



Diverse Voices Quarterly
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Editor's Note

Hi, reader-friends,

Thanks for the pausing the events around you and reading this issue. Can you believe we've been publishing for over five years now? We appreciate everyone of you who submit and believe in this little online presence in the literary Internet world. Here's to another five years!

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 6, Issue 22

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When she isn't teaching the abundant virtues of the comma and writing poetry about big hair and Elvis, **Kim Baker** works to end violence against women and end hunger. A poet, playwright, photographer, and NPR essayist, Kim publishes and edits *Word Soup*, an online poetry journal that donates 100% of submission fees to food banks. Kim's chapbook of poetry, *Under the Influence: Musings about Poems and Paintings*, is now available from Finishing Line Press. Kim has three photos currently in art exhibits. Her play *A Day in the Life of a Recovering Nine Year Old*, about surviving childhood sexual assault, opened summer 2014 at the Driftwood Players short play festival.

David Bennett has been writing since his days at Robert E. Lee grade school in Port Arthur, Texas. He got sidetracked for decades by the need to grow up after getting a degree in English from the University of Texas in 1969, by his obligations as a conscientious objector during the war in Vietnam, and by working as a registered nurse and licensed massage therapist. Release from responsibilities came in the form of fractured vertebrae in 2005 and the diagnosis of an incurable cancer, multiple myeloma. Finally, he was able to focus on writing the novel that had been begging to see daylight. This short story is lifted from that unpublished novel.

Lori Carlson is a poet and short fiction writer. She has published in ezines such as *Gzine the Magazine*, *Little Brown Poetry* (now defunct), and *Talent Drips Erotic Literary Ezine*. Lori has a Masters in Arts and Liberal Studies (MALS) and a bachelor's in English from Hollins University. Lori currently lives in Oklahoma, but will soon be returning to her beloved mountains of Virginia. Visit her website here: <http://promptlywritten.wordpress.com>.

Dah's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Cape Rock*, *Dead Snakes Journal*, *Deep Tissue Magazine*, *Digital Papercut*, *Eunoia Review*, *Jellyfish Whispers*, *Literature Today*, *The Lost Coast Review*, *Miracle Magazine*, *The Muse*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Orion headless*, *Perfume River Review*, *Red Wolf Journal*, *River & South Review*, *Rose Red Review*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Stone Voices Magazine*, and *Zygote in my Coffee*. The author of two collections of poetry from Stillpoint Books, Dah lives in Berkeley, California, where he is working on the manuscript for his fourth book.

A.J. Huffman has published eight solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. She also has two new full-length poetry collections forthcoming, *Another Blood Jet* (Eldritch Press) and *A Few Bullets Short of Home* (mgv2>publishing). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, *Kritya*, and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of [Kind of a Hurricane Press](#).

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Kate McCorkle received her master's degree in humanities from the University of Chicago and her bachelor's degree in English from the College of the Holy Cross. A member of the Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, her work has been published in *Apiary Online*, and she regularly contributes to [LiveQuestions.org](#). Kate has been a freelance writer and editor since 2006. Prior to that, she worked in higher education for several years. Four children under eight demand much of her time; she enjoys swimming to stave off insanity.

Michael Mark is a hospice volunteer and long-distance walker—his latest journey was the Camino De Santiago. His poetry has appeared or is set to appear in *Angle Journal*, *Awakening Consciousness Magazine*, *Empty Mirror*, *Everyday Poets*, *Forge Journal*, *Lost Coast Review*, *OutsideIn Magazine*, *Petrichor Review*, *Ray's Road Review*, *Scapegoat Journal*, *Spillway*, *Red Booth Review*, *Red Paint Hill*, *Sleet Magazine*, *The Thing Itself*, *The New York Times*, *UPAYA*, *Word Soup End Hunger*, *Wayfarer*, and other nice places. He thanks you for looking at his profile, though this isn't him.

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Sarah O'Sullivan completed her MA at University College Cork in 2001. Her thesis was entitled "Mary Dorcey: The Making of Poetry." She has had poetry published in an annual collection of contemporary poetry called *The Stony Thursday Book*. Her first collection, *Small Things*, was published in 2010. She now lives in Cork, Ireland, after spells in Australia, South Africa, and the Southwest U.S.A.

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Nina Rota is a writer and filmmaker. Her writing can be found in *Witness Magazine*, *Inside Tennis*, and *Red Fez*. Her short films have appeared in Getty Museum's Pacific Standard Time project and Anthology Film Archives. She hopes to live long enough to see machine-merged humans. Visit her website at: NinaRota.com.

Mahtem Shiferraw is a poet, visual artist, and cultural activist. She grew up in Eritrea & Ethiopia. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College. Her work is published or forthcoming in *The 2River View*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Blast Furnace*, *Blood Lotus*, *Bohemian Pupil Press*, *Cactus Heart*, *The Missing Slate*, *Mad Hatters Literary Journal*, and *Mandala Journal*. Her short story "The River" received an honorable mention from Glimmer Train Press. Visit her website here: MahtemShiferraw.com.

Marc Tretin is a retired attorney who has published in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Bayou*, and *Cloudbank*.

