

Prompt & Circumstance's



Promptly

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Leavings (Poetry)

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Interview: "A Dimension of Sound"

2nd Place

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Recurring Dream (Poetry)

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Introduction

"So much in writing depends on the superficiality of one's days. One may be preoccupied with shopping and income tax returns and chance conversations, but the stream of the unconscious continues to flow undisturbed, solving problems, planning ahead: one sits down sterile and dispirited at the desk, and suddenly the words come as though from the air: the situations that seemed blocked in a hopeless impasse move forward: the work has been done while one slept or shopped or talked with friends."

-Graham Greene

The subconscious is a funny thing. We've talked a lot here at Prompt & Circumstance about the inherent mysteriousness of writing, the way when we sit down to write, words seem to appear on a page as if they always existed there. Sometimes this comes easily, and sometimes it only comes after hours of toil and work. Sometimes, after hours of toil and hard work, the right words pour out unexpectedly in an unthinking moment after we've declared finding them a lost cause. The way our unthinking mind processes what we experience and think and feel into what we ultimately write can at times, no matter how much of the process we try to consciously engineer, seem like an extra person typing away in another room, only showing us their work once they've gotten a draft together. Oftentimes, we have no idea what they're doing in there while they work--chain smoking? mediating? ritual sacrifice?--but we're often bewildered and amazed at what they present us with.

The winners of Prompt & Circumstance's Spring 2014 contest, who comprise the contributors for Issue 3, very much deal in the barriers between consciousness and subconsciousness, both in their work and how they approach it. From one of our Six Words prompts, Lavina Blossom weaves a poem about a recurring dream that is both ethereal and immediate, intensely true-feeling and yet shrouded in mystery, exploring what it means to try to find meaning in dreams, and to embrace their enigma. Simon Barth and Callie Leuck, in telling us about their writing processes, also touch on this element of unconscious drive and attention. One talks about the fluctuating cycles of a writer, knowing a piece is done when the voice inside oneself shouting at us to write quiets down enough to let one resume normal life, steadily collecting enough inspiration for the

"write! write!" voice to start shouting again. The other explores the difficulties we often have with writing dialogue that sounds natural and true to life, attempting to tap into the way our thoughts actually flow in conversation in ways that may not seem immediately apparent when trying to create the action and reaction sequences of people talking. In her story, Kelly Ann Jacobson touches on the surreality of finding certain facts you always assumed were true to be false and trying to ascertain the motivations behind another's actions--what in their heart and mind drove them to do seemingly inexplicable things. And the way our contest's first place winner, Robbi Nester, transforms a grotesque, carnal scene into something holy and reverent is nothing short of dream-like, a flow of images into one another that we might encounter when our subconscious mind is free to make associations outside the literal perception of our eyes.

Come with us, dear readers. Dive into something a little strange and a little off-kilter. Embrace something vaguely illogical. Maybe you'll come out the other side with ideas whose origins you can't quite place, but that all the same, feel intimately familiar to a person somewhere deep inside you, living in a place largely forgotten about while taxes and grocery shopping dominate your attention.

Shenan & Brandi
Editors

1st Place

Leavings

Robbi Nester

Whiff of a muskrat, many days gone
beneath the giant wheels of a passing
eight-wheeler, all the delicate bits
broken, till feather-light,
printed with a palimpsest
of unreadable hieroglyphics.
What had once been
solid flesh aspires to air.
I pause on the road's shoulder
rapt as a videographer
seeing how it must have been:

First, the paunch split open,
spilling the bright guts.
The ribs, arched as a medieval
chapel, collapsed; then,
the memorial procession began,
all those scavengers
worshipping at the shrine
of what was edible.
But once they had gathered
all they could, the carcass sagged,
an emptied burlap sack.
Now I ponder what is left, this being
the core strength of the much vaunted intellect.

Prompt: Six Words, December 2013

Robbi Nester



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*. Robbi is currently assembling an anthology entitled *The Liberal Media Made Me Do It!*, composed of poems and artwork inspired by NPR/PBS stories and shows, to be published by Nine Toes Press.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

This was a particularly challenging group of words. It seemed like something one might find in a description of a parka at a camping and outdoors store. I had to think a while about how I could use these words in another context. But there were two words that gave me my cue: first, "muskrat." I've never seen a live muskrat, though I did once buy a vintage muskrat stole back in the day, with shoulder pads! Mostly I've seen them only after they had a run-in with a car or two, dead in the road. Then "videographer" told me this was going to be a poem about seeing and recording what I saw. "Featherlight" suggested where the poem might be

going. All I had to do after that was conjure up the scene the words seemed to suggest.

How much of this piece was the result of initial inspiration, and how much was the result of it twisting and turning along the way?

It all came from that initial realization that it ought to be about a dead animal, though I struggled with the actual writing, as one generally does. The thing was not to fall off the edge and make this poem totally disgusting. When I was a very young writer, as an undergraduate, I reveled in writing the gross, trying to be edgy, and tried to bring beauty to things that were horrific. That was a pose of course, but being oppositional by nature, I took it to avoid the too precious realm that beginning writers often fall into, the sentimental and gooey. I knew to avoid that, and it wasn't my nature either.

