

WORLDUMBO

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Volume 1
Issue 5

Feb 2012

Word Gumbo: Vol. 1, Issue 5 is a publication of Gumbo Press, February 2012.

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Submissions are open for issue six until 29th February 2012. The theme is ‘Endings’.
See our website for details of how to submit.

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Editorial

Welcome to a watery issue five of *Word Gumbo* which is, as you will see, a little shorter than usual. We picked the very best from the selection on offer but whether it was the approaching festivities, or just a lack of inspiration, we just didn't find a huge amount to fill our issue.

That said, the pieces we have chosen are wonderful, evocative, and inspiring, and our thanks go out, as ever for all the hard work of our authors.

The closing date for our next issue, 'Endings', is the end of February, so if you didn't get in this time, please do try again.

Calum Kerr
Editor

The theme of 'water', with its elemental overtones, naturally invites cliché - and I'm afraid many of our submissions yielded to temptation.

Some of the eco-poetry was swept away by passion and rather over-stated its message, leaving nothing for the reader to interpolate. Others related a particular incident involving water, but couldn't quite make the leap into a narrative that would mean something to reader, as well as writer.

At the most basic level there were lots of poems whose syntax, punctuation or word order made their meaning more obscure than it needed to be, and left me feeling that the poet had walked away from a piece before it was quite finished.

But there was much sensuality and personal experience in these poems; some very neat short poems, which I enjoyed but didn't quite trust enough to include; and an increasing presence of international writers, which we look forward to seeing more of in future. If you didn't make it, keep trying; if you did, feel proud that you made it!

Jo Bell
Poetry Editor

Monster

Joanne Key

You return from the hospital and stand in the living room. You try to sit down, but there is too much softness for you now: the chenille throws, velvet cushions, plush fibres under your feet - your body rejects them all, because you don't belong in a living room. Instinct tells you to go outside; seek the comfort of concrete, because you need something jagged and unforgiving.

In the garden, you kick off your shoes and push your feet into sharp slate. There is no pain. You shed your winter coat, lie down on the slabs with your limbs outstretched and allow the cold to infuse you. As the clouds drift and merge, you sift through the things you have come to know: every question asked; the answers that do not exist; the unknowns that coast silently beneath human silhouettes as they skim the surface.

The world is kaleidoscopic: it rolls over and disintegrates in front of you. Scenes struggle to find order as you watch the sky transform from a black mountain to blue ocean. Closing your eyes, you press your palms together: one last prayer asking for everything to be turned over. You say your *Amen* and open your eyes. You are naked; face down in water.

Somewhere above you - a telephone rings and you know it is a baited hook: something is trying to pull you back. You ignore it and lie in wait. The ringing fades when your ears start to fold and split into slits of gills.

You feel the stab and prickle of your skin as it flakes, bleeds and falls away. A new hide grows over you that thickens and sets into fins and armoured scales. The small of your back blisters and bursts open. You hold still and allow your spine to snake out. You flick your tail. You retract your lips into a rictus, bare your fangs and search for your reflection beneath the water. All you see is detritus: rags of skin and fragments of memory slipping by as they sink to the bottom. There is nothing above, nothing except one silhouette in the distance, thrashing at the surface: an animal in distress, gasping for breath.

As you close in, you sense an anomaly in the figure's vibration: two heartbeats. Closer still, you detect the movements of two separate forms that are locked together. They appear magnificent, invincible, until you locate a sound coming through the water: weakness, pain and an echo of a voice crying,

We will fight this together. I will not let you die.

As you rocket upwards, you draw down the membranes that cover your eyes. You smash through the surface - jaws gaping. You take them both.

It is quick. It is painless.

Interruption

James B Nicola

Of course he's a boor. And of course he burst
ill-mannered and ill timed at just
the crux of what you had rehearsed.
And sure, the interruption jarred at first.
But you don't seem unduly shaken,
do you? Have a sherry, then.
Maybe he'll come back and burst again.

Oh he's fine. It's humid tonight and hot,
clammy and cloying, but the sky is clear
so I'm sure he hasn't run off. What?
I met him at a function, a gala somewhere.
But on that occasion I did the strangest thing—
perhaps it was the moon, perhaps
that he seemed so kind, and unimpressed:
I laughed
which rinsed me off, as rude as rain.

So I thought that he'd be a good dinner guest
for you. And I think it's still possible. Let
us raise our glasses now and toast
the truth, and new acquaintances,
and then, outré as he is, the brute,
go join him in the rising heat.

I'm sure he hasn't left. Why should he have left?
You may have been curt, but you haven't laughed yet.
I think what it was, he heard the thunder,
didn't you?, and is standing out front looking up
awaiting the effects of a sudden rain
and wanting to show us how to wait
with faces raised to the thunderclap of summer.

When it rains

Charlotte Lee

I like rain. I like listening to it tapping against the roof or against my window, I like watching it bounce off the road, I like the ripples it makes when it hits puddles. I like jumping in puddles, splashing about, getting wet... I'm still such a child.

I like standing outside when it rains, sometimes with an umbrella, listening to the deafening noise it makes as it hammers down on the material. I like standing outside in the rain, just letting it soak me, run down my face, my hair...

I like rain because when I'm stood outside in it, it's the only time I can cry. Who's going to notice when it's raining? Who's going to notice a girl crying when the heavens have opened and people are dashing to get inside?

I like rain because it keeps me safe, makes me feel like I can finally be free. I can stand outside for hours, in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans while the rain pours down. I just close my eyes and wait. Wait for the tears to stop, or the rain, whichever comes first.

I like the rain because it washes everything away. All your sins, your regrets, your disappointments and just leaves you clean again. So when it stops, you can start over. You can sin some more, regret some more, be disappointed some more... until the next time it rains.

I don't understand people who don't like rain. It's good for the planet; it gives life to plants, animals, people... I don't know why people race to get inside when they feel the first drops on their face... I don't. I stand and wait for another drop and another and another until it's all come down and there is nothing left. That's when the sun comes out and the clouds clear away and I have to stop crying. I have to be locked back up again until the next time when it rains.