D. Jeanne Wilson writes from her hilltop home in rural West Virginia. After years as an elementary teacher, Girl Scout, 4-H and church youth leader, her published stories often feature children.

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STIRRED

A mourning dove, seldom seen, arrives
together with my breakfast toast.

I give its momentary coming to my
aging back. The silence of the bird

contains the solace of its coo,
the sky a patient waiting for the stir.

No need to cage what ecru feathers
carry, air made visible. A shape in flight

or still remains, true to its beginnings,
like the drift of bells straying

into memory or calling the weightless
presence into the need of now.

—Peggy Aylsworth

DAISIES & DEATH

(Koki's painting)

Death approaches with fresh daisies,
serene as a clueless sky. If you take a closer look,
faces will emerge, swollen like stung tokens,
shredded in sugared specks and fragments,
bundled up like ivory turnips, swaying from side
to side, distorting their bodies with your pupils,
and, finally, disgorged by other faces.

Once a little girl, now an uncomplicated
squalor plastered on a lacerated sky.
It is not dark, but the absence of light
croaks fervidly in translucent infestation,
swamping in azurite spurts from her sides,
(spattered all over her lower body)
whisking with maroon streaks of blood.

If I were the artist, which I am not, which I could be,
I would not tell you to get over it. You can preach
about AIDS to the world, but daisies don't even smell good.

—Mahtem Shiferraw

SCAR

We inhabit separate hemispheres
now, never again to share a season.

I had thought, back then,
when she first left me
in my winter prison,
that one day she would turn
her gaze to me again,
and we would be renewed
slowly, as spring greens
infiltrate frosted lawns.

But that is not how it happens.

Flung from frozen into the
full blaze of summer sun,
the almost forgotten,
skin on skin heat
of a beautiful stranger.
Basking in unexpected warmth
old wounds pale
to silvered scars.

—Sarah O’Sullivan

SUNDAY SHOWERS

When I refused his pink semen he put up the pink tiles
I love on the walls around our tub, while I stood like a fool
in a pew praying to god-knows-who that he'd live awhile
despite his biopsy and my urges to be cruel.

Sundays were our time to tangle tongue, legs, lips,
back of knees; it was our silent ritual
meant to ease those doubts that would slip
us into a divorce that would be oh-so-cordial.

Hearing the church organ's heaving chords hang in the shower's
still air, I dry my papyrus skin and wonder, if I'd twine
his body to mine, would his cancer bring closer my final hour.
As I see his tiles that he aligned so
perfectly, autumn's soft rains start, with no hint
of their coming; let this be our sign.

—Marc Tretin

A LOVER'S LEGACY

by

David Bennett

Riff had already named the electric guitar. He held Jeremy close to his chest, then jerked him away, still clutching his neck. He knew better than to plug Jeremy in, with his owner asleep in the bedroom. Instead, he let loose a silent succession of licks that would have had Jeremy wailing for mercy.

Then he frowned. Why should people be cursed with consciences? It would be so easy to split with Jeremy, but at the same time it would be impossible. Not after meeting his owner.

No, the best thing would be to make friends with the nice man who had invited him in off the street and ask if he could come over and practice on Jeremy. Maybe Keith would lend him the guitar if Riff got in a band. That would be fantastic.

A deep sense of relaxation ran through Riff's veins. And just like that, Riff's muscles gave way, a brand-new sensation—like gravity got turned down a notch. He put Jeremy down before he dropped him.

Riff had the urge to hug Keith and thank him for being real. Then he remembered what Keith had yelled down the hallway, as he stumbled off to bed: "Or you could join me in here." So Riff tiptoed into the bedroom, stripped down to his shorts, and crawled in with Keith. Keith grunted and moved over. It was warm and moist where he'd been lying. Smelled like sweat and peppermint, like the tea they drank earlier that night, when Keith listened to all Riff's problems without putting him down.

* * *

Keith woke in a fog. He vaguely remembered Riff joining him in bed. But he'd had his deepest sleep in more than a year, even after the strange body parked itself next to him.

For as long as Keith could remember, he'd woken up depressed every morning. He couldn't shake the idea that his life had essentially ended, that he was living it out the same way that a team hopelessly behind has to play till the final buzzer.

He had slept alone every night the past year. For three years before that, only Dwight had shared his bed—even after they got the diagnosis and Dwight

started his horrible decline.

But today Keith felt a little...jazzed. Clouds had lifted. The birds in the trees outside his bedroom window had reached full chirp.

This youth sleeping next to him was a gift from the universe. And this sort of opportunity had a very brief shelf-life. So Keith should certainly try to enjoy it while it was happening.

Riff lay sprawled, his eyelids twitching, his beatific smile yielding at times to a smacking of those beautiful lips, a snore occasionally bubbling up. A couple days' growth on his face, fine fuzz on his chest, and a package straining in his shorts said, "Filet mignon."

The question occurred to Keith: Did hustlers spend the night? But other questions overshadowed that one. Was it their protocol to spill out all their problems? Riff's fledgling band had failed. His mother was moving in with her boyfriend. Yesterday the grocery store he'd worked for since graduating from high school fired him for oversleeping. Not exactly fodder for a sexy romp.