Are there any themes that tend to pop up frequently in your writing? What draws you to write about these? What appeals to you about the particular genre(s) (i.e., poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc) you tend to write in?

I guess that in the process of answering the previous questions, I have begun to answer this one as well. I often write about the natural world. I think in fact that all the poems I've published in your journal have been on this theme. I just finished a collection of ekphrastic poems, collaborations with artists and photographers, mostly contemporary ones. I hope the book will appear next year. I am thinking that the next collection of poems I write will focus on the natural world and scientific theories and ideas of various kinds. It is a topic I have treated before, but not to the exclusion of everything else. This time, that's what I'm planning. But we'll see how it goes.

The question of why I write about this subject is a hard one to answer. I have not really studied science formally. I just like to read and think about it in a more informal way. Why I write poetry is another sort of question. I can answer it obliquely. Before I fall asleep every night, I hear music. Usually it is music of my own composition, I think, though I have no training in music, and indeed cannot read or write notes. Writing poetry is definitely connected with this music. The words and concepts make music of a sort. They have that added dimension of sound that makes something

a poem rather than just a bunch of lines. I love telling a story, but I do not naturally gravitate toward the creation of characters or a plot, though I enjoy reading novels and short stories. I do not write them.

What pieces or projects are you currently working on? Is there an idea you've had that you've been wanting to see come to life but hasn't yet?

At the moment I am between projects, toying with ideas, but not yet taking on any one of them. This may be because the anthology I edited, *The Liberal Media Made Me Do It!* (Nine Toes Press), poems inspired by NPR and PBS stories and shows, just came out, and I am trying hard to market it, which isn't easy in a world largely indifferent to poetry. And my first full collection of poems, *A Likely Story*, comes out in a month or two. I also have, *Together*, the manuscript of ekphrastic poems and collaborations with visual artists, mostly, though there is also a collaboration with another poet in it. It will be very expensive to produce because it is packed with full-color plates, worked in with the poems. A publisher has shown interest in doing it, but I have to wait for a while.

I am occupied also in trying to figure out how to earn some money by writing, something I have not yet been able to accomplish in any sustained way. I just came back from a trip to Israel (my first), where I visited with family. It was amazing, and it gave me an idea for an article I'd love to pursue, but I'd need funding to go back and to pay someone to translate for me. I never learned the language.

What was the first (or an early) work of literature you remember falling in love with? What appealed to you about it?

I lived across the street from a library, and had read everything in it by the time I was about 13 or 14, at least everything that held any interest for me at all, in both the children's and adult's sections. I love and loved fantasy, and read *The Phantom Tollbooth*, by Norton Juster, over and over. I think I started doing that in about third grade. And the Alice books, and Ogden Nash, and the Archie and Mehitabel (sp) poems...I always had a stack of books and would read them all at once... a bit of this one, then that. And I'd be watching TV at the same time.

But re: what appealed to me about Juster's book was first that it was the kind of thing I wished would happen to me, a foray into an alternative

universe, a world of language, where ideas came to life. The appeal of Alice was similar, though of course it is a masterpiece, and the poems in there still inspire me, as does Jabberwocky.

2nd Place

Big Gulp

Simon Barth

“Retching. Retch. What a perfect fit. Retch. Retch.” As the boy reflected silently on onomatopoeia from the driver’s seat, his mother sat next to him, reflecting on the word in her own, more vocal way into her late husband’s treasured Big Gulp. “Traveled a million miles, and it’s gonna travel a million more,” he used to brag, the weathered, reusable container a small monument to his ability to stretch a dollar, to work hard, to make each drop of sweat count, to make much for his family out of the little he provided. He’d picked it up on his way out of town on his first trucking gig, seven years ago, and had carried it on every trip ever since, filling up for cents on the dollar at 7-11s in every state. Seven years. Seven years, a million miles. 42 weeks a year on the road. The boy tried to do the math, but thinking of his father made him think of the shallow grave he and his mother had left behind them and made him want to vomit. But there was only one Big Gulp, and his mother had sort of staked her claim already. She had spent more years swallowing words and pain than he had, anyway, so it made sense that she deserved to get hers out first, now that they finally had the chance.

A cop car on the side of the road brought the boy back out of his head. “Don’t stiffen up like that, just take a look and turn back to the road,” his mother said. “If you stare straight ahead and pretend not to notice, they’ll know you’re nervous. Sometimes that’s all the reason they need to start following somebody.” The boy turned to her and saw she was already wiping the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief, ready to act like nothing had happened. The Big Gulp sat in the cup holder between them, out of peripheral vision but still stinking up the cabin. She produced a small mirror and began to re-apply her makeup. “If we’re going to make it home before we leave, you’re going to have to be more careful shifting gears. Otherwise we won’t make it another mile. Here, pull over at Betty’s

up ahead and dump this out," she said, gesturing vaguely towards the cup holder without looking away from her mirror. "Betty's?" the boy asked, still struggling to think. "She doesn't live up ahead, she lives by-" "Not Betty Whitmore, Betty's Diner! Jesus, Joshua, where is your head? I can't do everything for you, you know." "Yes, mom." Joshua breathed out the familiar words as he downshifted; turning into the diner's parking lot. Some things, it seemed, were not yet ready to change.