It rained that day. Our last day of camp... I cried then as well, out of habit, because that summer had been the best of my life. I had been happy and free and I hadn't needed the rain for a long while. But it must have known then, it must have known that I needed it because I had to say goodbye. Goodbyes aren't usually hard for me, they don't usually require rain, but that one did. I had to say goodbye to her, to them... to my freedom.

That day, it poured down so hard that I felt like I was being battered, but I still stood out there because I knew that I wouldn't get another chance to be truly free for a long while. But as I stood there, my eyes closed, my face turned to the sky as the rain soaked my hair and clothes, I heard someone calling out my name.

"Caitlyn? What the hell are you doing out here?!"

I had opened my eyes and looked down to see her stood in front of me, shivering, her arms hugging herself as the rain soaked her too. I didn't say a word, just frowned and wondered what she was doing outside. Most people wouldn't venture out in the rain without an umbrella or a coat, but she was dressed the same as me, t-shirt and jeans.

"Caitlyn... are you crying?"

I didn't understand how she had known, how she had seen, the rain always protected me from everyone... but not her, she knew.

"Caitlyn..."

She'd wiped the tears away, but more had fallen in time with the rain. She had frowned and moved closer to me, I'd been frozen to the spot, not daring to move in case someone else saw through the rain.

Without another word, she had kissed me. A kiss so gentle, that I had thought I'd imagined it, until she kissed me again, harder, then pulled me into a tight hug. She **hadn't been as wet as me**, so I'd felt some of her warmth and it had seeped into me, warming me too.

We had stayed stood in the middle of the camp for a long time, her arms tight round me and mine, eventually, coming to encircle her too. The rain didn't stop for ages, but she never left me. No one had ever stayed with me when it rained. No one had ever understood. She did though.

She had pulled away when the rain had started to slow and I saw that she'd been crying too.

"Jen..."

I'd wiped her tears away and, without knowing why, I'd pressed my lips to hers.

"Thank you."

She had smiled at me and I'd hugged her tight one last time before I turned and left.

It's been exactly a year since then and I was back at Camp, on the last day... and it was raining again. A small part of me just thought it was a coincidence, but the rest of me knew better.

As soon as I'd seen the first drops hit my window, I pulled off my jacket and made my way back to the same place. The place I knew she would find me.

I'd only been stood here a few minutes, staring up at the sky as the heavens poured down on me, when I heard footsteps and my name, once again.

"Caitlyn."

It wasn't a question this time. She'd known I'd be here. I looked down and saw her stood in front of me, just like last time. No coat, no umbrella... just her. Jenny.

"I thought I'd find you here."

She smiled. Moving closer, her eyes fixed to mine and mine to hers. She was beautiful, even more so in the rain, because that's what rain does, it sets you free, shows who you really are.

I didn't know what to say so I just nodded and waited, as she lent slowly towards me and pressed her lips to mine the same way she had a year ago. This time I kissed back, wrapping my arms round her

waist as hers circled my neck, pulling me to her.

I felt the tears escape and run down my face, mixing with the rain and... her tears. She was crying too. I pulled away just slightly, to see if it was real... She looked at me, understanding.

“I think I like the rain.”

I nodded, not able to find my voice.

“I understand, Caitlyn. I like the rain, because... because when it rains... I get you. You show me who I really am, you set me free.”

She kissed me softly before hugging me tight. Then I heard her whisper...

“You’re my rain, Caitlyn. And I want to be yours.”

I felt something tug in my chest. I was her rain.

“I didn’t understand last year, Jen. But I do now... because when it rains, I always think of you.”
And she was mine.

Ambush

Sarah Jasmon

The dry dock is the other side of Wigan Pier.

I get there on late on Thursday afternoon, and we go through the last lock just as the rain starts. It's hard and diagonal, and the wind is howling across the canal.

I'm due in the dry dock in the morning. You sail into the lock through one set of gates, then the water drains away and the boat settles down on a series of wooden blocks, ready for the jet wash and the bitumen

Bitumen is the stuff on top of roads. On boats you paint it along the sides, to just above the waterline, to stop the steel from rusting. Some are using a new epoxy coating, and I ran this past Derek, who's offered to do the work for me. I say offered; in actual fact, he informed me that he'd be doing it. When I mentioned epoxy, he gave me a sideways look.

'Naw, you'll be alright with bitchy,' he said.

For tonight, I'm going to tie up in front of the British Waterways building. I point my nose in, drop the revs, and wait for the gentle bump against the side. But the wind catches us, and the nose swings out towards the other side of the canal. I shove the tiller as far across as it will go and throw the throttle forward. There's no power, nothing.

My boat, Antioch, is 57 foot long.

The canal is 55 foot across.

I'm going to get stuck.

*

The working canals were obsolete before I was born. The one that had gone through the town where I grew up was long filled in, houses built on top. Canals were something I glimpsed from the motorway, read about in books. But, somehow, I ended up living on Antioch. We had the boat built for us, spending hours one summer marking out boat shapes in a field with a hosepipe, deciding where rooms, beds, cookers and sofas would fit. It was like designing a big dollhouse. My entire boating experience before moving on board was one very cold February day on a seventy-foot narrowboat on the Trent and Mersey Canal at Middlewich, doing an Inland Waterways Helmsman Certificate.

I scraped every bridge that I went under.

I've known Derek for six years. He uses Ambush to bring diesel along the canal, a huge tank and an old petrol pump sitting in the middle of the open-roofed hull. On average, I see him once every three weeks. He looks after me, knows before I do when the diesel is getting low in my tank.

‘Can you dip your diesel, love? I’m coming by on Wednesday.’

He started working on coal boats when he was twelve, steering fully laden, forty-ton boats down from the Wigan coalfields. He’s been in a force seven gale on the Mersey on a short boat pulled by a tug. He brought the night waste from Liverpool down to the fields of Lancashire. He’s been a lock keeper and a bridge keeper and made the last commercial run on the Leeds/Liverpool, grain to Seaforth, at the end of the seventies. Even when he was driving lorries or working as a corporation busman, his heart was with the boats.

