tell me who she is, what she loves. Dat's how I paint now. I paint de spirit, not de flesh. Dose t'ings are de black and white of people. Color comes from inside."

Jonathan shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans as if he could find a single item to show him — this is her, this is how I feel about her, this is who she is. His arms hugged his sides and protected the part of him that feared he did not know her well enough. He started again, the words at first no more descriptive than arched brow and soft skin, but as the ideas came, he used hands and face and body to show Karl how she spoke and moved, expressive and charming.

He defined her as Karl painted. Above her desk hung a collage of strong women, in character and deed. She loved Mozart and Green Day, poetry by John Donne and Sara Teasdale. She spoke four languages, and she snorted when she laughed. She cooked dinner in stocking feet, wearing a black apron, with a glass of Merlot in her hand. Katie made funny faces at him in the middle of an argument.

Jonathan mimicked her voice and manner of speech, and Karl worked steadily, interrupting sometimes for a detail of her face, or requesting a color from the boy. "Mix pink like de lady near de mirror and a red like de dancing girl." Karl spoke kindly to the boy, in a low and steady tone, warm as the island air. "Terrence is my nephew, my sister's boy," he said to Jonathan as the boy disappeared into the dark. "Why you come to Jamaica, Mon?" Karl asked.

"For vacation, to make her happy. Katie's been, I don't know, distant lately. People change over the years, and who's to say because you're married, you change along the same path? I've asked her what's wrong, and she doesn't know. She says she's happy. I thought getting away, being able to pay attention to her would help."

"Yah, Mon." Karl's eyebrows lifted high on his forehead.

"She seems content. But what if she's slipping away from me?"

"Whatch you want from her, your Katie?"

"For her to be happy, I guess." Jonathan wrinkled his nose as if giving a teacher an answer he was unsure of.

"Nah Mon, dat's whatch you want for her, I asked whatch you want from her."

"Just love. Love and understanding." He stood up straight, words soft.

"So. Maybe dat's all she want from you, too."

"But I do love her and understand her."

"It's not de same, lovin' and understandin'. Love is sometin you do. Understandin' is sometin you give."

And then he finished. It was . . . her. Jonathan touched his shoulder, then took Karl's strong and remarkably soft hand in his.

"Tomorrow. Come back tomorrow, Mon. It be dry enough den. Bring Katie witch you."

On the twenty-minute ride back to the resort, past businesses, more shantytowns, and beachfront houses, Jonathan saw them differently. They were all just things, the black and white of people.

When he entered their room, Katie was gone; her hat, sunglasses, and bag gone, too. He hurriedly changed into board shorts and jogged down to the beach. At the surf line, he headed west, seven miles of white sand meeting perfect blue water; it looked in real life as it did in the pictures. He walked on the edge of the tiny waves, breaking like bath water splashing over the sides of a tub. He knew Katie would recognize his Pennsylvania tan and unruly hair but he saw her first, reading in the now hot October sun, sipping a happy orange drink and tipping her head back to see out from under the brim of her sun hat.

"Where've you been?" She waved and pulled her glasses off. She always took them off when they spoke.

"I went looking for something for you, to make you happy, and instead, I found something from you."

She cocked her head to the side and took a sip from her drink. "I didn't know I was so powerful. What'd I get you?"

"Understanding." He couldn't say more.

"It fits." Her smile said more than the words. She held out her hand, "Let's go swimming." They walked slowly toward the water, and she ran her hand up his arm, patting it lightly in reassurance. "Did you know your shorts are on backward?"

She threw her head back in laughter as his panicked face gave away his hurry to dress. When he looked down, he found the tie strings in perfect order. He giggled as she turned and ran, and he stood there, love-struck and laughing, watching Katie run full tilt to the bluest water in the world.

## Men At Work

- Joseph Glaser







Old Skins

- Ion Coros

In unknown country  
He grips the weathered fence,  
abandoned on the threshold

where soul calls;

instead skeletons appear,  
look for old skins;  
a cleft in his hope.

Old Soul  
- Martha Phillips

I looked away  
It was the second time I had seen him.  
The first time, I had to make noise  
To interrupt his grazing.  
His rack was huge  
That first time I didn't count the points  
Simply marveled.  
Then, as he met my gaze,  
I bolted  
Back to my car to get my camera.