Prompt: Whatta Character, November 2013

Simon Barth



Simon Barth is not a writer, he just wandered in here one day and started typing. Sometimes he is published when there's space to fill. He has a Bachelor's in Unreasonable Debt and enjoys riding the DC metrorail system. If he belongs to you, please come pick him up.

Describe your creative process generally—is there a certain way you normally set about writing something? (e.g., a series of questions you ask yourself, steps you go through, etc? Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix? Any interesting rituals or habits you engage in?)

I usually start by putting on "Rich Girl" by Hall and Oates on repeat and lighting some incense. As the incense burns, I get comfortable in my favorite chair or on my bed with my laptop on my lap. Then I drink a cup of chamomile tea made from Italian chamomile flowers with orange blossom honey as I think of soothing childhood memories that reaffirm my belief that the world provides well for the good and the innocent. I usually run out of memories by the time the incense is done, which means it's time for a cigarette and cheap whiskey (whatever's on sale), consumed while cleaning my grandfather's shotgun with a calm earnestness you might describe as "meditative." Depending on the piece I'm writing, this can make me a little too aware of my own mortality to be creative, so at this

point I may elect to turn off “Rich Girl” and listen to “I Can’t Go for That” by Hall and Oates. It never cheers me up, but I can’t stop. “Private Eyes” is next, then “She’s Gone;” for some reason all of these songs sink me deeper and deeper into a state of hopelessness and despair. I mean, really, despair. It’s not pretty. I’ll spend the next few hours clinging on to the phone for dear life, calling friends and therapists for support, a branch to grab on to, anything to stop me from falling down this terrible pit I’ve found myself in. Then it’s a nice long drive to the nearest beach, where I’ll watch the sea until the sun comes up and the lack of sleep compounds my emotional vulnerability and I experience the overwhelming reaffirmation of hope and positivity that the universe usually reserves for upper-middle-class Baby Boomers on their first trip to the Outer Banks or teenagers on acid. I’ll go home and sleep after that, and a few days later when I remember that I was supposed to be writing something I’ll drink a glass or two of wine and bang something out really quick before bed.

How do you go about revising a piece, and how do you know when a piece is finished?

“How do you know when a piece is finished” is one of my favorite questions to ask creative types, too! For me, the answer is usually when I’ve satisfied my need to produce well enough that I can pay attention to my need to not do anything and lie down on soft things in a quiet, dark room. It’s all about striking a balance; write until one voice shuts up enough, stop doing things until the other voice quiets down, repeat. The problem comes when I have to upset this balance by doing things like “work” and “contribute to society” and “cultivate meaningful relationships with other people.” Ugh. Not a fan.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote from the prompts you used. Did it turn out pretty much as planned, the result of the initial inspiration, or take on a life of its own?

Well, it was sort of mechanical, honestly. I got an initial impression from the prompt, then just followed it to what seemed like the most obvious conclusion. The assignment was to explain a snapshot of a scene, after all, so all I tried to do was explain. I latched on to a few details right away, like the presence of the father not being immediate, but indirect through his vehicle. Putting Mother and Son in the Father’s big rig without Father demands a reason as to why Father wouldn’t be there, especially because

truck drivers have a reputation for being attached to their vehicles. Then you've got the more obvious, the unspecified waste in the Big Gulp; I attached this to the Mother touching up her make-up and, as I said in my notes when I submitted my piece, "the Big Gulp coming from a small room containing two people can only contain so many types of waste that would make a person hold it as far away from them as possible." Assuming the Big Gulp belonged to the truck's driver aka Father, bam, you've got the story right there. Mother's focused on reestablishing her appearance, Son is disposing of something terrible that came from one or both of them, Father's not there but he should be; Father did bad things to the family, Mother's used to putting on a good face for the neighbors, Son's learned to do what he has to do ("for the family," is usually the reasoning), Mother and Son got rid of Father but that doesn't change the impact he's had on them, not immediately, and right now they're at the end of the first step of purging him from the lives. Straight up formulaic. So I'd say it was entirely the result of "initial inspiration" (your words, not mine).

Where is the strangest place you've ever been struck by an idea? What is the oddest source of inspiration for a piece you've ever drawn from?

Once, I thought of a few lines for a song mid-breakup. I'd been working on the song with no progress for a while, and it wasn't very good (never turned out well either). When she went to the bathroom I jotted some notes down on a bar napkin. I lost the napkin, but the girl and I stayed together for a while longer after that night. I remember thinking that the lines I'd thought of would add a lot to the song, but then again, the girl added a lot to my life and the song was always going to be terrible.

Suggest some interesting words, phrases, or sentences to be used as prompts!

