

YES...WE ARE
OPEN



Promptly

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Promptly

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Introduction

"The blank page is about the only holy place I understand. I think all writing is inspired – even the worst. It has to come from somewhere and I don't know exactly where any of it comes from. I do know that it appears on the page suddenly and I am astonished at that fact. It is like getting a note written in invisible ink – there is something mysterious and secret about a first draft and all the subsequent drafts just deepen my surprise."

-Steve Scafidi

Where does inspiration come from? There is something vaguely mysterious about it, as poet Steve Scafidi alluded to in the interview quoted above. There's no magic formula or algorithm that we can plug into, repeatedly and without fail, anytime, anywhere, when we need an idea. Lawrence Ferlinghetti describes this as well in his poem "Constantly Risking Absurdity," comparing the writer to a tightrope walker taking a flying leap of faith in the space between the completion of each poem and the start of the next one, blindly reaching out for beauty like a trapeze in the empty air in front of him, hoping each time his hands will find something to grasp onto. Because of this, when we find ourselves – against any formula or algorithm that would tell us with certainty that we should – grasping onto that trapeze once again, there seems to be something supernatural or divine about it, as if it was the doing of something outside ourselves.

And yet, there's something instinctual about it too. There's something that arises from within us that guides us to exactly where and what we need, and what we need to be doing, for good writing to emerge. And that's part of what makes it seem so near holy, isn't it? Not only the wonder and mysteriousness of a first draft, but the fact that it seems to come from us, be *of* us. Perhaps it's not just happening to be in the right place, at the right time, in the right set of circumstances for an idea to take hold. Perhaps inspiration is living in that constant state of openness to the surprise of the world as a literary possibility, the potential for it to appear on the page like invisible ink at every turn. Not waiting for literary opportunity to strike by a fully formed story or poem falling into our lap, but creating opportunity

by treating everything we encounter as potential creative sparks, viewing every experience as worthy of talking about because of how we choose to talk about it, word by word by word. Not waiting until we see the trapeze to jump, but jumping, knowing it will be there because we make it so in our act of flight, for there are trapezes everywhere for us to grasp onto if we simply jump for them.

Activating that instinct is the goal we had in mind in conceiving of *Prompt & Circumstance*: to provide bits of tinder and fluff and newspaper, highly flammable little things, knowing that you, the writers out there, would know exactly what to do with your hands to light a fire. And we could not be more proud and delighted at the result! Traveling from the intimacy of a conversation in a lazy weekend shower in Marie Abate's "**Poem for a Willow Tree**" to the vast expanses of space, searching for connection in an empty galaxy in Nels Hanson's "**Homeward Bound**," from a surprising visitor in Kelly Ann Jacobson's "**Rhubarb Pie**" to a surprising turn of events after a night of debauchery in Adrian Mangiuca's "**Daybreak in Soho**," from the heron to the 50-cent gazelle from which Robbi Nester's and John J. Brugaletta's poems take their names, the results were outstanding, and we couldn't be more excited to share them with the world!

From us to you, the keepers of the flame, the trapeze artists, the writers of invisible ink.

Brandi & Shenan
Editors

Rhubarb Pie

Kelly Ann Jacobson

In 1932, the summer you
spent planting rhubarb in the garden,
true love returned as thick as crimson stalks
and just as strong. The man, a neighbor
new to town and wrong against the backdrop
of the Pennsylvania green, leaned back
onto the crooked fence and asked you for
a Texas laht which hinted horses,
hats and hair like bubbles under bonnets.
Then again, you'd never left the state.
You baked a pie and brought it, cinnamon
and nutmeg to fight the bitter taste
of loss, sliced strawberries the pie plant needs
to taste the best. He took your hand and
I'll be damned if grandpa didn't kiss it
then and there. Soon rhubarb thrived because
a menthol-smoking cowboy had arrived.

Kelly Ann Jacobson is currently pursuing her MA in Fiction at Johns Hopkins University, and she is the Poetry Editor for *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine*. Her work can be found www.kellyannjacobson.com.