Yesterday  
I saw him again as I was parking my car  
He met my eyes  
From twenty feet or so  
We stood there holding one another  
I wondered if he could look more  
Deeply in to me than I in to him  
Was he someone I knew from another life  
Was he the same one I had photographed before  
I dropped my gaze, closed my car door  
then walked around my car for the groceries.  
Still he didn't look away.

Starting toward the ramp with my bags  
I looked over my shoulder he had not moved  
quietly intent on me  
I turned to face him again  
And I spoke:  
What is it you want of me  
Who are you  
And what do you know  
I won't take your picture again  
You have imprinted me with your being  
Did God send you?

Tropical Paradise  
- Kana Philip

Big Joe launched a duffel containing most of his worldly possessions over one side of the rusted F-150. It landed in the bed at Ellie's feet, and she wrestled it into a pile with the rest: a tool chest, spare tires, three milk crates full of rope, twine and chains, two buckets full of trowel parts, hawks and gloves, fishing rods, a cardboard box of National Geographic magazines, and another bucket full of mixed nails, screws, hinges, drill bits, pulls and greasy paperbacks.

"But where is Belize, exactly?" asked Ellie.

"It's down south a piece. I told you already," said Big Joe. "Now go ahead and fish a tarp out from your father's bins."

Ellie hopped off the pickup and ran to one of the sheds where three fugitive chickens pecked at the feed-dusted floor. She shoved them out the hole they sneaked in through and propped an old tire across it. From the tack bin she chose the large cotton duck sheet she trimmed out with polished brass eyelets and tie-dyed last summer. She panted back and handed it to Big Joe.

"Is it as far as Mexico?"

He held one side while she stretched it across the truck bed. "It's further than that."

He tied his knots simple and fast, then came across to help her. His knuckles were wide as quarters, she measured them the first week he moved back. She could fit her entire hand in his palm, and when he blew on his thumb, his arms inflated.

"But don't you think I should go with you, Big Joe? We could have a real good time in Belize, and I could pick us up some tacos when we pull through Mexico. Plus, who's going to do your laundry? You've got to figure that in."

She wore a green shirt with two yellow stripes on each sleeve, faded blue high-waters and rusty Velcro shoes. Her pale ginger hair fell halfway to her shoulders and stuck out all over like straw. She knew Big Joe once had ginger hair, too.

"You aren't coming, and that's all there is to it, so you might as well drop it now, Ellie."

"Well goddamn it," she scuffed the gravel.

"Enough of that, or I'll get out my belt. Your father already gave me hell about your potty mouth."

As if the mention were a summons, Joe Junior came tearing up the driveway, throwing stones, skidding to a stop and hopping out in one movement.

"Whatever it is this time, just hold on, Pop," he said.

"Hold on to yourself, it's nothing," Big Joe retied one of Ellie's knots.

"We're packing up for Belize, Dad," Ellie said, "I'll give you a call when we get there so you know we're okay."

"Goddamn it, Ellie, I told you enough of that," said Big Joe.

"Goddamn it, Dad," said Little Joe.

"Goddamn it," said Ellie, and kicked the driveway again.

"Watch your mouth, Ellie," Little Joe said. "She never used to talk that way, know that Pop? And no way is she going to Belize, I'll tell you that right now."

"She isn't," said Big Joe. He looked over at Ellie, "Just like I told you, right Ellie?"  
Ellie double checked one of the knots.

"Then what the hell is going on? Delma said you were packing everything up again. Will one of you tell me where the hell Belize is at?"

"It's down south," said Ellie, "Right over there by Mexico."

"Well that's about it, I guess," said Big Joe.

"And just what in hell do you know about Belize?"

"I know plenty. I got an article in the truck. Ellie, go get your daddy that Geographic."

Ellie left the knots and fetched the magazine from where it lay on the bench seat, next to an unopened letter marked 'Official Business'.

"It's all right here," she said, slapping the magazine with back of her hand, "Tropical paradise."

"Who says?"

"By god, it is a goddamn tropical paradise," said Big Joe. He pointed to a double page spread with several beautiful, brown skinned women lounging in white sands with palm trees and blue water behind them.