Don't tell me what to do! Besides, your prompts are fine. You need more interview questions, though, and I'd rather think of a few of those. Just off the top of my head...

What's the best lie you've ever come up with? How drunk are you right now? When was the last time you felt undeserving of something good you'd received? How do you feel about Americans who can't name all 50 states? What is a source of inspiration for you that you feel doesn't make sense to most people? Do you have a sister? Is she cute? Where'd you get

those shoes? How many times has this piece been rejected by other publishers and why are they so much worse than P&C? Does your mother know what you're doing right now? Does she approve? Is she cute? What's the worst advice or guidance anyone's ever given you about writing? Why? How old were you? Do you ever feel the need to give one piece of advice to an aspiring writer? Me neither, but I suppose that's what makes it such a good interview question. What's the biggest obstacle to your creative process? Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States? Have you ever lost a really good idea? Does this look infected to you? Where are you going? Hey wait! OK, I guess this interview is over.

2nd Place

Recurring Dream

Lavina Blossom

It might be a push-button phone
or one with a dial, or a numbered scrap
of burlap tacked to the wall at which
I toss croutons, stones, hacky sacks.
Once, it was a stack
of drawers I had to pull out
and push back in the right sequence. Always,
I'm inept, my core strength gone, my fingers,
wrist, hands jerking or slipping. The dial tone
continues, the videographer nudges me, says
I've neglected to enter the area code. I try
again and again to call until
I'm certain it's far too late.

I've been told that if I can decipher
its meaning this recurring dream of needing
to reach someone and failing will cease,
but I suspect I've grown too adept at keeping
secrets from myself. Isn't this a symptom--that I've
developed tremendous skill at losing small
objects around the house?
Oh, sometimes I find them, but rarely
before they have lost their usefulness.

Which actually gives me a snippet of hope. Perhaps
on the day my limbs have gone slack and my
mind floats feather-light, the tunnels might
clear, a light appear, and the bolts of gauze unwind
so that I spontaneously connect. Then,

I might perceive in my innermost
ear and eye what I can't
let myself acknowledge yet.

Prompt: Six Words, December 2013

Lavina Blossom



Lavina Blossom grew up in rural Michigan. She divides her creative hours between poetry and painting (primarily collage and mixed media). She has an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of California, Irvine, and her poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Paris Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Kansas Quarterly*, as well as in the online journal *Poemeleon*. Her short story “Blue Dog” appeared in the online journal *Women Writers*. She is an Associate Editor of *Poetry for Inlandia: a Literary Journey*.

Describe your creative process generally. Do you start from the beginning, middle, or end, or a mix?

Often, I have a feeling that a particular subject or idea—something I am especially interested in writing about—will lead me into a successful poem. It doesn’t always happen, but that feeling is what drives me to persist until I either have a poem or realize this is one to put aside. I rarely abandon an impulse or idea altogether.

Other times, I might be most interested in taking on a challenge. For example, a friend challenged me some time ago to write a sonnet, since I hadn’t attempted one yet. I wrote several, and although I don’t think they were very good, it’s a confidence-builder to write in a way you haven’t before and discover what you will along the way. When I learned about Prompt & Circumstance, I was eager to try to shape a poem using one or more of the prompts and I am sure that generated good energy and focus.

After that first flash or the first meanderings of an idea, the heart of the finished poem might have shifted away from the first lines I wrote down. It can take a while to actually find what the poem needs to be, both in its details and at its core. But that first spark will be there somewhere. For me, finding just the right ending can be the toughest part of the process.

How do you go about revising a poem and when do you know when a piece is finished?

Usually I revise as I draft a poem and many times thereafter. Then, I set the poem aside for a while to give myself a better perspective. An incongruity or inconsistency can seem obvious after a little time has passed—maybe just a few hours or a day, but there have been instances when I needed to be away from a piece much longer. I also paint and the process is similar. After I've worked on a painting for a while, I walk away and try not to think about it so that I have fresh eyes when I return. In fact, with both poems and paintings, I know to turn away and go back a few times before I can be pretty sure the thing is finished.

Also, I am fortunate to be part of a wonderful poetry workshop and I take a few poems each year to this group for discussion. Having the insights of other writers (and visual artists) that I respect has been invaluable.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating "Recurring Dream."

Luckily, "stack of drawers" triggered a memory. I had a dream years ago in which bureau drawers were a kind of phone, and, as in other variations on that recurring dream, I could not get an urgent call to go through. In the process of revising, I tried to work in more of the suggested words, which was a lot of fun, and at one point I even had "muskrat" in there. But the image seemed to dominate, being a little too goofy, and it drew attention away from the message of the poem. Replacing "muskrat" with "hacky sacks," I was able to keep the rhyme.

Does your writing tend to be factual, fictionalized, or some combination of the two? What about this piece in particular?

