



The Rubicon

Troy University Department of English
Student Literary Journal: Issue 1, Fall 2009

The Rubicon

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1 Poetry

[]

by Erin K. Murray

I liken you to gravity.
 Constant, your influence keeps me firmly
 in place. Still sometimes, you're anti-matter:
 Newton's Apple falling up. Logically
 Separate from me, but worth the chaos.
 I'm grateful that, for whatever reason
 Particles swirled for millennia, collided
 And here we are. Victims of some odd
 Interpersonal Big Bang.

Our lifelines that ran parallel somehow
 intersected. We attempt to merge
 The logical with the emotional.
 History to our back, future ahead
 Moving on a plane of most resistance.
 We know, at least, it's all been done before.

Cavemen staring at a star-filled puzzle
 Began to wonder causes and effects.
 Later, staring into awestruck eyes-
 Self-aware, seeking solace in another
 Who is pregnant with inquiry.
 They had paused to state, "*This is love.*"
 Maybe they were right. Love is born of wonder.
 I'd like to believe it started there

Thanks To My Highway Companion

by Erin K. Murray

Our day starts late with coffee and pancakes,
 The pseudo-morning; eleven thirty.
 Goodbyes are said and we hit the Southbound
 Except, home is north. Twenty minutes for a turn
 around; I'm leading the way again.
 We're heading home on the rambling Interstate.
 Miles of monotony halt
 When a Cadillac meets a tree. Impatient
 Patrons threaten, bumper-to-bumper lines
 Of mechanical molasses. Then we move.
 Keen to accelerate: sixty ,eighty
 But I keep you in my rearview until
 A sudden storm slows me. You take the lead
 Aware I'm nervous even on clear days.
 Our pace is misery for you, I know
 Forty-five with staccato brake-taps
 For thirty miles until the state line.
 I'm calmer with you leading, even though
 It's only overcast and damp.
 You're filled with highway zeal, owning the road.
 Many long minutes I lose you in my sight
 Over hills, around turns, behind trucks.
 White knuckled, tearing up in a fit
 Of roadway anxiety. I'm scared
 I've lost you.

Crooked Little Ladders

by Candace Turlington

i saw a real live skeleton today
 she was staring at her cell phone
 willing it to ring
 she must have felt me watching her
 for she looked up, right into my eyes
 her voice was empty
 like an abused child who's long been numb to the world
 "I do this as punishment for wanting to be more than I should.
 I do this as punishment for denying myself what I want."
 i knew what she meant, and i knew that some mistakes
 even the ones that weren't really mistakes, never go away
 some crooked little ladders of pain stay with you forever
 she spoke again, only this time
 it was metal through a cheese grater
 (or maybe it was just the clackety-clack of the monster on the tracks)
 "You might as well be pretty on the outside if nothing else.
 I think I'll broadcast my yellow brick road to enlightenment.
 What will you do with yours?"
 i told her i'd quietly follow it back down to hell
 and spend eternity wallowing in regret and sticky, oozing self-pity
 she asked me to save her a seat
 and jumped in front of the train

Man-Eater

by Candace Turlington

“I specialize in oxygen deprivation” she said
 I shrugged. “That’s cool, I don’t like breathing anyway.
 It’s an acquired taste I haven’t really developed yet.”
 I didn’t know she was serious
 She thought *I* was
I thought I was)

2 Prose

THE SAX MAN’S REBOP

A Short Story by Stephen J. Davis

I am a ghost. I haunt the sewers and the subways by day. By night I come up from my hell, and I howl at the moon until the clouds finally scatter and I can see L.A. in all its pimply corruption and damp-palmed lust. I love it.

I’ve been a squatter here for a couple years now. I generally keep to the subways; they’re usually pretty warm, even by California standards. Plus I can raid the vending machines if I come across any spare change. Which ain’t often. A couple of years back, the gods decided to cut me a break. One of the machines went haywire and started vomiting up candy bars all over the place. I must’ve grabbed over two dozen of them before the security guys showed up. I lived off that heavenly bounty for a couple of weeks; I still had most of the wrappers crumpled in my saxophone case.