Ambush was built for Ainscough Mill, the red brick flour mill with a chimney that dominates the flat expanse of country around Burscough. She spent thirty years sailing up to Manchester with flour, re-loading at Wigan with coal for the return journey.

I say ‘she’ because she’s a boat, and boats are always female. She’s not feminine, though: a hulking seventy two foot long working boat, unpainted, unprettified. She has a round-bellied bow, and sides that tower above the flat roofs of the narrowboats and widebeams moored along the towpath edge.

*

Antioch is wedged across the canal

The engine is roaring, exhaust water churning out in a white foaming mass, but the wind is forcing the nose against the opposite bank.

I leave my daughter leaning into the tiller arm with her whole weight, and crab-walk my way down the gunnels until I’m on the front deck. If I jump over to the bank, I can push the nose out and hopefully get enough momentum going for the engine to move it the rest of the way. The wind and the rain are so hard I can only just see what I’m doing.

A man in Lycra stops his bike to watch. I turn my head towards him.

‘Do you need a hand?’ he asks.

I’m pushing, I can see my daughter leaning, the rain’s hammering.

‘It’s just, well, I’d hate to fall in.’ He looks embarrassed.

He’s right, the trick is knowing when to jump, and the boat is already starting to move.

‘No’, I say. ‘No, it’s all under control’.

*

Derek can always tell who isn’t going to cope, the dreamers who think that living on the cut is all sunshine and hand-painted water cans.

‘They’ll not last,’ he says, nodding his head down towards a narrowboat moored on the other side of the bridge.

He calls them 'the teachers', a youngish couple with a baby who still have the air of slightly inept beginners, even though they've been on the water for about a year.

Mr. Teacher is shapeless. He has a sign on his car advertising private tuition in maths. I suspect he is a bankruptcy case. He often sits down by the bridge, in his car with his baby strapped beside him. Maybe he's listening to the radio, or maybe he can't face going back to the boat.

My ex-husband couldn't cope either. He chose a job, a colleague and a house with three bathrooms instead.

When he was around we used a hand pump to empty the toilet tank. You had to stand on the wharf pushing a handle backwards and forwards for about an hour, the thick blue pipe running from the tank full of sludge inching its way...well, you get the picture. It was hard work, it was smelly, and it was often cold, and frequently wet. Add the sailing to get there and the sailing after to the slipway, where the boat could be turned, and then the sail home – it made for a long day.

He wandered past once, six months after he left, whilst I was up at the wharf emptying the toilet. I was standing there watching the little electric pump I'd bought to deal with the most exhausting part of the exercise.

'Do you think we'd still be married if we'd had one of these?' I said to him.

We watched the motor chugging. He smiled.

*

Derek's boats have seen off at least one marriage, but he never lived on one, except when he was on a run. He's in sheltered housing now, and he has another wife who still complains about his work.

'You always smell of diesel, she says to me when I come in.' He pulls his knitted beanie off, and wipes across his forehead with the back of his hand before settling the hat back on again. He has one misshapen fingernail, a curved hook from an ancient incident that I've never got round to asking about. 'I tell her, you knew what I was when you married me.'

Last year, he briefly formed a partnership with a man who runs a marina, and the cheques had to be made out to 'Elias Grimshaw Ltd'. I was captivated: if Dickens had written a book about canals, Elias Grimshaw would have fitted right in.

'Is he really called Elias Grimshaw?'

Derek gave me a look.

'Naw, that were his granddad, he's called Wayne.'

The partnership didn't last. Derek didn't like being told to do things differently, and Wayne bought a narrowboat and started taking fuel up the Bridgewater canal instead.

*

I leap back onto the streaming metal of the front of the boat and edge my way back along the side to relieve Fuchsia of the tiller. It seems to be working, we slowly swing our way back to the right side. I hear muffled cheering. Every window of the British Waterways office building is full of clapping people who have been following my travails. It's a bit embarrassing, but hey, we did it. So I turn and bow to my audience. The wind takes advantage of my momentary lapse in concentration and the bow swings back out. Off we go again.

*

British Waterways doesn't send icebreakers out any more.

Last winter, the ice was a foot thick and we were stuck for over a month. Our nearest house neighbours let us run a hosepipe from their outside tap when we needed water. I slipped on the ice, broke my wrist and had to develop a one-handed technique of chopping wood. With the ice that thick and the lock gates seized shut, Derek couldn't bring Ambush down, so he brought the diesel in twenty litre tubs in the back of a van. He parked up and ferried them down to the boat four at a time in a wheelbarrow.

Derek's an old school boatman. He's told me himself, there's no age limit for them. They work until they drop. I don't want to think about this. I want Derek to be the oldest working boatman ever. But, when he stopped hauling for a moment, Derek looked at me, looked at the tubs and looked over the frozen water.

'I'll not be doing another winter,' he said.

There were eight boats built for the mill, Leeds and Liverpool longboats, working in pairs: Ironclad and Attractive, Ambush and Burscough, Black Prince and Viktoria, Boadicea and Claymore. The mill itself closed in 1968; one day it'll be converted into apartments.

Derek bought Viktoria first, £240 scrap value, and she's still his baby. He got Ambush in a swap for another working boat, Irwell, partly to match her with Viktoria, partly to save her from the indignity of being converted into a restaurant. In Derek's eyes, there's nothing worse than a converted working boat; it's like asking a boatman to bake fairy cakes.

He's been keeping Ambush and Viktoria afloat for over a decade, and has plans to gather in the rest of the fleet, although out of the eight, one was bombed in Liverpool docks, one was scrapped and two are now in Ireland. And there's never enough money.

*

Somewhere in the depths of my waterproofs is my phone. I find Derek's number.

'Have you checked the weed hatch, cock?' he asks.

Wrapped around the propeller shaft are the remains of a school blazer. I grope about, slashing at it under the water with my second best paring knife until I've got it all. It's not the worst thing to get caught up: I've heard stories of carpets and mattress springs and even a dead sheep.