"Recurring Dream" is a narrative and my poetry often is narrative. This poem is about a personal experience, but I elaborate and invent and I was pleased that the prompts helped to bring a couple of surprising images to life. My goal is never to relate facts or stick to facts, but to write the

strongest poem that I can. In this one, I wanted to capture the sense of frustration that I feel in these dreams and move closer, if possible, to understanding why I have them, or at least write an interesting poem about that mystery.

What pieces or projects are you currently working on? Is there an idea you've had that you've been wanting to see come to life but hasn't yet?

I am putting together my first collection of poems for a chapbook, or hopefully, a full collection/book. To be honest, I go through a pretty fierce struggle with myself to send out individual poems and the larger project has been even more daunting. Arranging a collection well requires a great deal of consideration, focus, and time. I can come up with many other projects that allow me to avoid that work. It doesn't help that poets are not valued all that highly except among one another. Consequently, I must keep coaching myself and recruit others to keep nudging me to get the work out there. What helps me most is being part of a small poetry workshop and exchanging poems with other friends for critique. I do believe that each of us contributes by adding our work into the broad range of poetry being published. (Still coaching myself here.) And I see a poem with a little more clarity each time I go away from it and come back. When it goes out to a journal and is returned with a rejection slip, my scrutiny is more intense. I ask myself if the poem is truly finished; sometimes I ask myself if it is any good, or good enough. And then I either put the poem aside or renew my confidence in it and send it somewhere else. I expect I'll go through a similar process with a collection as I submit it.

What was the first (or an early) work of literature you remember falling in love with? What appealed to you about the work?

Unlike many writers, I did not read a great deal when I was young. Education ended for both my parent with the ninth grade. My father's supported his family with hard physical labor. He worked full time in a foundry; he also farmed because he wanted to make his living that way and thought that someday he might. My mother raised six children and reading for her was a diversion or an escape. I think those factors contributed to literature being marginal in our household if not suspect (sitting around when there was "work" to be done). Aside from what was in school textbooks, I mostly read what was in the house, none of which was very well written. Fortunately, one high school teacher had my class

read Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, and a number of other wonderful poets. I was especially drawn to Thomas's poems, although many were puzzling. I was discovering the incantatory power and the music in poems, I think.

The first book of poems I fell in love with was probably "The Lice," by W.S. Merwin. I still admire it very much. It is difficult and intriguing and speaks to concerns of mine in ways that are very moving. The book is about withdrawal and seclusion, about fear of the unknown, about natural life cycles and the relationship between other animals' lives and our own, about survival, war, mortality, and extinction. It isn't a cheerful book, and when I spend time with it I need to counter its effects with healthy doses of more optimistic or playful work. Some of the poems of Bob Hicok, Kay Ryan, and Heather McHugh come to mind.

What is the earliest thing you remember writing?

I wrote limericks, with my mother's help, when I was very young. My mother has always been fun-loving and supportive. So, at first I wrote for the pure joy of it. I think that was a very fortunate beginning.

I can't recall the first poem I wrote on my own, but a few were published in my high school newspaper. I'm sure those were self-indulgent and full of angst. The recognition and encouragement, though, allowed me to believe I could go farther and be, possibly, a really good writer. You never "arrive" of course, and although I have had some stretches when the poems went nowhere, I kept coming back to the page, struggling to make art out of a wide variety of impulses, emotions and thoughts.

Honorable Mention

We Are Not In A Romantic Comedy

Callie Leuck

After college, I stopped trying to learn the names of Christine's boyfriends.

"How's it going with Ashley?" I'd ask on our weekly calls, draped across my armchair with a just-uncorked bottle of red wine.

She was amused by my calling whatever man she was currently seeing 'Ashley.' It cast him in the role of her romantic ideal: Ashley Wilkes, the southern gentleman who *Gone With The Wind* heroine Scarlett O'Hara thought she loved.

"Oh, wonderful," she'd gush. "Absolutely wonderful, Holly. We are rapturously happy together."

She was eternally hopeful, manically so, but she easily shed disappointments; that man hadn't been her Ashley; she'd been wrong; that man had just been a distraction not worth her time; this new man is definitely Ashley. She believed it with her entire soul.

"That man," she told me once, laughing — she always called the latest not-Ashley *that man* — "was so upset that he didn't win the big door prize at the club on New Year's Eve that he stormed out, announcing he'd go somewhere he had better luck. The casino, I assume. Or the whorehouse."

"And you let him go?"

"Hell yes!" She sighed. "That man was clearly not Ashley."

Christine tried it all: blind dates, set-ups with friends-of-friends, speed dating. After the New Year's Eve incident, she decided to find Ashley more

scientifically. She thought online dating would end her search, but the list of eligible bachelors left her feeling...“overwhelmed,” she confided. Her hushed voice barely carried over the line; I turned the volume up on my phone. “I mean, how do I tell which one is Ashley? They all seem so nice and friendly.”

It was too many men at once. She had first date after first date with Mister-Not-Quite until eventually several months passed; Valentine’s Day came and went, time not spent in some romantic tryst with Ashley; and the dreary Midwest winter lingered over-long, the charm of cuddling under blankets and before fireplaces with some attractive maybe-Ashley slowly suffocating beneath wave after wave of relentless grey slush and bone-aching cold. For the first time in the ten years Christine and I had been best friends, she stopped talking about her latest man, stopped talking about men altogether. That’s when I knew it was time.