I am a sax man, though I haven’t been playing long; eight, maybe nine months. I’m not that great at all, to be honest; usually it only nets me a couple of quarters when I start bebopping on the subway. I taught myself to play by ear – it’s mostly honks and flub notes, but once in a while I’ll get going on some simple tune like “In Dreams” or “Crying.” Actually, the only half-decent songs I can play are Roy Orbison’s. My biggest gig was when I played backup sax for a low-rent jazz quintet at the Hellhole, a cozy little club down Tijuana way. The bandleader got himself knifed by a couple of gringos in a back alley after the performance, so they never called us back to TJ for an encore.

So I started spreading my love of jazz on the subway, blasting out “Pretty Woman” or “Running Scared” for spare change. It gave me something to do and something to call my own. I managed to scrape up enough to buy a new reed a few weeks ago. It was worth it – kinda. I still can’t play for shit.

It sometimes gets me in trouble, though. Like yesterday, for example.

I’d really been cooking that afternoon – blasting the chorus from “Only the Lonely” over and over – and I was just settling down with a pint of Johnnie Walker Red Label when he came up to me. I didn’t notice him at first, not until he had me shoved against the wall with a .38 socked against my throat. Just like

that.

“Listen up, shitbird,” he said. His voice was broad Boston guttersnipe. He was tall and fat, with a huge flat head that grew straight out of his shirt collar and the palest blue eyes I’d ever seen. He wore a double-vented blue suit. He looked like a gone-to-seed refugee from the L.A. Rams middle line. He looked shrewd; he looked mean; I listened up. “Only reason you’re not *dead* is ‘cause you don’t know *shit*, capisce?”

I capisced, all right.

“Me n my employahs, we *own* this subway, okay? *We* say what goes on, and *we* say what gets played. You dig? So either you stop playing that thing” – he jerked a thumb at my sax case – “or *we’ll* stop *you*. *We’ll* shoot your ass dead, is what I mean to say.” He rattled me a couple of times for emphasis. “You got the picture?”

“In Technicolor,” I sputtered.

“Good,” the suit said. Then he made sure his point got across by roundhousing knuckle dusters into my midsection, left-right, one-two, wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am. I remember retching; I remember being shoved back against the stone wall of the tunnel.

Then I remember nothing.

I came to a couple of hours later in a sour puddle of Johnnie Red and my own sick. I squeezed my eyes shut and picked myself off the cold concrete. I looked around. My sax case lay a few yards away; the suit had given it one hell of a boot after I’d blacked out. Woozy and rubberlegged, I went over and picked it up. There was a size 12 dent in its side, but otherwise it looked okay.

I looked left and right for the brute in the blue suit, but he’d already taken a powder. *Good*, I thought, and gasped. My chest ached like my ribs had been cracked.

I flipped the latches on the case to make sure the contents were safe. But when I opened it, something caught my eye. A white rectangle tucked between the B and A keys of the sax; it looked like a business card. I pulled it free and took a look at it. It was blank except for two lines in very small type:

**SIDNEY “BIG SID” KUPCINET
PUBLIC RELATIONS**

I laughed at the thought of the gorilla who’d punched my lights out as being “public relations” for anyone; then I remembered what he’d said about my sax playing and I stopped. I balled up the business card and dropped it in the cocktail of Johnnie Red and vomit. I closed my sax case and moved on. And I haven’t

played since.

A couple nights later I’m back on the prowl. It’s late, and I’m trying to get some shuteye. It’s one, maybe two in the morning, and I’m cooping next to the storage lockers, right underneath the security camera. It’s the only place you can sleep around here. If they see you this close to the lockers, they’ll get antsy and send a cop to chase you off. It’s happened to me a time or two. But as long as the camera can’t see you, you’re fine. So I prop my sax case against one of the lockers and tuck myself into the corner and try to doze off.

But I can’t sleep. Can’t tell you why, exactly. It’s not the lights; they’re on all hours and I’m used to it. But eventually I just give up and start staring up at the ceiling. There’s a beautiful mural spray-painted up there – truth be told, it’s the real reason I sleep around here. It’s of a woman, a statuesque redhead straight from a G.I. pin-up. She’s wearing a one-piece bather and she’s got a smile on her face that I can’t even *begin* to describe. It’s sort of sweet and tired at the same time, and it makes me think of Florida. That’s where I grew up, before I breezed out to L.A. They say it’s the same, all beach and sea, but it’s different. It’s *cleaner* out there, you know? More *livable*, you know? You know? You –

“You know she ain’t real, right?”