The other question: was Riff really a hustler?

But answers would come soon enough. Keith reached over and gently stroked the wondrous creature, whose body winced at first, then cried out for more. Riff's eyes popped open and he looked around, startled. When he focused on Keith, he broke into a shy grin.

This couldn't have been mere happenstance. Yesterday afternoon Keith had set out to take a walk, trying to chase off the blues. It was the one-year anniversary of his dear Dwight's passing. He'd made his way to Jimmy's Music in the Montrose neighborhood. Getting a copy of Corliagno's AIDS Symphony would be the perfect way to honor Dwight's memory.

Little could he have known he would run into this disconsolate—but intriguing and sympathetic—young man.

Had someone arranged this tryst? A fellow widower from his grief group? One of the guys from the quartet Keith had put together with other high school band directors for campy weekend gigs? Whoever it was, he had superb taste.

* * *

Riff tried to remember. Had anyone ever treated him so tender? Not Brandon, that was for sure. That fucker had promised him an electric guitar and a band—but he never produced either one. The hypocrite only wanted Riff in his life so he could brag that he was friends with a guy from the projects.

And so he could paw him after they got good and drunk.

High school girls weren't any better, really. They were all in a rush, worried someone would catch them. Not that Riff had wanted to be with them all that much. Just trying to fit in.

Last night Keith had come down with the yawns around midnight. Said he couldn't stay up another minute. They'd yakked for hours and Riff was still wired. Keith threw Riff a pillow and a blanket and told him how comfortable the couch was. Said, "Make yourself at home." Then yelled the thing about crashing in his bedroom.

This morning a hand was *caressing* him. He'd never known how that felt—a caress. Heard of it but it meant nothing to him. Now he knew.

And now, after Riff woke all the way up and returned Keith's touch, he felt another first—a mouth surrounding him where it felt totally awesome.

After awhile Keith came up for air enough to say, "Let's 69."

Two more firsts. Lying like that with another guy. And returning the favor. Riff liked how equal it was, liked listening to Keith moan. It wasn't just hurrying to get your rocks off; it was wandering toward an awesome fountain that you knew was close but didn't mind how long it took. That's how nice it was—like bathing in poetry. Nothing anywhere *near* that sense of peace and security had ever happened to Riff.

Afterward, Riff put his head on Keith's chest and mumbled, "I feel like a million dollars." His problems had faded away. He skimmed the top of sleep, in and out of dreams.

Keith kept treating Riff's body like it was a cat, running his hands through Riff's hair, humming into his ear.

And Riff thought: *I've made it to goddamn heaven.* He shivered into a big, fat sigh and let go completely.

And he stayed in that state of rapture while Keith kissed his temple, licked his ear, and went, "Mmmmmmmmm," for about ten minutes.

Keith's purring finally ran out, and he stretched his arms. Messed Riff's hair up. Whispered, "How much?"

Riff gave Keith a lazy smile. The dried trail of cum on Keith's face tickled him. He giggled. Brushed Keith's cheek.

“How much what?”

“I was wondering. How much you charge. Whatever it is, this was worth it.”

* * *

Keith had never witnessed a drama like the show Riff put on. Was it to extract more money? Riff had whipped his head away as if he'd been delivered an uppercut. He'd whined, “You shitting me, man? Nothing. You don't owe me nothing.”

Why the pretense of offering his services for free? With equipment like that and a youthful body that fairly glowed, Riff could name his price.

The kid should have stated his fee up front. The charade of negotiating was a turnoff. Riff should lose the humility and the attitude.

Suddenly self-conscious, Keith cloaked himself in the top sheet from the bed, got up, and went to his study. He was pissed that Riff took him from ecstasy to irritation so quickly. And now he kicked himself for taking a risk in bed with someone he didn't know.

He reached up to the top shelf, removed the lock box disguised as the complete works of Shakespeare, and plucked out two hundred dollar bills. He had no idea what the going rate was, but that should suffice. He peeled off another hundred, just in case.

Before Keith went back to the bedroom, he picked Dwight up, ran his finger along the edge of the frame, and kissed the face behind the glass.

“I promised, Dweebie, and I meant it. I'll never love again. You have my word on it.”

OUR TEMPORARY UNIVERSE

On those days when we lie together—
sprawled upon the hotel's crisp white sheets
with our legs entangled,

I feel our universes woven
beneath my skirt and sunken into the world
you and I share during our effervescent moments together.

We get distracted by intoxication,
pushing aside our personal limits.
All this feels just right, up until

the moment I turn my head toward yours,
fingering your salt-and-pepper flecks upon our pillow
after minutes of lovemaking, and pose *the* question.

You gently place kisses upon me
but firmly squeeze my arms,
reassuring our rhetorics while time

twists steadily around the temporary universe
we have created, in the cusp of our hearts
held firmly in both of our hands.

—Diana Raab



Waiting
A.J. Huffman

NEVER THE BREEZE

The summers with their lofty grasses
and lengthy heat; a tangle of light
caught in the purity of lovemaking.