What I think Christine missed in her many readings of *Gone With The Wind* was that Scarlett’s infatuation with Ashley – a man who was unable or unwilling to return her love – had prevented her from finding any happiness with her untoward admirer Rhett Butler. I have an idea about that, if she truly is slowing down on the Ashley front, but I will have to proceed with caution.

“How’s work?” I ask carefully on our usual Thursday evening call.

“Oh, fine,” she says blandly. “Finishing up the quarterly report for the department head, then I’ve got some vacation time to burn. Probably just stay home. Catch up with the cleaning. You know.”

“Your thirtieth is coming up,” I point out. “Why don’t you come visit? We’ll get the gang back together and go out on the town.”

“Well...”

“C’mon,” I wheedle. “We barely see you anymore, and Chicago is only maybe four hours’ drive from Indy. If you don’t want to drive, take the bus down; Mike will pick you up. We’ll do a fancy dinner downtown with

Sarah and James and everyone.” Pause. She hasn’t said no yet. “Wrap up the night with cocktails and cigars at Nicky Blaine’s?”

“Well, I suppose...”

“We’ll even rent one of those horse-drawn carriages,” I say. She laughs. I’ve got her.

“I always loved those,” she says wistfully.

“We’re doing it,” I say. “You need a break from the big city. Ask for a few days off; we’re doing girl time before the big three-oh.”

“Okay,” she says, and I can hear the slow smile in her voice. “Girl time sounds great, Holly. We’d better get mani-pedis – and the whole shebang! I’ll bring all my little black dresses.”

“And your sultriest shoes!”

As I hang up the phone, Mike pushes the slightly-ajar family room door open and eyes my half-emptied wine bottle.

“Operation Rhett Butler is a go?” he asks.

I shoot him a double thumbs-up. “This may be the dumbest thing we’ve ever done.”

He leans over the armchair and kisses me upside-down. “Dumber and dumberer, ‘til death do we part.”

“This whole *Gone With The Wind* thing is a bit stupid, isn’t it?” Brooke asks the next day across the long table in the break room where we’re catching up over soup and salad. “Aren’t you and Mike being sort of...” she waves a cracker in the air while she searches for the perfect word. “Dramatic?”

“Look,” I say, pointing my plastic spoon at her, “yes. Yes, we are. But I’m not imagining Christine’s whole Ashley obsession. And Desmond’s no Ashley.”

Brooke’s left eyebrow quirks up. “Oh? And is Dezi a Rhett Butler?” Brooke leans in and lowers her voice. “She hasn’t said a single thing about him for five years. She doesn’t give a damn, Holly.”

“Dezi is the one who gave her that book,” I say. Brooke just looks at me, confused, so I elaborate. “Dezi gave her *Gone With The Wind*. For Christmas, right before their big fight. I don’t think he ever read it, but apparently she ‘reminded him of a Southern belle’ or some such.”

“And she thought the book’s takeaway message was to go find an *Ashley Wilkes*?” Disbelief practically drips from Brooke’s voice.

“You knew she had that Ashley thing.”

“Christ,” Brooke said, cracker frozen halfway to her mouth. “Yeah, I knew she’d been on a love quest to find McDreamy, but Christ! I didn’t know she got that book from Dezi.”

“She still keeps it on her nightstand.”

“Christ,” Brooke says again. She pops the cracker in her mouth and shakes her head. “I thought you and Mike were crazy,” she says, spraying crumbs across the table. “Now I think it’s just her.”

“You always have to be the practical one,” I say, flicking my spoon into the trash can. “Love isn’t always sensible, you know.”

“It could be a lot less senseless.”

“Motherhood has sucked the romance out of you,” I joke. “Look, I gotta get back to work. Mike and I are hoping to head out early tonight.”

“That’s right, you’re going to Cincinnati this weekend. Give Dezi our best.”

“You and James should come with us again.”

“Yeah,” Brooks says, “maybe when the baby’s a bit older, we’ll feel okay with leaving her with my mother while we waltz off for a wild weekend of drunken debauchery with Mr. Desmond Harris.”

“Aw, that’s exaggerating a little.”

Brooke shoots me a stern look over the top of her glasses, then cracks a smile.

“Well, maybe a little,” she admits. “Tell that jerk we miss his stupid face.”

Construction on I-65 prolonged our trip to Cincinnati, forcing Mike and me to rendezvous with Dezi at the restaurant where he’d made dinner reservations, rather than meeting him at his home in the suburbs.

“Brooke’s wrong,” Mike murmurs as he helps me out of my coat in the entryway of the Cincinnati steakhouse. “Christine’s not the *only* crazy one.”

I groan. “He’s got another new one?”

“He’s got his hand on that woman’s shoulder,” Mike points out, gesturing toward the bar.