"Listen Dad, what in hell you think you are going to do in Belize? You don't have a house, you don't know a soul, you don't have a job. You don't speak Belizian. How much savings do you even own?"

Behind the house, Marcy was barking.

"I can still work anywhere. I got two hands, don't I? Down there, you just set up in a field for a while, and it's yours. The government doesn't go around taking all your cash and charging you to live on land you already own. Don't worry about me, I'll be just fine." He sliced the air with his hand to make the point.

"Oh great, so he's all pissed off at America again," Little Joe raised his arms to the sky and let them slap down on his thighs. He took off his hat and rubbed it along his brown hair.

Marcy let off a long volley of throaty woofs that echoed between the sheds.

"Shut up, Marcy!" said both Joe's.

"She's a hollering at something!" Ellie ran out back to the pen. Marcy put her head down and sniffed.

"Listen Dad," said Little Joe, standing between the trucks, "This isn't a good idea, it's not like Oregon this time, or Montana, or any of the other ones. They have diseases down there. Malaria and such. Do you even have the right shots for that?"

"Diseases, he says! Listen to him talk. They got diseases up here! Taxes, they call them. You want me to starve to death up here in the land of the free? Diseases. Ha!" The old man spat at the gravel and flipped through his National Geographic without reading.

Behind the house, Marcy stood her front paws on the fence, scenting the air with narrowed eyes. Ellie yelled, "I think she's got something now! She's sniffing around pretty fierce over here!"

Little Joe slapped his leg with his hat, "Dammit, Pop, will you just think it out for a minute? You can't just go around saying taxes is the same thing as malaria! You're gonna get yourself sick. Or worse. Just hold on a minute, and lets figure this thing out."

Marcy was barking again.

"Figure what? There's nothing to figure on, I'm heading south, going to be in Belize in a week. Done deal. Ellie, can't you quiet her down?"

"She smells something funny!"

"Well settle her down, then," shouted Little Joe. "Listen, Dad. We're doing good. Damn good. If it's about money, why don't you..."

Big Joe waved away the question. He pointed to a line of print, "Three hundred eighty kilometers of coastline," he brought the magazine close to his nose, "Is a kilometer bigger or

smaller than a mile?"

"It's smaller, Dad. You didn't learn that in Ottawa?"

"Anyhow, it says right here, 'Belize is slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts.' So there you go."

"There you go what? Gimme that thing," Little Joe grabbed at the magazine, but his father snatched it away.

"Hold on a minute, I was getting to the good part. Says right here, the place is practically empty. Almost the size of a state, and it's practically empty!"

"Well, let me see it..."

"Now, hold on a goddamn minute..."

Little Joe grabbed the top of the magazine, but Big Joe held fast to the bottom. "Let go!" Marcy hopped the fence.

"I ain't done with it yet, goddamn it. You let go."

Marcy shot by them, barking and leaping, a yellow streak.

"Oh shoot, grab her!" shouted Ellie, running down to the trucks.

"How'd she get out, Ellie?"

"Jumped the goddamn fence! And you two just let her run right by ya!"

"Watch your mouth, Ellie!" said Little Joe. At that moment, his Rescue Squad pager set up a squall of high-pitched squawks. "Ah shit," he said "They're toning me out, I gotta get to the fire station. Would you two get that goddamn dog back in the fence? You aren't going anywhere pop, got it?" He ran to Big Joe's truck, reached in, pulled the keys and was back in his own truck, spewing gravel across the yard before Big Joe could stop him.

"Well, goddamn it," said Big Joe. "Go get the leash, Ellie!"

Ellie ran back to the shed and pulled the leash from its spot by the light switch. "Go on, before she gallops the cows," Ellie shouted.

The glossy magazine fluttered in a small breeze on the hood of Big Joe's pickup. Ellie took it back to the shed, hid it in the bottom of the tack bin and lit out across the field where Marcy dodged between the startled cows and Big Joe cussed. They chased her behind the barns and house and behind the pens, through a shallow tree line and into the back pasture. She bounded across a meadow and into more trees on the other side, over a tiny brook to the edge of the road, Joe and Ellie puffing along in her wake, calling when they gathered enough air. And when they had her at arm's length, Marcy ran back through the woods and the field and the meadow, a blonde bolt hopping and barking, full of the joy of freedom, to the back porch.