Along the river, always a slight wind,
never the breeze, stirs the cattails,
and you in your creamy nakedness

above me, like a downy bird perched
on a tall tower, in motion with the river's
deep music and rippling reeds.

Beating in the distance, the wings of ducks,
as if the quickening of our pulses, landing
and taking off, like one kiss after another.

—Dah

PITHED

janet
because i will die
first i am the frog
poorly pithed
by our teacher
in our bio class
we are beneath
its sky of gothic
arched brontosaur
bones all this
is very important
to us as you
approach to
take the pin from
my brain and i
say “i can’t
see you see me
die like this”
your helpless hands
reach to me as
i look to the bare
air and know your
empty arms. “good
bye my love good
bye my love”

—Marc Tretin

SMILING JENNY

by

Nina Rota

Staci lies on the bed, looking up at the ceiling with unblinking eyes. Her 34D breasts are barely contained by a black lace halter. She wears a matching black choker around her neck. She has permanent plum-colored lips.

Dan walks over and sits down on the side of the bed. He reaches up and grabs the top of her face at the hairline, then rips down till the face completely separates from her skull.

Three other faces sit on the bedside table. Dan chooses the Ecstasy, an expression face with an open mouth. A lip liner sits next to the faces.

“A little lip liner, some perfume to cover up the silicone smell, and I can finally get down to business,” Dan says. “Oooh, I’m getting all excited. Now where did I put the perfume?”

Dan gets up and walks to the dresser, but Staci’s large wooden crate blocks his path. He jockeys the crate left and right to move it out of the way. As he turns toward the dresser, he almost trips over something and looks down.

“Jenny, oh my god, I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you. The crate must have knocked you over.”

Smiling Jenny had been sitting on the floor propped up against the loveseat. Her long black hair spreads out over the floor where she now lies. Dan squats down and pulls her up onto the love seat.

“I’m getting too old to lug all this weight around, Jenny. Sit in the middle here, you’ll have a front-row seat for the show.” He props her up and walks toward the dresser. He’s almost there when he hears *whoompf* from behind. Jenny has flopped forward and rolled sideways. She’s inches from falling off the love seat.

“Ugh, Jenny, you used to stay in that position; you’re getting loose. I need to send you back in to get tightened up.” Dan lifts her up and drapes one of her arms over the back of the love seat.

“Let’s see if that works. And forget the perfume, I’m losing whatever hard-on I had as we speak.”

Dan walks over to the bed and sits Staci up, grabs her from behind, and drags her to the bottom of the bed. Once he gets her up on her feet, she flops forward, leaving her hips straddling the top of the footboard.

He pulls the long blond hair out of Staci's eyes and turns her head to the side and down so she can look back at him. After spreading both her arms, he reaches for the hand closest to him, takes the wrist with one hand and the palm with the other, and bends her hand into a delicate arch.

He steps back and looks at her. "You are a lovely honey. Wait, one more thing." He reaches for her mouth when he hears a loud *womp*, Jenny has fallen over sideways and bounced her head off the love seat armrest.

"Jenny, what the hell are you doing? You know I need you watching to get off. You know I got Staci so you could watch us doing it. You're worse than my ex-girlfriends."

Dan props Jenny up and this time drapes both of her arms over the back of the love seat. "Better, except for the hair in your face." He walks over to the dresser and picks up a pair of white sunglasses hooked over a framed picture of his mother and handsome younger brother Chase. His mother has her arm around Chase, who is dressed in a tuxedo for his high school prom.

Dan pushes the sunglasses into Jenny's face then up and over her forehead. "There, now you can see all the action. And I can get back to business."

He walks back over to the bed, pushes his fingers into Staci's mouth, and pulls the soft pliable tongue forward till it fills the bottom of her mouth. "Beautiful, just beautiful."

He walks back to the bottom of the bed and pushes into Staci from behind so he can lean out over her body. The silicone compresses slightly, crackling like a rumpled plastic raincoat. "Hold on while I pull the duvet under your hips, that footboard must be painful. And I don't wanna tear your skin."

The sheets are sateen so Staci doesn't get abrasions. The duvet slides easily on the bed. Dan gathers the material under her hips till her buttocks reaches his desired height.

Staci's breasts spill out onto the bed as he unzips the back of her halter and lays it out flat. He leans into her more slowly this time and runs a hand down the length of her naked back, then up the back of her thigh. His breath quickens and he closes his eyes. When he slaps Staci on the butt, her body bounces back into him.

He straightens up and reaches for his belt buckle when he hears a huge crash. Jenny has flopped forward and taken a full face-plant into the carpet. Her sunglasses have bounced across the room, and her body is turned at a strange angle, leaving one arm twisted underneath her.

“That’s it! I’m done. I give up. I can’t even get you to cooperate!”

He walks over to Jenny and kneels down. “Come on, smiley, let’s untangle you and get you upright.” He lifts Jenny in his arms and carries her to the opposite wall out of Staci’s view, then folds her legs underneath her so she sits on her heels with her back to the wall.