Desmond Harris is a tall, slender man with a way of standing that is instantly recognizable, even from behind – and, these past few years, *particularly* so while leaning over a woman to whisper playfully in her ear. He was always debonair, but in the years since that last ballistic argument with Christine, he’s become positively insouciant in his amorous behaviors; the combination has wrought him seemingly irresistible to any woman of his desire.

“You’re sure it’s not the one from last time?” I ask Mike hopefully. We’d met up with Dezi just after the new year, and he’d brought a woman he’d been seeing for several months. “Krista?”

“Kirstie,” Mike corrects me. “Krista was the one from last summer.”

“No, that was Crystal,” I say. “I remember because he kept making those jokes about stemware the whole week at the lake.”

“Oh, God, yes,” Mike says. “That was awful. Anyway, this one’s definitely new.”

“Shut up; he’s seen us,” I hiss, and I wave at Dezi. The woman has turned as well and, yes, it’s another petite brunette. Check, check, and — too far to tell, but brown eyes are common enough. If ever these days he romances women without these characteristics, those relationships never last long enough to warrant an introduction to his inner circle — but he was always more taciturn than Christine in disclosing the details of his dating life.

“It’s the Walkers!” Dezi exclaims, pumping Mike’s hand enthusiastically and clapping him on the back, then hugging me. “Holly, Mike, I’d like you to meet a very special lady. This,” he says, turning and putting an arm around the woman’s shoulders — yes, brown eyes, check — and squeezing her briefly, “is Kristen.”

“Soooo good to meet you,” I practically coo, dodging the elbow Mike was about to dig into my side by stepping forward, grasping the latest lookalike of my best friend by the hand, and treating her to a smile of the highest wattage. “It’s always a pleasure to meet someone important to Dezi.”

“You must say that a lot,” she deadpans.

“I — what?”

“It’s not as if I don’t realize my Desmond is a charmer,” she explains, grinning. Her teeth are shockingly white against her bright-pink lips, and I think, unkindly, of the open leaves of the venus flytrap that Brooke had, for a joke, left on my desk in Indianapolis: a solution to the persistent drone of the housefly that had grated on my nerves for several days.

Dezi laughs and kisses the top of woman’s head on the place where her long hair parts.

“You know me too well, my love,” he murmurs into her hair. Then, to me, he says, “It’s okay, Holly. Kristen knows all about my sordid past.”

“I’m not sure I would say *sordid*,” I comment. “Active, perhaps.” *My love?* Did he just call her *my love*?

“There are no secrets between us,” Dezi explains. “You see, tonight is a celebration. I wanted – we wanted – to tell you two first. Well, after our parents. Of course.”

“Dezi, man, what are you saying?” Mike demands. “Tell us what?”

“Kristen has agreed to marry me,” he says. “We’re engaged!”

In the sudden silence – in which my jaw drops, actually drops, open – the well-coiffed host steps up and says to Dezi, “Sir, your table is ready.”

“Give us a moment,” Mike asks. The man nods and steps away. Dezi looks nervous, excited; the woman who’s snared him – yes, I can see the ring; he did the thing properly, of course; her hand hadn’t been in view before but certainly is now – looks pleased. Mike shakes Dezi’s hand enthusiastically, congratulating him, and hugs Kristen, this woman on whom we’ve never before laid eyes. I attempt to smile.

“What a surprise,” I say, finally – too late; thank God for Mike’s instant joviality. “I’m afraid you’ve caught us completely off guard.” I manage a smile that feels possibly *not* blatantly false. “Why don’t we sit down and you tell us all about it over dinner?”

“Perfect,” Dezi says. The group begins to turn toward the host, and I put a hand on Mike’s arm.

“I’ll be right there,” I say. “I need to step in the ladies’ room.”

As soon as the restroom door closes behind me, my cell phone is in my hand and I'm texting Brooke.

D lost his mind

Worse than you can imagine

Brooke's response is immediate: *You are being dramatic again*

I am typing furiously.

NO

New woman

Kristen

Tiny, brown eyes, brown hair

Giant fucking diamond

Brooke writes,

WTF??

Christ!

Super weird but congrats to D

That mofo always was cray cray

There is something wrong here I insist, thumbs flying across the touchscreen.

He is supposed to be with C

I know it

This time, several minutes pass before a new message appears from Brooke.

We are not in a romantic comedy

This is real life

Things do not always happen like in your stories

My phone beeps, interrupting my thoughts with an unexpected text from Christine, who has no idea her old flame has suddenly become affianced to her doppelgänger.

Holly I was thinking...

Would you invite Dezi to my bday?

I don't know if he wants to hear from me

Do you think he'd come?

I know it's been years but...

It wouldn't REALLY be the old gang

I look at the text, read it over again, and slump against the wall. I slowly type out one final message to Brooke and hit "Send."

*Sometimes things happen like in my stories
Where do you think stories come from?*

Prompt: Run With It, January 2014

Callie Leuck



Callie Leuck is a writer, dancer, tea-drinker, amateur photographer, and Oxford comma enthusiast. She is a science-medical writing graduate of the Johns Hopkins University. Her current city of residence is Indianapolis, IN.