I’m up on my feet in the blink of an eye, sax case in hand, my heart jackhammering in my chest. There’s a guy standing to my left, leaning against the bank of lockers. He doesn’t look at me, only at the bathing beauty on the ceiling. He’s pale, like he was wearing white pancake makeup. He’s got a little hoop around his ear. He wears a satin smoking jacket, and one of his hands has an Ace bandage around it. He looks like he’s about to fall asleep, and yet he’s wide awake at the same time. Mellow.

“Christ, man, you scared me.” I’m clutching my chest, making sure my heart doesn’t burst out and escape.

“She’s not a real person,” this cat’s drawling, eyes almost closed, slightly swaying on his feet. “She’s an idea someone had a very long time ago. An angel of redemption who sees all and understands everything. In this day and age, that’s an impossibility. Or at least, it is in the world as it exists.”

I start to relax. A ghost like me sees a lot of reefer smokers and hopheads down in the subways and the gutters I inhabit. Shit, can’t say I’m any better. I used to do acid a long time ago, back when I could afford it.

Then the man looks down at me, and then his eyes open *reeeeeeeally* wide. And all of a sudden, I can’t move. I’m paralyzed, with something screaming in my head like a banshee. Because this man’s got eyes like four hundred watt bulbs, the kind that look straight through you down into your soul, and don’t like what’s there. The kind of eyes God has on a bad day.

“But ideas have *power*, Andy,” the guy says, and I’m afraid to ask him how he knows my name, because I get the feeling this man’s like a cobra, about to kill me.

Then his eyes go back to slits, and he looks over my shoulder at something. I turn away reluctantly, afraid to take my eyes off of him. And I see him walking toward me, the goon in the blue suit; Big Sid Kupcinet is coming and hell is coming with him in the form of four thugs that could be Big Sid’s brothers. All of them are wearing blue suits and every one of them has a gun.

“Run,” the man in the smoking jacket says to me.

I don’t need to be told twice. I jump past him and tear off like an antelope being chased by a pack of hyenas. I’m fast, sprinting full out, and I’ll run until I pass out. It takes me a while to realize why I feel that way: my sax case isn’t in my hand.

I skid to a stop, meaning to look back, but that’s when I hear the *ka-raack!* of a shot and the tiled wall of the subway splinters over my shoulder. I let out a scream and throw my hands over my head and beeline for the nearest cover, which turns out to be the ladies’ room. I don’t hesitate for a second; I’m diving through the door and huddling behind it, making myself small, wedging myself in behind the doorframe. And then I hear the screaming; it’s coming from just down the hall.

Sooner or later it stops, but I don’t take any chances. I wait a few more minutes until I’m sure the coast is clear, and then I poke my head out the door and look around.

The subway platform is a cordite-reeking slaughterhouse. Big Sid Kupcinet and his brethren lie dead on the floor, bullet holes oozing blood all over them. Brain spatters leaking yellow fluid cover one entire wall. My first coherent thought is that the goons had ended up shooting themselves up while shooting at me, but I tear my gaze away from the mangled corpses and something else catches my eye.

It’s the guy in the smoking jacket. He’s standing in the middle of the carnage, like a horse sleeping on its feet. He’s holding something in his hand, but it’s not a gun. It’s my sax case.

I grip the doorframe and pull myself up. I start feeling a hollowness as I walk toward the guy, fearing him more than I’d feared Big Sid. But the sight of my prized possession in this man’s hands puts the kibosh on that little dance of terror. I say, “Hey, man, that’s mine.”

I don’t think he hears me at first. He’s just standing there, waiting... and then *whoosh!* eyes open really wide. And I suddenly realize just how much blood is on the floor.

The guy looks at me, his cold eyes boring into me like poison darts, and I look away, committing the carnage around me to memory. The dead man nearest to me has no face left; blood and cartilage fragments cover what remain. I think that it *might* be Big Sid, but how can you tell? I know I will carry this sight with me to my grave.

Looking back up, I feel cold all over; my breath comes in spurts. I’m afraid of what the guy in the smoking jacket’s going to do to me, and I wonder if he’s going to bludgeon me to death with my own saxophone. I suddenly realize the man doesn’t even have a single scratch on him, and he’s got blood all over his hands.