I get the weed hatch back in place, and the engine brings us round without a murmur of complaint. Of course, the BW windows are now empty of spectators.

I'm back at my mooring, waiting for fuel. You don't hear Ambush coming: there's just a moment of darkness when she cuts out the light from the portholes, and she's alongside. Derek lassoes the rope while I stick the kettle on and go up on the deck to clear a way through all the wood and shoes and umbrellas and folding chairs that I keep on the back deck. Derek laughs at me and shakes his head.

While the tank fills, we sit down and have some tea. He's shaved off his beard, fed up with all the Father Christmas comments, and you can see the cleft in his chin. If Kirk Douglas had been a Wigan boatman, he'd look a lot like Derek. We catch up with news, and he heads off again. Antioch shifts very slightly as Ambush pulls away and I hear Derek's final sentence again.

'You're alright, cock,' he says. 'You'll be alright.'

Make This Go Away

Bob Barr

Cast:

Algernon 30's-40's

Fred 30's

Alice 30's

Set: Skeleton living room: Practical door with backing.

The time: the present

The scene: A suburban home. Living room with front door to street. Can be very sketchy, no furniture required, could be painted backdrop or cyc only.

At rise: in black.

Sound: Car drives up, stops. Car door opens, closes. Footsteps.

Sounds at door. Lock is being picked by an expert. In a few seconds, door swings open, allowing spill of street lamp. We see a man dressed in black with a tool box. He kneels by the door and starts removing the lock. He is quiet, but makes some noise, perhaps drops a tool.

Suddenly, lights come on and FRED HAYWORTH comes in, wearing pj's, holding a gun.

MAN Shit!

FRED You said it, buster. Hands up!

MAN (STILL ON HIS KNEES, HANDS UP)
Wait! Wait! Don't shoot---I'm not a burglar!

FRED Oh, yeah. You can tell that to the cops.
(CALLS OFFSTAGE)
Honey, call 911. I've got a burglar.

ALICE (OFF)
Are you all right, Fred? Are you sure you're all right?

FRED
Yeah, Alice, I'm fine. Just make the call

MAN
Hey, you're making a mistake. I'm a locksmith.

FRED
Sure you are. And I'm Indiana Jones.

MAN
But I am. I really am. Let me show you my...
(STARTS TO REACH FOR IDENTIFICATION)

FRED
Just hold it right there, fella...or I'll shoot.

MAN
I just want to show you my ID!

FRED
All right. Slo-o-owly...with your left hand.

MAN
It's in my right pocket.

FRED
OK, right hand...But SL-O-O-O-OW.
(MAN SLOWLY REACHES INTO POCKET, PRODUCES I.D.)

FRED
Toss it on the floor.
(MAN DOES, DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF HIMSELF, STARTS TO GET UP)

FRED
No! Stay on your knees! Pick it up and toss it on the floor in front of ME.

MAN
Oh.
(HE DOES. FRED PICKS IT UP, READS IT)

FRED
Algernon? Your name's Algernon?

MAN
Yeah. Algernon Englander. AE Locksmiths....Incorporated.

FRED
What the hell are you doin' here?

ALGERNON The bank sent me. They foreclosed on the house.

FRED What?

ALGERNON Yeah. They wanted the locks changed.

FRED I don't know what the hell you're talking about.

ALGERNON The bank with your mortgage. They foreclosed. They said you got a notice. I thought the place was empty. They told me you'd been evicted.

FRED Evicted, my ass! What notice? I didn't get any notice.

ALGERNON Maybe your wife....

FRED What? My wife what?

ALGERNON Sometimes the notice comes...and they don't, like, tell you.

FRED (YELLING OFF)
Alice! You get the cops?

ALICE (OFF)
Not yet. Nine One One was busy.

FRED Busy?

ALICE Busy signal. So I waited a minute and tried again.

FRED So you got 'em?

ALICE They answered, but they put me on hold!

FRED Well, while you're waitin', tell me somethin'. Did we get a letter from the Bank?

ALICE Which bank?

FRED THE bank. The one with our mortgage! Great something.

ALICE Great Western Eastern Southern National?

FRED Yeah, that's it. Did we get somethin'?

ALICE I didn't see anything.

(FRED LOOKS AT ALGERNON)

ALGERNON They said they sent a final notice two weeks ago. They said the place was empty.
(STARTS TO GET UP)

FRED Hold it! All right—just hold it right there!

ALGERNON My knees hurt. I usually wear knee pads, but I was in a hurry to get done.

FRED All right you can stand up. But no funny business.

ALGERNON Thanks. That's better.

FRED Wait a minute. If you're a legit locksmith...why the hell'd you do this in the middle of the night? What time is it, anyway?

(ALGERNON STARTS TO LOOK AT HIS WRISTWATCH)

FRED Hold it! SLO-O-OWLY.
(ALGERNON LOOKS, VERY SLOWLY)

ALGERNON It's 2:30.

FRED Two thirty. So, tell me, what the hell you doin' this two thirty in the morning for?

ALGERNON I been busy. I'm working practically around the clock. Foreclosures all over the place. You know.

FRED I know about foreclosures all right. But not here. We been payin' our mortgage regular.

ALGERNON You sure?

FRED Sure, I'm....
(A BEAT. HE THINKS, THEN CALLS OFF)
Alice, you still waiting for 'em?

ALICE Yeah, the recording keeps saying my call's important.

FRED Well, tell me somethin'. You been payin' the mortgage, haven't ya?

(THERE IS A LONG SILENCE)

FRED Alice? Did you hear me?

ALICE (OFF)
Yeah, I heard ya.

FRED Alice, hang up and come in here.

ALICE (OFF)
I gotta get a robe.

ALGERNON It's just...you know...what they say: a failure of communication.

FRED We'll see about that.

(ALICE IN A ROBE OVER HER NIGHTGOWN COMES IN)

ALICE This is the guy, huh?

FRED OK. Let's hear it. You been payin' the mortgage or not?

ALICE Well....

FRED Well, what? Either you did or you didn't?

ALICE The interest rate went up. Way up. So the payment did, too.

FRED I know that.