Dan squats in front of Jenny and strokes her cheek. “Well, you won’t play my sex games, but at least you won’t leave me. Maybe it’s because you love me, huh?” He grabs her neck bolt and lifts it up and back onto the wall hook directly behind her. He straightens her fingers and arches both hands before placing them gently on her thighs. “Let’s see if I can make it up to you, okay? Just give me a minute; I need to find something.”

He rumbles around in the packaging at the bottom of the wooden crate and pulls out a long thin box labeled Deep Throat Mouth Insert. After pulling a wisp of hair from her eyes, he pushes the insert into Smiling Jenny’s mouth, steps back slightly, and unbuckles his belt.

SOMETIMES I GET CRAVINGS

Sometimes I get cravings, what's a guy
to do? Listen to your belly, my gran used to say,
it knows what you need, your body will never
steer you wrong.

But when the surgeon opened me up, she seemed
surprised by what she found: digital clock,
TV remote, bits and pieces from a programmable
thermostat, three different types of MP3 players,
a handful of silicone wafers—

indigestible one might think, but tasty nonetheless.
And that doctor had the nerve to tell me there
was something unhealthy, compulsive even,
about my eating habits.

Just another example of Western medicine
discounting whatever it can't explain—like the
magical healing power of cutting-edge technology
and the way that an AA battery can be both
sweet and savory at the same time.

—Jeffrey Park

TIME WAS

When I reflect on what I was,
I am amazed at what I see.
The young boy of then is stranger
to the old man of now.

The run, the race, the romp replaced
by stumble, shuffle, and stroll.

There was a time when affaire d'amour
could efface the world that was not she,
and despair from rejection could force
a stowaway flight on an ocean liner.

How quaint, how Victorian, how dumb.
A man of propriety, a pillar of society
to flee from conformity, hide from authority.

God, how I wish I had that heart now!

—Kenneth Kenigsberg

PONDERING MY WOMB

On that cold, cold slab
they ripped you out
like a dead cold fish
left the nothingness
inside
a black hole
where seeds of life
failed to sprout

Twice I plucked
the seeds from you
disassociated
the sucking, the sucking
and although
shame followed me home
I wanted
what I wanted
and that did not include
birthing babies

I gave up
motherhood
for poetry slams
coffee shops
and college
I wanted
the writer's dream:
3 a.m. muse attacks
midday luncheons with poets
library overloads
and group readings over potluck

And so I wonder
after getting what
I wanted
why this final separation
of you from me
leaves such an emptiness
and the hushed whimper
of a child

—Lori Carlson

BROKEN CHILD

Broken child thrown back
like an illegal fish,
we are now
in a boat together.
Words slap like waves,
“You are not
my real mother,
real mother, real mother.”
I search for realness,
longing to be real enough
to save you
from screeching sirens,
red lights flashing
over ordinary people.
The lucky ones
doing ordinary things.
I am tired, hope ebbs,
but God help me,
my broken child,
I’ll always love you.
No one else
applies for the job.

—D. Jeanne Wilson

BREVIARY

by

Kate McCorkle

I wish I could be the mom I am at 6:15 a.m. all day.

Of course, that mom isn't actually interacting with any children.

I wake up early, earlier than my kids anyway, to try to get some writing done. I'm possessive of that time. I begrudge the five minutes it takes to make a pot of coffee. I know showering is part of maintaining personal hygiene, but I resent that time too. I barely dry my hair, and that's only in winter. I just want to wake up and go to the page. I suppose I could wake up earlier, but with an infant who doesn't sleep through the night, I don't even want to contemplate a "5" as the first number on my alarm clock. Maybe that will improve in a few months.

It's dark outside. The house is quiet. The only noise is the coffeemaker, heating and bubbling.

Most of this morning writing is a brain dump, just getting the voices and secret committee into the open. Sometimes it morphs into other, more creative writing, passages held together by a common thread (something more than just "I'm tired") or possibly even a narrative. Sometimes old characters penetrate the mental clutter. My worries and mental "to do" list dissipate; something else emerges.

There's another voice in there. It's not mine. Oh sure, I'm the one typing, but I'm typing things I normally would not be able to articulate. I've gotten to a place in my writing where I'm okay going with that voice, where I don't need to know the outcome before I start out; I want to see where it's going. When I'm in that space, I'm wholly out of my own way. There's no agenda. No efficiency. No self-censoring. This is what I'm so protective of, all sharp elbows and beady eyes.

* * *

Around 6:25 a.m., my five-year-old begins sneaking downstairs. He's stealthy. He's learned not to wake his younger brother, with whom he shares a room. I feel him more than see him. There he is on the steps, body hidden and head peaking down, staring at me. I put my finger to my lips, but he knows. This is the sign for him to come down all the way now.

I want to write. I need this time. There's still another twenty minutes before I have to wake my oldest for school. My son is trying to crawl into my lap, wants to type his name, wants to type his friends' names, wants a blanket, wants me to get his Legos, wants to use the iPad, wants to touch some keys, wants me to hold him.

This behavior exasperated me for several weeks. Why couldn't he stay in bed? It's well before 7 a.m. This is the one time I do something for myself all day, and here he comes, encroaching on it. My whole day revolves around their schedules, their needs. I'm okay with that; I signed up for it, but please, please—just let me have these few minutes in the morning!