Then the man throws out a smile that’s pure charm. “I like Roy Orbison, too,” he tells me. The words serenade over the scene as though he hadn’t just butchered five men a few minutes earlier. “You don’t get any better than ‘Blue Bayou’ in my book.”

I try to smile back, parting my lips and grinning my teeth in what feels more like a rictus of pain than anything else. The man holds out my sax case. “I think you might want to get a new case, though. There’s a big dent in it.”

I take it numbly, feeling sticky warmth on the handle and I realize it’s blood. I nearly drop it in shock, and the man starts to laugh. High feminine laughter that sounds hysterical in my own ears. Then, still laughing, he turns and walks away down the tunnel.

He stops once, only once, underneath the mural of the lovely beach beauty. Without looking back he says, “Don’t worry about the security camera. It can’t see you.” And then he tips his hand to the paint-and-pastel goddess above and walks on into the shadows, still laughing that mad laugh. I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again, and I don’t want to.

All of a sudden, I realize where I am. I tear from the bloodbath and highball it down the tunnel, hoping I don’t run into any of the subway dicks that start asking questions about the blood on my hand. The only thought running through my mind is how Florida’s looking this time of year.

And I wonder how they like their Roy Orbison.

Swifter than a Runner

by Cody Muzio

He felt like walking, so he did. He preferred to walk. Unless he was in the mood to drive, in which case he preferred to drive. But he wasn't. He wanted to walk. He also could have flown. But he didn't feel like flying. He felt like walking. So he walked.

It was lunch time. He decided a sandwich would suit him well. So he walked toward the local sandwich place. He walked down the street. He looked at the trees. Purple blossoms. He looked at the road. Tire marks. He looked at the people. These he loved to look at. He wanted to know people, to understand their ways and feel the plight of the average man. He noted everything about them. Their clothes. Their mannerisms. Vocal inflections. Accents. The way their eyes twitched, revealing hints of emotions he had almost known but couldn't seem to recognize again. He knew they all looked at him with envy, though, despite what their eyes suggested. He knew their jealousy of his spectacular abilities. He watched the construction workers struggling with a large rock stuck in the ground where their new pipe was supposed to be. He noted that the rock bore a striking resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. Or perhaps Jesus. Or the Virgin Mary. He couldn't decide which. He knew he could easily lift the rock out for them, but it wasn't his job. So he kept walking.

Reaching the sandwich shop, he grabbed the door and held it open for the young lady walking out, as well as the older woman walking in who had been behind him. He had known she was there. Following him. He could feel her behind him. Keeping pace. Watching, as if waiting for him to do something amazing. He hated to disappoint, but he didn't feel like doing anything. So he just let her walk in the door. She walked past smugly without a glance. He approached the counter and stood in line. Patiently. He noticed the people again. A boy tripped over a chair leg. The boy managed to catch himself with a stumble of several steps and a lost French fry or two. Several people let out their various amused snorts and giggles. He didn't. He just watched. He thought of how he would have handled that. Smoothly. With athletic finesse far beyond natural human peak. Floating off the floor, leaping between walls, catching each momentarily liberated drop of Coca-Cola in mid-air like a trapeze artist. A trapeze da Vinci, even, he thought.

The old woman who had passed in behind him had now grown older and was tapping him on the shoulder. "Hey, boy. I said you can go in front of me. I don't know what I want." He knew she just wanted to watch him from behind some more. Or else she was just old and stupid. Maybe both. He couldn't decide, so he skipped her place in line. This put him next to order his sandwich. "Turkey. Roast beef. Lettucetomato. Pickles. Jalapeños. Honey mustard." "Would you like a combo?" He saw that she had the name *Mindy* engraved on the magnetic clip-on she wore on her lapel. He wasn't sure why. "Not really." "Six seventy-eight,

then." He tried to imagine the girl behind the counter in a superhero suit as she handed him his sandwich. Ew. Not this girl. He took his sandwich and walked straight to the door, opening it and walking out and letting the door slap shut inches from the rapidly aging lady behind him, her arms full of sandwiches and drinks.