ALICE Well, you remember what we agreed. How you'd pay it one month out of your account and I'd pay it the next out of mine?

FRED Yeah, so what?

ALICE I got laid off.

FRED Laid off? You been getting' dressed and leavin' every morning. Weren't you goin' to work?

ALICE Yeah. I mean no. I didn't want to tell you. I figured you'd get sore. I thought I'd just get another job.

FRED When'd you get laid off?

ALICE (HESITATES, THEN)
About three months ago.

FRED Three months!

ALICE I been lookin' for a job. It's not easy.

FRED So what about the bank?

ALICE Last couple of times, maybe, I didn't pay it.

FRED Whyn't you tell me?

ALICE I was scared. I thought you'd holler.

FRED (HOLLERING)
What the hell made you think that?
(BEAT)
So a notice did come?

ALICE Yeh. But it was just a warning.

ALGERNON That was the first one.

ALICE I thought they were all the same.

ALGERNON No, they get tougher. But if it was only a month or two, it shouldn't have....

(HE BREAKS OFF. HE AND ALICE BOTH LOOK AT FRED)

FRED Maybe it's been longer than that.

ALICE Whadda ya mean? Haven't you been payin' it?

FRED They cut me back to part time. I figured you'd been payin' and I'd catch up later.

(FRED AND ALICE LOOK AT ONE ANOTHER, THEN AT ALGERNON)

ALGERNON Once it gets past three or four months....

ALICE So what happens now?

ALGERNON They usually send a marshal to evict. But they said you'd already moved. That's why I was supposed to change the locks.

FRED Hey, I guess you were just doin' your job.

ALGERNON In that case, would you put away that gun? It makes me nervous.

FRED Oh, yeah. Sure.
(HE DOES, THEN, AN AFTERTHOUGHT)
I still don't understand why you were changin' the locks in the middle of the night.

ALGERNON I need the money.
(OFF THEIR LOOK AT EACH OTHER)
The bank. They went everything done in a hurry. Everything except payin' *their* bills.

ALICE They haven't paid you?

ALGERNON They...like..set up a sliding scale. The quicker you get the job done, the quicker you get paid. Like...today's the 19th of the month. Every job I get done by the 20th, they'll pay me in two months.

FRED Two months? The *bank* is two months behind?

ALGERNON Hey, if I'm a day later, it goes to three months! Maybe four.

ALICE That stinks.

FRED More than stinks. It sucks.

ALGERNON Yeh, well, what can I do?

ALICE Complain. That's what you ought to do, Al.

ALGERNON Lot of good that'll do, Alice.

FRED Wait a minute.
(TO ALICE)
You called him "Al". How'd you know his name?

ALICE You said it.

FRED No, I didn't. He showed me his card and I was surprised it was "Algernon". I never said Al.

ALICE Well, I don't know. I thought I heard you.

FRED (LOOKS FROM ONE TO THE OTHER)
And he called you "Alice"!

(ALGERNON STARTS TO PROTEST)

Somethin' funny goin' on here.
(GETS HIS GUN OUT AGAIN, TO ALGERNON)
...and you better tell me what.

ALGERNON Wait a minute. I heard you call her "Alice". Hold it with the gun.

FRED (WAVES THE GUN)
I said you better tell me. Now!

ALICE Don't hurt him, Fred!

FRED (WITH A LOOK AT HER)
What's goin' on?

ALICE Well, I...I didn't really get laid off.

FRED Why'd you tell me you did?

ALICE Why didn't you tell me you were cut back!

FRED Never mind that. You been payin' the mortgage or what?

ALICE Well...I had the money, my months. What about you?

FRED I only missed one month.
(LIGHT DAWNS)
So...there shouldn't be any foreclosure.
(TO ALGERNON)
Should there?

(ALGERNON SHRUGS)

OK, enough of your b.s. Tell me what you're doin' here.
(COCKS GUN)

ALGERNON (VERY NERVOUS WITH THE GUN IN HIS FACE)
It was her idea.

FRED What?
(HE WHIRLS ON HER)
Alice!

ALICE (TO ALGERNON)
You son-of-a-bitch.

FRED OK, I get it now. You're in this together, huh?
(TO ALGERNON)
You been bangin' her?

ALGERNON No, no---it was just business.

FRED Oh, yeah? Is that right, Alice?

ALICE Yeah, nothin' personal.

FRED All right, so it's a scam, huh, this foreclosure stuff?
(OFF THEIR SILENCE)
What the hell you expect to get outa this?

ALICE Well, we been talkin' divorce.

FRED Yeah. So?

ALICE I figured you'd leave.

FRED What? Leave the house?

ALICE If you thought it was foreclosed.

FRED But you been payin'!

ALICE I said I had. I could have, but I just put the dough aside in another account. But you *haven't* been payin', Fred. And don't tell me it's only once. It's been a lot longer than that.

FRED (AFTER A MOMENT)
How'd you know that?

ALGERNON I told her.

FRED What?

ALGERNON My connection at the bank. He's my brother-in-law.

FRED So, there really is a foreclosure...

ALICE Listen, it was just business.

FRED What business? What the hell you talkin' about?

ALICE I figured we were splittin' up pretty soon. So I figured if they foreclosed the place, Al could buy it back, cheap. He knows the workout guy at the bank. They don't want the damn house.

FRED How could he afford to buy it?

ALGERNON I can't. But I could be a straw buyer for Alice. If she'd front the money.

ALICE I promised Al a \$500 bonus. I'd get it back at a fire sale price. And we'd get rid of the humungous mortgage.

FRED (AS IT SINKS IN)
And I'd be odd man out, huh?

ALICE Jeez, Fred...I thought you wanted out.

FRED I've just been worried sick about money. Doesn't mean I don't still love you.

ALICE Do you?

FRED Aw, honey, you know I do.

ALICE 'Cause I still care about you, too.

ALGERNON So...you still want to go through with it?

ALICE Whadda ya say, Fred?

FRED I say----screw the bank. And, if we get it back cheap enough, let's give Al a thousand!