Prompt: Run With It, May 2013

Homeward Bound

Nels Hanson

So lonely, tired of us and the way
we are, same awful story since Cain
and Abel, the violation of the Sabine
Women, certain it was either leave
or die, I traveled to bright Venus, our
sister, Planet of Love. Under sulfur
clouds I felt its heavy gravity, trudged
dried ocean beds past black volcanoes
spouting fire. I flew on at the Sun to
tiny Mercury, whose years are short,
days long, a pock-marked place and
started back, looked to starboard, away
from painful Earth, soon arrived on
Mars. Just as the scientists' wheeled
robot said: ice-capped poles, orange
desert whipped by powerful winds
scouring all trace of ancient war.
I tried the largest in the Solar System,
gas giant Jupiter, saw its Red Spot,
its midway bulge, knew why they called
it oblate spheroid. I trod each of its 67
moons. I walked the Rings of Saturn,
round the rocky paths ten times, then
descended pale yellow ammonia mist
to search. Now the Ice Planets, aqua
Uranus, bluer Neptune, Triton its single
satellite. I landed on dwarf planet Pluto
named for God of the Underworld, a third
our white moon's mass, but not a soul,
alive or dead. I hesitated, stared back

toward Mother Earth with long regret but
no longing for the night's oasis. Somehow
it never felt like home or family and I
shoved full throttle for the closest star.

Nels Hanson's fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and two Pushcart Prize nominations. Stories have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Montreal Review*, and other journals. Poems are in press at *Stone Highway Review*, *Word Riot*, *Paper Scissors Literary Magazine*, *Oklahoma Review*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Citron Review*, *Scintilla*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Apeiron Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Hoot & Hare Review*.

Prompt: Run With It, May 2013

Daybreak in Soho

Adrian Mangiuca

It was 4:30 and the frozen night had begun to thaw into morning. Dave and I had lost all sense of time six hours before. Time was all tangled up where we'd been: a casino somewhere near Soho, mostly for rich Chinese tourists that needed to leave their country in order to gamble. The Communists frown on that sort of thing, after all.

Everything was in Chinese; as if the stick-figures for men and women weren't discernible, even the signage by the bathroom had a Latin M and W, under which were characters that I can only assume read the same in Chinese. I saw an old man inside, snorting and hawking up mucus which had been there since the Cultural Revolution, judging by how long it took him to get it out.

I zipped my fly and slunk back to the roulette table. Chinese characters everywhere, even on the goddamn screen where they put up the statistics: hot numbers, cold numbers, odds, all with little explanations followed by their Chinese translations. Young Central European women walked by and offered ten-minute massages to the luckier men for their five-pound chips. Easy money for everyone; the kind of money that stays in your wallet like water in a wicker basket, made-in-China money.

The point is, the night had begun to thaw out into morning. It began around 4:00, now that I think about it. Dave and I reconvened; he'd been busy for most of the evening eviscerating his savings account at the poker table. By that point in the morning, his luck had turned around. He was 300 pounds up, so there were 600 pounds between us given my losing streak: a thousand dollars, a month's rent, groceries, liquor.

We both needed to smoke. There's a point when cigarettes stop tasting like shit and start tasting like something between piñon bark dust and clay. Mornings that begin with you having three hundred pounds less than you started with are the kind that make cigarettes taste good, and surprisingly

it only takes one or two such mornings to realize it. The place was non-smoking, so we went out to the narrow balcony overlooking the square in Soho we'd been stumbling through earlier that night.

We looked out at the space below us: before the taxis, before the foot-traffic. Before the cops with their silly hats, and the endless reams of tourists. Before the sirens and screeches, before the clouds and rain, the dawn had broken over London. First light in midsummer: 4:15.

"What the hell, dude." Dave pulled out his tobacco and began rolling.

"What? The sun?" I replied.

"Well, obviously the sun. What is this place, the Arctic?"

"52nd parallel, man. Sun rises early come summertime."