He didn't feel like walking anymore. But he hadn't driven, so he didn't have his car. And he still didn't feel like flying, so he just walked. He didn't think about it much, though. He walked down the same road. All familiar. He passed the rock that looked like his grandfather—which had been unearthed and discarded on the side of the road. There was nothing different about the street except that there were no people this time. No interesting ones, anyway. It didn't take him long to get back to his room. When he did he put down his sandwich, noting he had already eaten half of it. He assumed it was good. His room was small, but not unlivable, quite comfortable for him and his roommate, and never dirty. His roommate wasn't in, so he was alone. He had no table in his room, so he ate at the desk. The sandwich was good. He made a mental note of the ingredients so he could ask for them from then on. He never had to buy a different sandwich. One kind of sandwich was enough for anybody, he thought. He ate the sandwich quickly, throwing away the crust and a few of the excess jalapeños from where the sandwich girl had piled too many in one spot.

He turned to his TV, turning it on first, followed by his videogame console. His options neared the uncountable. He could not decide. He pondered one, then another. He picked up one case, only to put it back and flip deliberately through another stack entirely. He narrowed his list of possible choices to ten and then put them all away before picking out another group of games he thought would be a better list to choose from. He finally settled for a flying game from two console generations back that he remembered playing in his childhood. This bored him quickly, but he continued to play until he grew tired of sitting. He then played while standing until he became tired of standing and shut the system off.

He returned to his desk. He decided it was finally time to write that story he had been meaning to write for his school's literary journal. He had always thought himself a good writer, in addition to his many other, more incredible talents. He had always done well in school as a whole, having made an A+ on his last English paper, though he didn't mind bragging about the C he got in math, either. He decided to have fun with the story and just hope it all turned out well. He chose to make it a satirical story about a boy who pretends to have superpowers for so long that he finally believes he really has them. He wanted to write about escapism in society. That would be deep, he thought. He had an idea to throw in a never ending loop sequence in the story, in which the protagonist writes a story about a boy who pretends to have super-powers for so long that he finally believes he really has them and who then writes a story himself on the same topic. This amused him. He knew a good story needed a good title, so he thought about this, eventually deciding that the Bible makes for good titles. He

searched the internet for passages containing the word “fly” in the Bible, in the hopes of discovering something that complemented his story’s themes. He found Psalm 55, and settled on the title “Wings of a Dove.” He liked it.

He was done with the story and realized it was soon time for dinner. He didn’t feel like eating, but he also didn’t feel like skipping a meal, so he decided to go back to the sandwich shop. He couldn’t think of anyplace else. He thought about flying there. But it was such a short way. He thought he would just walk again. Down the same street he walked. He passed the stone with Elvis’ face on it. He passed through crowds and walked past trees and gardens and historic buildings. Cars rolled slowly past him on the street, they avoiding him, he never seeing their headlights. People shouted to him as he walked by. Friendly quips, some, others, calls to get out of the road. He heard none. He walked on. Imagining his multitude of battles, decimating armies of totalitarian regimes, and punishing brutal crime lords. He looked back over his rich history of exacting justice on all those who hurt the innocent, bearing down upon them his superhuman strength, speed, endurance, and cunning. He decided short distance or not, he was tired of walking. He never heard the screams of the people near him. He wanted to fly. He never saw the driver occupied on his cell phone. He simply wanted to fly. And so he flew.

In Nature

by Amber Richards

The afternoon sky was the color of liquid downy. A young girl stood alone in a southern Alabama field, hair blowing, wearing boots. It was autumn, the season of dying gold. She looked out at the grassy field’s edges. A congregation of trees surrounded the five-acre patch. The trees varied in appearance, reverent oaks, undignified pines—dancing in the wind. They all seemed to be expressing one thing. Their out stretched branches seemed to be calling “*Abba! Father!*”

She lifted her arms and bent them at the joints, mimicking the trees. She stood there for a few seconds, her face anxious, like she was waiting on someone to show up who was already late. She sighed and let her arms drop. Those great wooden limbs seemed so pressed; they seemed to reach with fever—they wanted heaven. Trees that couldn’t even speak or sing or read, that didn’t have a soul, could serve their purpose without error. Their rustic messengers were sprinkled on top of the green ground, twitching whenever the wind picked up. She bent down to examine a particular specimen and wondered how far the leaves of these trees were scattered. The girl felt slight anger. She didn’t understand how a tree could be perfect and she couldn’t.

She could smell smoke from a neighboring farm, most likely a fire of leaves. The meek little leaves were burned every year, like martyrs. At least they smelled good when they were burned. They softened the smell of the rich soil—soil so thick with earth’s love that it caused people to twist up their noses if they weren’t accustomed to it. It made for good trees though.