(FRED EMBRACES ALICE)

BLACKOUT

The Beach

Alan Dennis Harris

“Who does he think he’s talking to?” Dad asked.

“Why don’t you get off your beach towel and ask him?” Mom replied.

It’s the first Saturday of summer. We drove an hour to get to the lake. But it’s not just any lake, it’s Lake Michigan. The endless water somehow reminds Grandpa of the ocean.

“I’m not asking the old man anything,” Dad said. “He hasn’t started a conversation with me since the day I was born. Why should I be any different from him?”

I hear the ocean is cleaner than any lake. I don’t know. I’m probably the only 12 year old that’s never seen the sea. Grandpa’s been to shores all over the world, places with funny names like Iwo Jima and Ford Island.

“Oh, that’s right, talking to fathers doesn’t run in your family,” Mom said.

Lake Michigan was cold but the sun sure felt warm. We all smelled like sun tan lotion.

“He started that tradition,” Dad replied.

Mom looked around the beach like she was searching for someone. “Hmmm, tradition, eh? So that explains it.”

As a ladybug landed on my nose, a sea gull swooped over my head trying to grab a granola bar right out of my hand. As Mom and Dad talked I thought to myself, *Explains what?*

“Explains what?” Dad asked.

Mom smiled, put her big sunglasses on and stretched out on her towel. Grandpa kept staring at the water, mumbling to himself. My little sister was showing off her stupid gymnastics as she walked by him—on her hands. Grandpa and I ignored her.

“Stop ignoring me,” Dad said to Mom. “Explains what?”

Mom answered as the sunshine lit up her face. “It explains why your oldest son is not here to enjoy the beach—with his father.”

My older brother stayed at home again this year. He never goes with us to the beach. He pretty much never goes on any family outings—unless Dad stays home.

Grandpa mumbled to himself as he looked out over the water. He stood at the shoreline for a good hour. When his conversation with the wind wrapped up, he walked up and down the beach until it was about time to drive back home. To further prove how annoying she can be, especially at the beach, my sister kicked sand all over my towel and granola bar. Cartwheels in the sand are just a messy way to show off.

But with or without little sisters, I love the beach at Lake Michigan—and I'm not the only one. Ladybugs love the beach. Sea gulls, who have never seen the sea, love the beach. But it's possible that Grandpa loves the beach more than any of us. The look in his glass eye, as it reflected Lake Michigan, sure looked to me like love. But whatever I saw in his good eye made me cautious. Twelve year olds might not be right all the time. What I saw coulda been love or it mighta been fear. Either way, I've never seen love nor fear that deep in a good eye.

Maybe he was looking for something that was supposed to wash up on shore. Or he might just of been remembering something or someone just beyond the horizon—maybe both. But nothing floated to shore. Nothing ever did. The only shadows upon the waves belonged to sea gulls swooping towards us like fighter planes.

"Ooooh, look at the birdie," my sister pointed out with her toes as she stood on her head.

A sea gull swooped in low from the water right at her.

"That's a sea gull, Stupid," I said, as politely as a big brother can.

Grandpa squinted with his good eye as though he had recognized something—something he'd been waiting for. Standing bravely before the sea gull's descent, Grandpa finally spoke up.

"That's a strafing pattern," he said softly.

"What's a chafing pattern?" my sister asked. But Grandpa didn't answer. He looked over at Dad, then the rest of us. He looked around at the ladybugs, sea gulls and once again at the waves crawling across the peaceful sand—advancing on our position.

He saw all he wanted to see of Lake Michigan, finally turning his back to the beach. As Grandpa watched the sky in all directions before he carefully headed for the safety of the parking lot.

There Is A Hole In Your Shoe

Nick Garrard

There is a hole in your shoe. With each new pulse of the tide, the water creeps further inside. The air feels impossibly sharp and there is a long green bottle in your hand. It weighs heavily on your arm but you don't dare move. You are awaiting further instructions. You stand perfectly still but the world keeps moving around you. A gull beads its way across the horizon.

A woman comes pounding over the dunes. She is wearing thick boots and a bright red fleece. A walkie talkie is at her belt, fizzing with noise.

'Do you mind telling me what you're doing here? This is private property,' she says. 'You can't just wander onto the beach.'

'It's not my fault,' you tell her. 'I didn't want to come.'

'Is that your car parked in the dunes?'

'No,' you say.

'Whoever it is, they've left the radio on.'

'It's not my car,' you repeat.

You don't look up but you can feel her eyes searching your face. She is looking for signs. She wants to understand.

'You do realise this beach is off limits,' she says. 'The signs – you saw the signs?'

'I know that,' you say, 'but they don't'.

This makes you smile. The corners of your mouth lift as though pulled by strings. The woman turns aside and pulls the walkie-talkie from her belt. The voice on the other end is high and agitated, like a wasp throwing itself against the inside of a jar. While she is turned away you take the note from your pocket and stuff it into the bottle. It is still flecked with earth and your hands are calloused from clutching the spade. You hold the bottle above your head and calmly take a step out into the wash. The woman looks up.

'Now, wait! Wait a minute!'

You turn back towards her and stop, stretching out an open hand. You motion towards her. There is a pause. She is reading your eyes again. A moment passes between you and then her breath escapes her and she lets out a deep sigh. Her walkie-talkie falls into the foam.

She wraps his fingers in yours and together you begin to walk into the water.

Spring

Anja Konig

At 4am you could blame the birds
for singing or you could go for a run
across the misted fields with their
gristle and grass, wide water up
to the brim waiting for the honey
sun. But just because you can't sleep
doesn't mean you are crazy, so
you have a beer and a pee and go
back to bed.

Ocean Beach

David O'Neal

Gone the bustling amusement park at Ocean Beach, gone Skateland and Playland, gone into burnt brick and ruined concrete walls are the once sprawling Sutro Baths, gone the Chateau-like Cliff House which exists only in old pictures and postcards.