He whistled. You don't hear authors writing about the quality of a man's whistle. They say shit like *you could see all the accumulated doubt of a lifetime in the way he looked at me, or all her forgotten dreams were in that sigh*. A whistle never gets the same treatment as a sigh, or a look. Maybe it's because we (rightly) have a visceral reaction to the idiots who choose to whistle in public places. Whatever the case may be, there was something in Dave's whistle that read loud and clear:

We've been here way too long.

We stood there in silence for a while, fiddling with the tobacco and filters. I had pinched too much into my cigarette and had to start over. Dave rolled his one-handedly, his nimble fingers getting the job done in less than twenty seconds. A minute later, we lit them together and looked off toward the East for a while.

"We've been here way too long, dude." He took a puff.

"I just lost three hundred pounds." I took a puff.

Dave doubled over the railing and turned to stare at me, mouth agape, and grabbed my shoulder with his free hand.

"Are you serious? Holy shit, how'd you manage that?"

"Roulette. Everything's in Chinese. You can't read a goddamn thing."

He turned back and rested his elbows on the balustrade.

“Good for the Chinese.” He took a puff.

“And not for me... what’re we gonna do?” I took a puff.

“Make all our... hem... your money back!”

I raised an eyebrow and half-looked at him as skeptically as I could.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Fine, let’s just get drunk and walk around Soho while nobody’s out.” He flipped me a hundred pound chip. I looked at it for a moment, and then at him, at which point he nodded toward my suit pocket. After a run of exceptionally bad luck, a man overcomes his pride and takes the money, demeaning as it may be. I pocketed the chip and squeezed his shoulder a couple times. Two Frenchmen joined us on the balcony and asked for a light; I wondered for a moment if we had the same look in our eyes as they did.

We left the balcony and Dave cashed in his chips after buying us rum and Cokes, which we promptly brought back to the balcony. One more cigarette before we left this frenzied orgy of supervised vice. Lizard people, tired hookers, millionaire teenagers: everywhere. I rubbed my temples.

There were two cottonball-clouds above us; their bottoms had begun turning pink, though we had only been waiting in line at the cash register for five minutes. The summer sun rises quickly, I thought. We lit our cigarettes and watched the scene, or lack of a scene, below. Not a living soul on the London streets, not a bicyclist or pedestrian, no shop owners or clerks to open their stores. I was not surprised. To the best of my recollection the night before had been a Saturday; I was nearly certain that we had been out dancing, and that some girls had left us when we announced we’d be trouncing into the casino with Chinese characters. Neither of us could remember its name, and it hadn’t been printed on the chips they gave either.

“You know what time it is?” I asked.

“Does it matter at this point? Who cares. Let’s just get going man; I’m tired, and if I don’t get more booze in me soon, I’m gonna pass out.”

“Go big or go home, Dave.”

“Kiss it, and drink your rum. And Coke.”

I sipped the concoction, and supposed that I should have told Dave about my hatred of alcohol mixed with soda. The flavor of college, mixed with piñon bark, clay, and Chinese. I looked up and watched the clouds changing their shapes, high up where they were being blown around by violent winds. They were the color of ripe apricots now, playing around in the gusts of the high atmosphere. I saw dim orange sunlight breaking on a greenish metal dome at the top of a building across the street.

In frustration, I gulped my awful drink all down at once. We finished our cigarettes, retrieved our bags from the concierge, and walked outside for the first time in six and a half hours. The streets were still empty – the bass from music being blasted on the gambling floor was silenced the instant the bouncer closed the glass doors behind us. Six hours with music like that and the rhythm becomes a kind of silence, such that when one is actually confronted with a lack of noise, its physical presence is felt more deeply than the rib-pounding bass. We looked up at our balcony – the doors were closed and no smokers were perched there. Silence.

The sun seemed higher, brighter, and warmer than it had been from the balcony. It shone upon us, where a moment ago it had barely grazed the top of the buildings. My black jacket collected the heat. Dave thought out loud about the possibility of finding beers to chase down some of the evening with.

“I doubt it’ll be open man; I think they start at like, six or seven,” I pointed out, thinking that maybe I had had enough.

“You’ll see, I know this place that opens early. Indian guy.”