“Therese!” a man’s voice carried across the field, “Therese! Supper’s ready!”

It was her father; he was calling from the end of the dirt road off the left side of the field.

“Coming!” The texture of her voice was nothing compared to her father’s. Her voice fluttered when she yelled; his could sustain. He could call out and be heard almost anywhere on the farm. He credited it to his ability to throw his voice; Therese thought it was just part of being a father. In her mind all fathers were like hers; they all wore pearl snaps and worn out blue jeans whenever they were at home with their families. All fathers kissed their wives on the cheek when they cooked supper. They all had big hands and big steel-toe boots and drank black coffee every morning. They always had simplistic, sage grade bits of advice and rough voices that yelled only when supper was ready. Even at twenty two, Therese didn’t imagine her father much different from when she was five.

Therese rose. She imagined what the dinner spread would look like. Her mother had mentioned pumpkin pie earlier; that alone would make up for leaving the trees. The sun would be setting soon anyway; the autumn sun never visited very long.

She began down the dirt road, a short walk of about forty yards. It looked like dirty brown sugar. Lots of twigs and pecan hulls were stuck in it. Leaves speckled it. Maples, Sycamore trees, Sweet gum, White Oaks and Pecan trees lined the bank on either side of the road along with a few pines. She could hear quails moving around in the brush, repeating, “bob white.” Brown Thrashers stirred up leaves and undergrowth, noisy yet seldom seen.

About half way down the road, there was an old wooden house. It was rotting and slanted to the left. It once housed a family of five. It now housed a fox whose burrow opened beside the porch steps. Therese would see them slipping in and out sometimes. Therese paused when she was even with the house. She could feel the chill setting in, going in and out of her chest. Out of the stillness, Brown Thrashers near the edge of the old yard sounded panicked. There was rustling; a twig snapped. A fox appeared at the yard’s right fringe, a small, brown rabbit in its mouth. The fox was the color of red-brown rust with black tipped ears, feet and tail. It was in little contrast to the scenery. Its yellow topaz eyes glinted with the spirit of something untamed, unnamed and hungry.

The fox was unsure of what to do next. Therese didn’t move. They held each other in a wide eyed gaze. Therese looked at the red fur around the limp rabbit’s neck. It didn’t look very roughed up; the fox must have made things quick. The fox trotted to the burrow opening with caution, never taking its eyes off of Therese. After it was gone, Therese continued to stare at the hole it had gone into. She had never seen any animal with a kill before, and this had been so unexpected. It was a new lesson.

Once she started walking again, she paid more attention to the sounds around her. She noticed how distinct the sound of her boots hitting the packed in dirt was. She rounded the back half of the mule pen and went into the yard. Therese reached the concrete slab in front of the back door and slid her boots off. She opened the door—inside smelled like pumpkin and onions; the air was warm. She slid off her coat and sat it on top of the loud dryer. She walked out of the back room and into the kitchen. Her mother was pouring sweet tea in glasses of ice. Her father walked in from the living room, drying his hands with a white hand towel. He had just left the bathroom sink.

“My hands are clean,” he grinned at his daughter.

Letter to a Best Friend

by Candace Turlington

“This is the litter tool.”

You stood, facing away from me, babbling about things I couldn’t comprehend. Compelled by forces unknown to me, your body stiffened, suddenly full of purpose. Your arms stretched upward, trying to meet the sky, as you became borderline belligerent. “Why won’t you come to me, God?” you demanded of no one in particular. It was then you turned to face me. “Some abductions are worth it, you know. The vacation away from this body helps me deal with these demons.” I knew what you meant; I just didn’t know how to *respond*. I also knew that I wanted to stay in that moment forever, even though it was impossible. It was perfect, don’t you remember? Amber rays of salvation warmed our souls; we were just too obsessed with the *darkness* in each other to notice.