She wagged her tail, circling again and again as Big Joe and Ellie made it to the bottom step. Ellie collapsed into the soft lawn, and Big Joe eased himself down beside her.

"Good planting, this ground." said Big Joe. He wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Big Joe, can I ask you something?"

"That depends on the something, Ellie."

"Why are you leaving out again?"

Joe thought for a time. "Can you remember when my daddy died, Ellie?"

"I like to think I wouldn't forget a thing like Joe Senior dying." She plucked out some of the cool grass and let it fly away from her fingers on the wind. Marcy finally found a suitable spot and lay down on the porch.

"I'm going to take you in on a secret here." He looked down at the daughter of his only son. "This is something you aren't going to hear in school, so I want you to listen good."

Ellie shrugged. "Sure."

“The day Joe Sr. died, I became an orphan. That’s what happens. That’s the secret nobody tells you. Even if it all goes right, and your kids grow up and have kids of their own – that’s you – even then, one morning you wake up to the plain fact that you’re a seventy-five-year-old orphan. There are no nets, Ellie. Not even for you.”

“Are you going to leave us again for real?”

“Nowhere is home to an orphan.” He built himself slowly up to his feet. “But one day they’ll send me back. I want you to lay me down right here. This’ll be the spot.” He dug in to the dirt with the tip of his boot.

Ellie lay back on her arms and looked over the treetops. Marcy lifted her head, suddenly panting off the heat in the way dogs do. She got up and spun around a few times, then lay down again on cooler part of the porch.

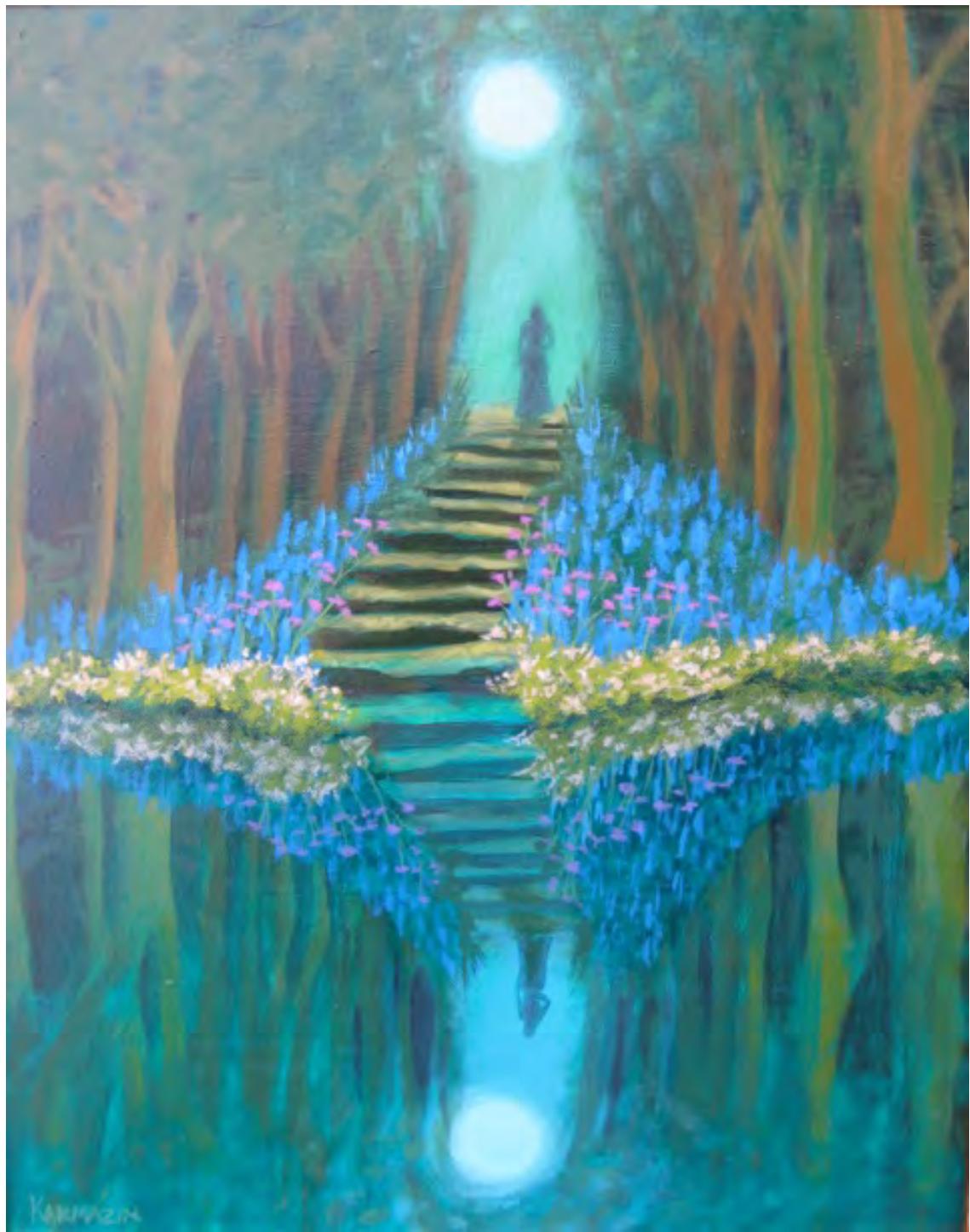
Ellie sat up. “I hid your magazine in the shed, Big Joe. I guess I wished you’d stay.”