He didn’t wait for my answer. We picked up walking through the Soho backstreets at the other end of the square. I looked for the two clouds I’d seen earlier, but they were gone: a crystal-clear London morning.

The sun had made its way above the roofs of the buildings by the time we found the sad little corner shop several alleyways later. I waited outside and Dave bought four lagers, cracked open two, and put the others in his backpack. We found a curb in the sunshine two blocks later and perched there. The sun had risen until it was almost above us; not more than fifteen minutes could have passed since we had left the casino. Silence, still. Not a

pigeon, or crow, or sparrow to be seen; not a hint of birdsong, or a dog barking. Not the distant rumble of a double-decker bus, or a chiming of heavy bells to welcome in the Sunday morning.

Not a whisper of conversation besides ours.

“You know what?” Dave said, and took a sip.

“What Dave?”

“I don’t even know why we went in there.”

“To gamble, dude. To win big money. Right? C’mon buddy. I’m the one that lost. Whatever, it’s over.” He had a look in his eye that bespoke something below his words.

See? I did it right there. I mentioned the look in his eyes. Christ, I promised myself I wouldn’t do that.

“No man, that’s not what I mean. I actually don’t know why we went in there – where were we last night?” He yawned on night.

“Somewhere in Soho.” I yawned on ho.

“Who was with us then?”

“I don’t know, man. Does it matter?”

The sun was right above us now and I took off my jacket and left it to sit on the pavement to my right. Little pools of sweat had started to show on my white dress shirt beneath. I reached under and patted some of the moisture from my chest.

“That’s what I mean. You don’t know, exactly. Neither do I. I’m pretty sure those two girls from class were there, along with what’s-her-face, but what the hell happened?”

“Want me to roll you a cigarette?” I offered.

“Sure man, go ahead.”

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes and a shadow began creeping up my back; the sun was moving behind the other row of buildings. Dave and I sipped our beers, mellowing out the taste of smoke and the headache I felt coming on.

When Dave finally spoke, he asked me a political question. We began talking about the American Dream, and Hunter S. Thompson's search for it. We spoke about pollution and elections and nuclear bombs in the deserts around Las Vegas. As night fell, we wondered where we would be in one year. The streetlights flickered on while we spoke, the only voices in the sea of perfect silence that was Soho that evening. We cracked open our second beers, and I began to feel a chill.

I reached for my jacket, but when I grabbed it, I did so from the bottom and the pockets were upended. The 100 pound chip that Dave had given me earlier slid out, and I cursed myself for the realization that I had never cashed it. Unfortunately, it fell on its edge, and rolled away from me across the street, too fast to grab, right into a sewer.

I would not be defeated, not after my luck in the casino last night, and so Dave and I resolved to figure out a way to get it back. The grate covering the sewer was not heavy or fixed to the pavement, and so we lifted it off easily. Dave turned on a light attached to his cell phone and pointed it down into the darkness.

He whistled again.

"Phew. Ain't getting anything out of that pit," he said, and stepped back.

"Goddammit, this is bullshit. I'm going after it. Give me your phone."

"Uh, I don't think that's such a good idea, man. Look, there's no way down."

Indeed, there were no stairs leading into the sewer that had swallowed the money my friend had given me.

"I'll be fine, I'm just going to look in. Hold my feet."

And so I got on my knees, peered into the darkness, and began inching my body inside the hole, using my right hand for leverage against the cool

cement walls. The hole was perhaps five feet in diameter. My left held Dave's cell.

He held fast to my shoes, and called down.

"You see anything down there, big man?"

I pointed the light straight down for the first time. More tunnel, more cement wall – straight down.

"It goes deep, man. Like, really deep, several stories at..."

In that instant, a great thunderous noise splashed out from the tunnel. I felt like an ant on the inside of a trombone. Poor Dave screamed, and in his knee-jerk reaction, let go of my feet.

As my body fell, I turned my eyes back up. Beyond my feet, I could see Dave looking down at me, silhouetted in a little square of streetlight that grew smaller.