You told me the Secret to Life, but I was so wrapped up in my own tragedy that I forgot to remember it. Perhaps one day, long after you’ve forgotten about me, it’ll skip through my mind like a playful imp. I don’t think I will want to remember it, though. You see, I’m hoping that by then, I will have moved on from this life, and unfortunately, I fear that to once more know its secret will send me spiraling back into the Abyss, and I’ll drown in her eyes forever. Or maybe I still am now. *Perpetually* lost. I thought you would save me, but you just smiled and said that the time wasn’t right yet. That I needed to bask in this vampiric plague a bit longer. I didn’t know what that meant and still don’t, but maybe the plague does. It’s always a guess with you, you know, whether or not I’ll understand the vines that flow from your mouth. They wrap themselves around me and steal my breath, but I suppose you’ll never stop because *you know how much I like it*.

But alas, these are thoughts for another day. Today we’re talking about *that moment*. The one when the trees giggled as the wind played with their leaves. The one when my lifelong weakness revealed herself to me. The one when you told me The Secret. In your eyes I saw a fire, and in my eyes I felt blackness. I knew they had gone black; they always do when you tell me something detrimental to the health of the universe. I think it’s because you, or something inside you—your center, your definition, your lyrics—is detrimental to the health of the universe.

And no one besides me understands this, but it’s part of your *charm*.

It is the foundation of *my love for you*.

It is the foundation of your love for me.

The Amber Calm

by Ben Whitehead

The wind poured in through the open window of the car. The late night air was heavy, a product of the humid weather. It made it difficult to breathe, and it didn't help that I had been suffering from a cold the past week. My eyes were heavy with sleep, and I really wanted to lie down for the night, but I was also very hungry. Thomas, my roommate, suggested Waffle House, so I agreed. We were in his Intrepid, driving to Waffle House. There are two in town, one near the campus and the other on the north side of town. We were going to the one further away because they have better service and food. We left out of the dorm parking lot, heading out the back side of the campus towards the highway.

The amber of the streetlights cast shadows across the road that shone in ways I had never seen before. The way the light—not just from the streetlights, moonlight, too—came down over the buildings and through the tree limbs, then down onto the street as we passed over, struck me as odd, like an amber-gray cloud stretching over the land. The air smelled of the rain that had just passed from the last hurricane. The smell of fresh-cut grass and rainwater mixed with the smoky smell of Thomas' Newports. The yellow lines split the road until we turned onto the highway. The radio blasted "Minerva" by the Deftones. Once we turned, the road was cut intermittently by the white lines in the middle. My mind focused on the music because I liked the song and because it was 2:15 in the morning. I gazed out the window and watched the interplay of the light on the different surfaces around us. It shaped itself around the car as we passed under each new light and projected itself, not only onto the ground below it but on the whole area around it. The light sent streaks across Thomas' dirty windshield.

When we finally got there, the place was almost a ghost town except for the waitress, cook, and the drunk guy who was sitting on a stool at the bar. We sat in a booth in the corner. The waitress, a small Asian girl named Lin, walked over after we sat down and placed our silverware on the table. We both ordered the All-Star Special: a waffle with bacon, hash browns, and scrambled eggs. After Lin had taken our order, Thomas went to the jukebox.

While he was picking songs, I gazed out the window towards the road. It was dark and hardly a car was on the road. Serenity. I am awake, yet the city sleeps. There was a small hill that rose up in front of the Waffle House, giving it some cushion from the highway. Further down the road toward the city limits, a large hill carries the road down and back up again. I stared down the road at this small valley. I thought, *What did this place look like before we were here? Back when no one lived here, when it was just trees and nature?* At the moment my thoughts were fully formed, the opening bars of "Folsom Prison Blues" took me from my Walden.

A few minutes later, our food was brought to us: first, the main plate (eggs,

and hash browns, with toast), then the waffle and bacon. The food was the most delicious meal I had eaten in days; whether it was from hunger or my sleep-deprived thoughts, I had no idea. As we ate, the music played on.

After we were both through, we paid our bills and walked outside. Thomas lit up another cigarette and sat down beside me on the curb. We sat in silence—he enjoying his nicotine fix and I enjoying the peace of a truly silent night. A light fog was settling over the air, making orbs around every bulb of light outside. When we got back to the dorm, I lay down on my bed. I looked out one of the windows over my bed and stared up at the sky. It was charcoal all over except where the amber of the streetlights shone. Where the amber and charcoal met, the sky created the darkest shade of amethyst. I closed my eyes, almost as the shutter of a camera in my mind, trying to forever save that moment. When I opened them again, it was morning. The sky was blue, and the moment had ceased.

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