As I lamented his lack of sleep, though, the thought came that maybe he needs this time too. We're never alone together. There's always another kid around. Maybe he keeps waking up early because he needs me. I've loosened up a little since realizing this. I may be flattering myself that he's waking up early to spend time with me, but considering that possibility has made me resent him less. I'm still instinctively protective of that writing space, but now I have him get one of his Lego books to read in the chair next to me. Or, if it's particularly early, I carry him to the sofa, wrap him in the afghan, then sit beside him with the laptop, writing while he rests.

I usually end up writing about him or my other kids at this point. At first, I lamented being derailed from a character, being jerked out of the wormhole of whatever fiction my head was spinning. Then I think, this is my reality. This child here. Motherhood. I need to protect the creative space, yet its very existence is intertwined with that aspect of myself.

The part of me that shows up every morning, tired, hardwired to write—even if no one else will ever read it, even if there's no “purpose” other than me honoring a baffling part of myself—is the same confused mess that goes into motherhood each day, with similarly low expectations of what's going to happen. No bloodshed—no major physical or emotional trauma—is a good day. I'm trying to help my children become independent, responsible, resilient people, but there's no clear path from A to B, and what works for one kid doesn't work for another, or it stops working after a few days. I find it so much easier to give my imaginary characters room to breathe than to give my own children that similar space. I can't force a character to reveal himself to me (even though his story is mostly done, and I would really, really like to finish it so I can prove that I actually do something with that morning time), so I exercise restraint. This is the same person who pesters her son eight times over lunch about how school was that morning, thinking that maybe the ninth time he will say something besides “Fine.”

I like the mother I am in the morning. Accepting. Patient. Kind. (I am rarely kind.) Coffee is wonderful and warm in my hands.

In that morning space with my son, I am all those things and more. I see him with such grace. His half-smile is an impish marvel. Even waking my daughter for school isn't so bad. I prep a hot breakfast before I wake her, so she can come downstairs to something warm. I meet her crabbiness with humor and temperance. And if the others are awake by now, and who knows in what moods, it doesn't faze me. Triage comes naturally in the morning with my coffee. Smiling is easy. It is so much easier for me to be in love with them when I've visited them on the page first.

By four in the afternoon, that dippy lady is long gone.

I scowl and bark names like I'm yelling at the dog. I hate the television and want the freaking cartoons off, yet when the TV is off they roll around the floor and into each other and jump from the chairs and land on each other and generally want to occupy the exact-same-space-and-time as their sibling and the baby's grabbing Legos so they're all screaming and someone got hit in the face and someone threw a shoe that doesn't belong to them and someone asked ten minutes ago for a snack that I never got him and then someone else wants a snack and that's not fair because she didn't drink all her milk at breakfast and there's more screaming because the baby's touching the crayons and the dog's chewing something and where's the snack that someone asked for twenty minutes ago and we're having fish for dinner no you can't have something different we're a family.

I tell them they can put the TV on, but then that turns into a fight too. I confiscate the remote. There's wailing. The oldest complains it's not fair she has homework and no one else does. The baby's crying because everyone screams when she comes near their toys. The three-year-old is whining for food. He is always whining for food. The five-year-old is hiding with a pile of Legos. I worry that the other kids exclude him. Maybe this is self-preservation on his part.

Things only seem to go downhill from here. I make a dinner of which, on a good night, two out of four children approve. No one—except the baby strapped in her high chair—is capable of sitting in their seat. They have all turned into noodles. The three-year-old gave himself a black eye last week, flopping out of his chair and banging his head into the chair next to him. There's a magnet under the table that pulls them down from their navels, all limp invertebrate.

When my husband is home for dinner, the dynamic changes. It's not always a better one, but it does take the pressure off me to be the cook, disciplinarian, civilized-manners-enforcer, referee, and task-master at one meal. The other night, the seven-year-old picked all the "poison" raisins out of a sausage casserole for the five-year-old. I told my son he didn't have to eat the

raisins, but that I was not going to pick them out of his dinner. He was old enough to do that. He cried. My compassionate daughter ran over, placed one arm around his sobbing shoulders, and used the fork to segregate the offensive raisins. She was happy she could help. My son was happy he could eat. I was happy no one was crying or screaming. This dynamic would not have happened if my husband had been home for dinner.

If he were at the table, the seven-year-old would not be allowed to “enable” her brother in his “laziness.” That’s even if he would be allowed to segregate raisins in the first place, a sign of wastefulness and ingratitude. My husband’s intentions are good. He wants the kids to respect the work I put into our meals, to appreciate their food. He’s trying to shore up a daughter already yielding her own comfort to that of her brother. The logic follows: one day it’s raisins, the next she’s rationalizing that if you had his life, you would drink too.

But while my husband’s motives are noble, his method of delivery is loud and threatening. There are more tears and wailing. The noise is unbearable. No one’s eating. I might be setting my children up for a lifetime of drug use and delinquency with raisin-removal as the gateway, but at least we have one dinner that doesn’t end in hysterics.