“I know, Ellie,” said Big Joe. “I know.”

# Dreamworld

- Margaret Karmazin





Karen Koenzen

Removing the Poet's Desk

- Robert Carr

The walled hollow space  
echoes my stepping.

A dusty edge of drawer  
defines your mark.

A single almond  
you left on the floor

says more  
than all your words.

Calloused nut  
balanced on my fingertip –

Unsown, I consider  
dropping the seed.

Safe House  
- Mark J. Mitchell

The wing nut  
on the dagger tip  
spins,  
glinting all  
out of proportion.

It sings  
the song of metal  
on metal,  
droning  
a harsh note.  
A door creaks.  
No one comes in.

Outside, cars slide past.  
Bored drivers ignore  
this dark window.  
Shadows splash  
on the wall,  
tossed by headlights.  
The curtain rises,  
falls  
like a spider web.  
The blade hits the floor

and nut slips away,  
suddenly silly  
against the red rug.  
A lamp snaps awake,  
drowning the night's  
imaginary threats.

In this naked room  
morning will be  
welcomed.  
So what shall we do  
while we wait?  
First, shuffle all the cards,  
then  
place your bets.

My, What a Long Beak You Have

- Len Kazmer







The Girl Next Door

- Colleen Redman

I'm the woman who walks to the mailbox everyday  
whose life you imagine when you drive by and wave  
The one collecting sticks for kindling as she walks  
who stops reciting poetry out loud when she sees you  
The homebody in house clothes with dirt smudged at the hips  
seen swinging her arms up over her head  
because studies have shown that symphony conductors  
live longer than the rest of us

## **Submission Guidelines**

We publish thoughtful, provocative fiction, poetry, essays and visual arts.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

- If accepted, submissions may appear in any quarterly issue.
- Biographical information will be requested for accepted submissions.
- If your submission was previously published, please cite the reference.
- Simultaneous submissions should be accompanied by a statement stating so.
- If your work is accepted elsewhere prior to our evaluation, please notify us.
- No erotica or works which rely on explicit language or gratuitous violence.
- All work must be original and in English.
  
- Fiction and essays can be up to 5000 words.
- No novel excerpts
- No memoirs
- No genre fiction; e.g., horror, science fiction, mysteries
- Fiction should deal with critical, universal aspects of human behavior.
- Essays can be on any topic but must express a reasoned opinion.
- Poems should have strong images and concise, evocative language.
- Visual arts which elicit the comment, "How interesting!" are desired.
- Submit visual arts as **.jpg** files; do not send **.tif** or **.bmp** files.
- Accepted visual arts may be reduced to fit the available space.
- Prose and poetry may be accompanied by one or more relevant photos.
  
- Mac users, please be sure that your files are readable by Windows 10.
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