And I fell down, down, down. Down to where I am now.

Adrian Mangiuca currently resides in Washington DC, after having moved around quite a bit (including to London for one year, from where the above story draws its inspiration). He writes fiction and nonfiction, both strongly influenced by his time abroad and the odd situations he has found himself in while traveling.

Prompt: Six Words, May 2013

Poem for a Willow Tree

Marie Abate

I tell you one afternoon in the shower
that I'm sick of writing love poems.
So don't write a poem about love, you say.
You could write a poem about a forest.

But it doesn't work like that. Happiness distilled
my sharper words, and when I look up at you
under my showerhead, I think of treelike limbs,
a tangle of dark leaves on your chest, your eyes

glowing the color of bark dust, and maybe
we could be a forest, growing together,
wet with spring rain, thawing into summers,
opening our branches as we inch up in the sky.

For now we pass shampoo back and forth
on a Sunday afternoon, and you push me up
against the wall and bite my lip, just a little,
and the white tile squeaks, so I giggle,

and you say, *You squawk-squawk, little girl.*
I tell you if I were a tree, I would be an oak,
sturdy and dependable, and if you were a tree,
you would be a willow, light and free,

but not the weeping kind. You laugh
and tell me my shower's water pressure
is crap, and wow, I'm a such a weirdo. I say,
Maybe that's just the Shiner talking, and we dress

and dry off and go sit on wicker chairs on the porch
to drink another beer and watch a thunderstorm
shake all the purple flowers in terra cotta pots.
But here's the part I didn't say —

when I call you a willow tree,
I mean that you already share this forest,
my deepest roots, my green world, my oxygen.
Exhale. Breathe in. Stay as long as you like.

Marie Abate is a poet from Baltimore. She works as both a writer and an editor and has an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her most recent writing has appeared in *Crack the Spine*; *Sewanee Theological Review*; *Free State Review*; *The Mom Egg*; *Kisses with Fishes*; *Smile Hon, You're in Baltimore!*; and *20 Something Magazine*. Her first book, *The April Sonnets*, is forthcoming in 2014, and she is currently at work on a novel.

Prompt: Six Words, May 2013

Heron

After a photograph by Sandrine Bizaux Scherson

Robbi Nester

The heron stands aslant
in a tangle of palm fronds,
woven as wicker into a diagonal weft.
The silver grey of the image
evokes old postcards of Florida,
showing commonalities no one
could see until now in a world
where everything insists on itself.
Here they are as conspicuous
as a shiner on a freshly shaven face:
the bird with its legs like stalks
or the palm's thick ribs,
its wings tipping upwards
shielded by the trees' fringed leaves
ready to take to the air.

Robbi Nester is the author of a chapbook of poems, *Balance*, that follows a sequence of Iyengar yoga poses (White Violet, 2012). She has published poems in many journals, including *Poemeleon*, *Inlandia*, *Broadsided*, *LummoX*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Northern Liberties Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, and *Caesira*. They have also been anthologized in *Point Mass*, *Poised in Flight*, and *The Poetry of Yoga, II*. Her essays, reviews, and interviews have appeared in *The Hollins Critic*, *Switchback*, and *The New York Journal* as well as the anthologies *Flashlight Memories* and *Easy to Love but Hard to Raise*.

Prompt: Six Words, May 2013

The 50-cent Gazelle

John J. Brugaletta

First there was a thread trickling
upward from Sowbelly Hill.
Then the slow clipping
of a shod horse or mule
on the road's hard grit.
What's that smell?
Who wears mint after-shave
in these parts?
And who's that singing
"Back to the cattle again"?
Could it be Jean Artery herself?
Yes. Yes it is.
The menthol-smoking cowgirl
has arrived at last.
I guess we won't need
the raisins anymore.
Now what we need around here
is a good 50-cent gazelle.

John J. Brugaletta lives on some wooded acreage in Northern California with his wife, a horse, 12 vicunas, and one Thompson's Gazelle for which he paid half a dollar. He has two books of poetry out there somewhere, *The Tongue Angles* and *Tilling the Land*.

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