When I am alone with them at this hour, winning that battle takes priority over winning the war. Because now comes the next phase of the night: cleaning up from dinner, homework, baths, straightening up the downstairs, nursing the baby, bedtime for four kids, packing lunches for tomorrow, starting any paid work, and the whole whack-a-mole of dealing with who’s out of bed. I love my children, and I love the life I have, but I hate this part of my day. Humor doesn’t help. Sugar doesn’t help. Music sometimes helps, but only if it doesn’t get the kids amped up.

I find my limp self wanting to return to my writing. There’s time now, maybe. Others speak of a magic time—once the children have gone to bed—a time to get things done. But my brain is gone. I get annoyed with myself for not being more patient with the kids. They’re good, really. They can be very sweet and kind with each other. I feel like it would take superhuman strength to do 4:30–7:30 with any kind of patience, love, and tolerance. I think I’d be a horrible writer during those hours too, though. Most mornings I am content starting my day. Even the rough mornings come with a certain amount of optimism and hope. Early evening is downright fatalistic. It could be Christmas and I think I would still feel doomed.

As a writer, this is maybe where it gets sticky for me too. The not-quite-finished story that requires key elements before being “put to bed.” A story without a palpable conflict is no more done than a day without dinner. You’re still waiting for something. In my real family, this is the time of day when I want to yell or shake someone or throw things. Maybe I need to do that to my

characters once in a while. Step away from loving them so tenderly in the morning and kick their butts later in the day.

Maybe I will try this one night. I will scowl at the page. My kids can eat cereal for dinner while I get out the laptop. We can all snuggle under the afghan.

THINKING ABOUT THAT BITE OF BAGEL

I am just about convinced
that you can't write without
a dog around.

She doesn't have to be at your feet
or in the room.

You can look up suddenly,
in mid-word,
to listen for her, call her nickname

and then return to the poem or
novel, that uncompleted word,
a far better writer

just for the missing of her
breathy breathing, her animal perfume,
the ridiculous positions she gets into
on the floor.

In the momentary search, you
wonder if she is still there, if
she went off to the spot she'd picked
out the day you brought her home

and now she is dead, leaving you dead too.

But you turn back to your page,
your place in the universe,
believing she is in the yard sniffing around,
snug in a patch of sun or

conspiring to get that part-eaten bagel
you left on the plate when a good clear picture
came on in your head and
forced you to the writing,
before it's gone, unraveled.

Dogs never wonder about beginnings
and endings or middles.

This grounds you enough
to stay with it,
to find that perfect word.

—Michael Mark

THE WOMEN POETS OF CHINA

After reading Women Poets of China, edited and translated by Kenneth Rexroth and Ling Chung (1972)

The Women Poets of China invade
my dreams, with their cloud dark
hair, loosened to trail across
a lover's moonlit skin,
their pure love brimming
carefully, gracefully, in fragile
priceless vessels, perfumed, floating
with jasmine and lotus blossom.

My desert daydreams fill with
them, dressed in nothing but
jeweled phoenix hairclips,
joy taken in their own beauty,
their jade-like skin uncovered
and kissed by spring winds.
I envy their ease in undress,
their pride and self flattery.

These priestesses and courtesans,
celebrating their secret ceremonies,
enveloped in silk, birds, and blossoms,
at times floating through
my mind in little painted boats.

They come, they go, they wait.
Hope, despair, love, despise.
Words that survived a thousand
wars and winters are the hoof beats
of their fine horses
galloping at me
from the past.

—Sarah O'Sullivan

FUCKING AGAINST THE BOOKCASE

You changed your name to Andy three years ago,
before we met at yoga, where your body had posed
in feathered peacock, legs straight, toes pointed at ceiling,
where tufts of mustard highlights settled
in balance, kissed the floor's cheek,
where you kept my eyes open, breath uneven.

You keep your hips open even here,
where your forearms clutch fiction,
where wrists grip oak shelves of the bookcase
and the room is hardcovers undone.
I mouth gold letters of Bronte, Eliot, try to hold
canvas still with my teeth. Sometimes pronouns catch.
You will not use them. I cannot slip
under your binder, too tight for curved thumb,
even rigid index I run toward your sternum.

I fail every time. In bridge pose
I've searched your shoulders for answers,
in pigeon pose, curvature of spine.
Here, I am given greying hairline,
crow's feet, freckle above your left ear,
your bite into my bicep, thigh to pelvis,
the downward slope of tongue,
and, balanced again, we forget our names.

—Zarah C. Moeggenberg

CONFESSIONS OF A RELUCTANT ADULTERER

by

Rae King

The adult human male was made to have sex. Yes, we're meant to do a few other things along the way like eat and sleep and earn a living, but mainly we're supposed to have sex. Our bodies cry out for it. And I'm sure if you could ask Him, God would concur with me on this. After all, He gave us our equipment, front and center, and told us to be fruitful and multiply. Sex, you could argue, is every man's divine calling.

In the months leading up to my conversion from non-adulterer to adulterer, I was not fulfilling my divine calling. I was in hell.