But the slow-sloping Beach, at the edge of the infinite ocean, is there in all its natural stolid solidity and aloneness: five miles of it from Lands End, where tourists gather for views of the Golden Gate and Marin Headlands, south to the Fort Funston cliffs where moth-like hang gliders soar 500 feet over the wind-swept land, riding the ridge-lift, held aloft by the up-drafts. Tiny Bank Swallows nest in the cliffs – their only known coastal nesting site. Ocean Beach, paralleled by the Great Highway, is two hundred yards wide all the way, its flatness modulated by occasional low sand dunes.

It's wind, wind, wind at Ocean Beach: strong wind, whooshing wind, whipping wind, forever wind, cold, steady, unrelenting always wind. Wind carves waves, froths the breakers, and forms white-caps in the distance. Wind drives the sea into the shore and the constant sounds of wind and waves together seemingly radiate from far beyond the horizon of incoming swells; the crash, roar, dip and hush; the pulse, shape and duration of multiple sea and wind sounds; the rush, constant pounding and plangent resonance of ocean and air; the weight and power of the ocean tamed only in small measure by the Beach. And shrill calls of snowy plovers, gulls, geese, ravens, pelicans, cormorants.

The slippery visual wash of waves; the sight of their rhythmic rise, thrust, collapse and retreat; their differing motions; their curves, filigrees and lacey shapes; the ever changing dots, specks and lines, jagged and smooth, on the moody ever-changing sea surface; inlay of scintillating light; tankers diminished by distance to toy boats; the grainy sand underfoot and in the hand; the briny taste and smell; salt on the lips. Do onlookers not see inward and stare into the sea-tides of their souls?

All San Francisco comes here. Waders like the gentle slope of the Beach and children play in the foamy spoor and backflow of the water; flyers of kites unloose their birds and dragons to the wind; surf-casters cast out; sand sculptors compete in the annual contest. Surfers love the heavy swells and miles of beach break; they mount the liquid planes below and above the rising waves and read the changes and shapes of the swells, then glide down cutting back and forth along the long spiral roll of falling wave crests. Kite-surfers slide and glide colorfully through the glassy shallows. Warming bonfires and barbeques glow on the beach day and night while runners and bikers flow on the sidewalks of the Great Highway.

Yet swimmers beware! Lives have been lost from the achingly cold water, strong rip tides, currents and undertows, and fierce waves. Wind driven waves have grounded many ships and pounded them to pieces on Seal Rocks and against the jagged cliffs at either end of the Beach. Once in a while, at low tide, the ghostly hull of the King Phillip, an old clipper ship wrecked in 1878 surfaces eerily through the sand at Ocean Beach.

The Process of Water

James B Nicola

When Shirley Maclaine
or someone like that
says she is
or rather has
god in her or
something like that
it means she is as a drop
dropped on the ocean
there being of course
many other
drops.

A sea's aloof from neither river nor rain,
but welcomes
and salts all
drop by drop
till we are born—
evaporate—
condense with experience—
then fall—
and return
as rain.

And everyone and everything
alive or once alive or soon alive
is as a drop
in that water process
to be bathed in or drunk
by the eternal thirst
of Earth, of us, of
the ocean god
or someone

somewhere
somewhat, I think,
like that.

Underwater, Overwater

Kevlin Henney

I can feel my heart beating.

A-beat.

"It's OK, you can jump in."

But I can't. I can't swim. It looks deep. I'm afraid.

"Everyone's enjoying themselves, see?"

Yes, splashing and shouting and swimming. Messing about, having such a good time.

My armbands are inflated. Against the encouragement to get in their pressure is oddly comforting.

My brother is filled with life. Underwater, overwater, smiling at me. I know he wants me to join in and play. But I just can't do it.

My mother's at the poolside in front of me, smiling, urging.

"Come on Edward, I'll hold you."

A-beat. A-beat.

I see my brother again beneath a sky whose blue I thought lived only in colouring pens, a sea I have only ever seen in pictures and an island whose name is too unfamiliar, too foreign for me to remember at this age.

Traffic, tourists, ruins. Two days in Athens, the three of us. Hot, bored, bothered. And then escape to the sea, away from the city. Not simply the coast, but to an island away from the overflowing beaches, bars and bistros, away from the nationless front of the Med.

"Come on Edward, pretend you're an outboard motor! Get in and hold onto the lilo. We can both kick. We'll be back to shore in no time. Mum won't even notice we're gone!"

But I can't do it. It's too deep. I'll be in over my head. It's not like swimming in a pool. Maybe it would be enough if I dangled my legs slightly over the side? We try that, but my splashing doesn't add enough to counter the current. We're drifting out of the bay and the waves are picking up. The shallowness near the beach lured us in, pulling against caution.

"Edward, be careful. Don't go too far or too deep. Charlie, the same for you. And keep an eye on your brother — remember, he can't swim as well as you." My mother's concern.

It was hours before the wayward current delivered us back. And, of course, she did notice we were gone. A notice that rang in our ears and kept us from the beach for days after.

My brother's optimism and sense of fun is laced with an edge I don't have. It's why we're drifting

out to sea in the first place. It's why we get back. It's why he finds some kind of thrill in being grounded while I just brood.

"OK, Edward, I don't think kicking's going to work, but I think I know what might."

We scrabble back onto the inflatable, exhausted, on our fronts, sun-coloured backs against a felt-tip sky. My brother rolls over, still catching breath, feet dangling in the water. He stares into the sun, squinting, his face caught between a thought and a grin.

"I heard... instead of swimming against the current, you should just go with the flow. The waves, the tide, the undertow... they'll take you along and back to shore... eventually. It can work both ways."

This sounds too good to be true. It doesn't make sense to me. But neither does seemingly still, shallow water pulling us out to sea. My brother's face breaks a full grin.

"You know why it's called the undertow?"

I don't. I don't even know what that is.

"Because it pulls you from under your toes!"

At least this makes sense. My brother laughs.

A-beat. A-beat. A-beat.

Always water.

The last time I see my brother is by a waterfall in New England.

He's home from university. He's just finished with his girlfriend. More convenient than trying to keep the relationship going over the summer. Apparently. We're off to greyhound across America, zigzagging from California to the north-east. Highways, motels, hotels, camping, floors, family friends, friends of his friends.