You would never guess this if you met my wife, Fern. This sexy, alluring, coquettish woman sashayed braless into parties, draped in translucent tops that revealed the shadow of her nipples and the tight bounce of her breasts when she walked. She wore ass-hugging miniskirts and high heels and plunging necklines. It was all false advertising.

As soon as she got home, Fern kicked off the heels and peeled off her clothes, only to pull on sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. I'd lock up the house, and by the time I'd made it upstairs, she'd have smeared goop on her face or have toothpaste foaming out of her mouth. Within five minutes, she'd be asleep. On those nights, when the alcohol had flowed freely and she'd been the life of the party, she snored like a truck driver.

I could actually count the number of times we'd had sex this year. On two hands.

To compensate, I threw myself into my work, and I was fruitful. At work, I was a god. And on this day, the day in question, the day of my conversion, I was unstoppable.

The deal that no one could pull off—the one that would make everyone obscene amounts of money—the impossible-dream deal was within my reach, and I plucked with a Midas touch.

When the last person left the conference room, I felt it. That buzzing, vibrating feeling that starts in your gut and just spreads. Radiates everywhere until your scalp tingles and your toes curl. The business-deal orgasm. I was master of the universe.

Steve Wainwright barreled into my office with Mags at his heels. He carried champagne; she carried glasses.

“So you pulled it off after all.” Steve popped the cork with a flourish, letting it bang to the ceiling, losing a third of the bottle to the carpet. The noise brought in a few others, eager to clasp my back, and offer congratulations. Eager to be seen to support me. With this deal, I was more than up-and-coming. With this deal, I had arrived.

“Some if us are going down to The Hammerhead. You should come and celebrate your *kill*.” It was Allen. The same Allen who had, up until today, seen me as a rival. Now it was clear, even to him, that I had outpaced him, and he was eager to be in my good graces.

“Tempting offer, Allen, but I’m celebrating with Fern.” I used my best condescending voice to turn him down.

“That’s a shame.” Allen’s assistant, Valerie, said. The one whose stunning good looks had been an unofficial endorsement of her fairly average résumé. “We’ll miss you.” And then that look. She had never given me that look before. It was true, then, that women found successful men more attractive.

We finished off the champagne, and I headed home in a taxi, because surely I could afford taxis now. I had the cab stop on the way at a florist and picked up a bouquet for Fern. This night would mark the beginning of a new era.

It was 9:15 p.m. by the time I walked in, admittedly late for dinner, but certainly not late. I found her snuggled in bed, clutching a hot water bottle, and with a pile of tissues and medicine bottles cluttering the night table, fast asleep. Again.

On any other day I would have tried to muster some feelings of compassion for her. She’d caught a cold. But today was different. It was the day I’d scaled Mount fucking Olympus, and here she was passed out while the rest of the office drank champagne on my behalf. Fuck that.

I threw the flowers on the floor by her bed and stormed out.

Change of plans, I texted Valerie. Coming out after all. Still at the bar?

The answer came back immediately. *YES! I’ll buy you a victory drink when you get here.*

I didn’t go out intending to cheat on my wife. I blame the close quarters that pushed Valerie practically onto my lap and the copious amounts of alcohol

I drank, along with my general state of work-euphoria and sexual frustration.

That first time it was an accident waiting to happen. After that I figured, as long as I have my hand in the cookie jar, I might as well eat the damn cookie. And, eventually, when that particular cookie jar was empty, I found I missed the treats.

Like a good husband, I turned to my wife, hoping to get her interested, encouraging her to be responsive, suggesting she take better headache pills. I even tried to be romantic, which made her suspicious, of all things, but I drew the line at begging. I was not going to beg my own wife for sex. So, when I met Andrea, the fun-loving paralegal at Schuster and Crawley, it was in everyone's best interest.

Andrea had a phenomenal understanding of the bigger picture. She had a theory about how monogamous relationships were an unnatural state of existence, imposed on modern enlightened people by our Puritan forefathers. One person couldn't realistically satisfy all of our needs, yet here we were, denying ourselves fulfillment for an impossible ideal. It was modern-day flagellation, and she was having none of it. And neither was I.

And neither was Mary, whom I met flying out to Chicago. I wasn't looking for anything, but there she was, and on a plane too, like something out of a movie. Now, honestly, which one of you hasn't wanted to try that before? I didn't know at the time that she only lived uptown, and I wasn't so unfeeling as to refuse to see her again when she lived so close.

As for Becky, she was such a wonderful woman, and I hated to see her so down on herself after her divorce, full of insecurities and self-doubt. Some of the things her ex-husband said to her were practically criminal. With her entire self-esteem on the line, it was the only kind thing to do.

This lead, of course, to Linda and Joan and eventually Stephanie. All three ladies were divorced, alone, in need of companionship. New York is pulsing with such downcast women who become immediately cheered by the idea of being desired. Knowing that I have it in my power to bring this kind of joy to the world places a certain responsibility on my shoulders, and though I am sometimes exhausted in my service to humanity, I persevere.

So, yes, technically, I am an adulterer. But it is a role thrust upon me by forces outside of myself and I will play my part, to the best of my abilities, for the greater good.