He's at the edge of the pool, I'm holding him. We're soaked through. I can hardly hear my sobbing against the white noise. My tears never get a chance to take hold. My face is already wet. The spray washes away anything I might add.

I tried to save him. We were both messing about, having such a good time. We're near journey's end. After Maine we were going to head down to New York, catch our flight back to England. The campsite is not far from the waterfall, so we went searching for it after pitching the tent. He wanted to get close to the edge.

A-beat. A-beat. A-beat. A-beat.

I can feel my heart beating.

Underwater, overwater, breathe.

Underwater, overwater, breathe.

Underwater, underwater, swallow, struggle, overwater, gasp, underwater.

A-beat... A-...A-...beat... A-beat... A-...

Dark. Can't see. Can't breathe. Night? Yes, night. But darker.

The car? The car. The car and the bridge. The bridge and the river.

Heading home? Yes... no, visiting my mother. Late. Long drive.

What will she do? Dad. Charlie. Me.

A-...beat... A-...A-...beat... A-...

Rain. So much rain. Couldn't see. Can't see.

It's always about water. Always water.

Underwater, underwater.

A-... beat... A-...

A...

Elemental

Cheri Ause

At the end of his shift, he turned off the patio and pool lights, the signal to motel occupants they could not enter the area until morning.

The water was warm, the air only slightly cooler each time she lifted an arm. She rolled into a turn at the end of the pool and re-surfaced, now gliding soundlessly on her back across the dark water. The marquee on the street cast a dim glow: *Travelodge*. The single *L* slipped between the two words: *travel, lodge*.

Earlier that night she'd ridden with him through the traffic and neon of State Street, the top down on the Austin-Healey, the tails of his silk tie trailing over the shoulder of his white shirt. "Twenty-three?" her mother said before she left. "What does someone his age want from a seventeen-year-old girl?"

Still wearing his slacks and shirt, he sat in a deck chair and watched her swim, her body indistinguishable from the dark medium except for the pinpoint of light flickering across it. Once she raised her hand and snapped it, sending sparks of water in his direction.

"Hey. Knock it off," he said, but he didn't move. She imagined his mouth and the partial moon crease to the right of his lips when he smiled.

She dived beneath the surface and slipped deeper into the shadows, the edges of her body softening, dissipating. Amniotic. With a dolphin kick, she propelled herself to the far end of the pool. When she emerged, he was standing above her, a towel draped between his hands.

"Ready to get out?"

He unlocked 3A, the same room they would use all the other nights that would follow—gone forever the fumbblings of backseat boys. In the dim light, the radio played something sweet—Getz and Gilberto, Chet Baker, Trane ballads. In this way she learned to love jazz, sitting naked on a bed while he dried her hair with a coarse white towel. In this way she learned to love a man, the smell of chlorine, bleached cotton, and sex, co-mingling and indistinguishable.

Author Biographies

Cheri Ause

Cheri Ause lives in Gualala, California, and believes her life has been shaped by the bodies of water around her: the Ohio River, the Great Salt Lake, the Pacific Ocean, and numerous swimming pools. She can't remember not knowing how to swim--a good thing, considering some of the deep water she has found herself in.

Bob Barr

Robert M Barr is a theatre professional, a member of Actors Equity and the Dramatists Guild. Phi Beta Kappa at UNC; MFA from Yale Drama School. His plays have been produced and published internationally. Further details at www.actorbobbarr.com and <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3210052/>. He will be directing this play at the Phoenix Fringe in early March 2012.

Nick Garrard

Nick Garrard is a writer and freelance journalist based somewhere South of London. He dreams a lot about Peter Cushing.

Alan Dennis Harris

To better understand himself and to help other older writers explore their creativity, Alan D Harris has become a gerontologist. He also writes stories and poetry to keep his mind active, stories based primarily upon the historical fictions of family, friends and loved ones. Within the last year his writing has been accepted by kind editorial staffs scattered across three continents. Harris has received the 2011 Stephen H Tudor Scholarship in Creative Writing from Wayne State University.

Kevlin Henney

Kevlin Henney writes shorts and flashes and drabbles of fiction and articles and books on software development. His fiction has appeared online and on tree with *Litro*, *Fiction365*, *Dr. Hurley's Snake-oil Cure*, *New Scientist* and *FlashStories.net*. He blogs at asemantic.net, tweets as [@KevlinHenney](https://twitter.com/KevlinHenney) and lives in Bristol, UK.

Sarah Jasmon

Sarah Jasmon lives on her boat, Antioch, on the Leeds/Liverpool canal. She is right on the edge of completing her MA novel, and her short story, 'At the end of summer' was published in Paraxis01 (www.paraxis.org). You can also find her on Twitter: @sarahontheboat.

Joanne Key

I am a teacher, but I have a tendency to try and reinvent myself now and again. At the moment, I'm discovering the pleasures and pains of being a Flash Fiction writer - very similar to lion taming I imagine. I recently had a Flash published by *A Very Short Story*.

Anja Konig

Anja Konig was brought up in the German language and now writes in English. The water in the poem is the River Cherwell.

Charlotte Lee

I am a 2nd year student at Manchester Metropolitan University. More than anything I love to write and that's what I want to do. So what else am I going to study at University other than a Creative Writing course? I'm learning a great deal and enjoying every minute.

James B Nicola

JAMES B. NICOLA has had two hundred poems appear in a score of publications including *Tar River*, *the Texas Review*, *The Lyric*, and *Nimrod*. A stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a CHOICE Award. He also won the Dana Literary Award for poetry, was nominated for a Rhysling Award, and was a featured poet at the New Formalist in 2010.

David O'Neal

David L. O'Neal, who lives in San Francisco, California, is a graduate of Princeton University, a former U. S. Marine Corps officer, and a retired rare book dealer who now enjoys a second career as a writer, mostly of poetry. His creative work has been published in various literary magazines and anthologies, and he has just published *Babbling Birds: An Anthology of Poems About Parrots, From Antiquity to the Present*, which is the only book of its kind. His website is davidloneal.us