Describe the inspiration or process of creating the particular piece you wrote for this issue from the prompt you used.

I started with the January 2014 Run With It prompts.

- As I shut my car door, I heard tires skidding and glass shattering, and a single rain drop splashed the back of my hand.
- She thought online dating would end her search, but the list of eligible bachelors left her feeling...
- He strutted out of the club at 1:00 am, only an hour into the start of a new year, with a ticket in his hand and a bottle of stolen wine.

I saw a story about a search for love that kept meeting with bad, bad matches. As I personally quickly suffer First Date Exhaustion when attempting online dating, I imagine that anyone who can keep picking herself back up and going right back out there has a particularly resilient spirit, or possibly sees every new man as the potential Perfect Match -- a girl with stars in her eyes, perhaps.

The idea about “Ashley-ifying” men is one that has stuck with me since I first swiped my mom’s copy of *Gone With The Wind* and thought that Scarlett’s fatal flaw was idealizing Ashley. I have used it as shorthand in my own life -- “Don’t Ashleyify” -- to remember to try to see people as they are rather than trying to force them into being perfect idea. Thinking about a love-seeking young woman who has repeated and frequent romantic failures but just keeps getting back up and going out there again resulted in Christine.

Describe your creative process generally – is there a certain way you normally set about writing something?

One of my goals is to not write a story that fails the Bechdel test. To pass the test, two women must talk about something other than a man. This is always difficult in a short story, and it was definitely a bit difficult in a story originally conceived as about a woman searching for the perfect man. It was a good challenge though because, as I reflected on it, I realized that even when I discuss men with my girlfriends, that’s rarely if ever the entirety of the conversation. Therefore Holly and Christine’s conversation is about Christine’s upcoming thirtieth birthday and even Holly and Brooke’s conversation in their office’s break room, ostensibly about Christine’s love search, meanders into teasings about Brooke’s recent motherhood and Holly’s upcoming visit to their friend Dezi. I think that actively trying to pass the Bechdel test helped me make the story more natural and less super-focused on romance, hopefully giving it more depth and interest.

What subjects or forms come most easily to you? Is there anything that you have just never been able to write, or write about?

In the last few years, I have mainly written nonfiction (which is what I studied at Johns Hopkins and what I write professionally) so it’s been quite a while since I’ve written fiction. And even when I do write fiction, it is typically fantasy. So this time I tried to do something new: non-fantasy fiction. Romance is also new to me, which is probably why it’s only sideways a romance and not directly!

What was the first (or an early) work of literature you remember falling in love with? What appealed to you about it?

I am still in love with *The Hollow Kingdom* by Clare B. Dunkle. It is the first in a fantasy trilogy for young adults, and it features goblins. I was absolutely fascinated by the goblin culture; it was unlike anything I had ever read before. I wrote the author a gushing letter to tell her so and she very kindly wrote me back and explained her creative process. I still write her occasionally, and she always writes back. She is very nice, and I read all her books even though I have clearly aged out of her target reader group. (She pointed out that she has, too.)

What is something you've always wanted to see written about, or have always wanted to write yourself?

I want to actually write the epic fantasy that I've been toying with for, my gosh, over ten years now. I either want to actually write the damn thing or just give it up entirely and stop being one of those people who're going to write a novel one day.

Honorable Mention

Carlos & Sylvia

Kelly Ann Jacobson

Part One

The printed photo of his mother was under a pile of shoes in the back of his grandmother's closet. The paper was worn at the edges, crimped like his wife's apple pie crusts, and he spent a few minutes rubbing it smooth over his pant leg before he could read his grandmother's handwriting: "Janine Juarez, 2009."

Carlos sat down on his grandmother's bed, which smelled of her brandy nightcaps and the Bengay she used to rub on her neck before they realized the pain was actually cancer lumping its way through her body, and collapsed into its quilted comfort. He couldn't decide which was more of a shock: that his mother, Janine, had aged into a sixty year old woman with dyed brown hair and a muffin top, or that she had aged at all, considering she was supposed to be dead. He surveyed the photo over and over again, looking for some clue that this might not be his mother, but it was irrefutable; side by side, they could have been twins.

"Sylvia," Carlos called, then listened for his wife's heavy steps. She had been kind enough to take the day off, to scrub the bathroom and donate the outdated kitchen utensils and box up his grandmother's unmentionables, and now that they were nearing the end of their unfortunate project, she was probably exhausted. "Come here."

"Why?" Sylvia volleyed back from the living room, and all of the gratitude Carlos had been feeling a minute before shrunk and then disappeared altogether.

"Just come here, goddamn it!" Finally, the familiar tread.

“What happened?” Sylvia appeared in the doorway, all two hundred and fifty pounds of her, and leaned against the frame. This was what three kids and fifteen years as a fast food cashier had done to his stunning bride, the short, dark-haired woman who took his first hamburger order and scribbled her phone number on the cardboard fry holder... not that Carlos was much better, with his beer gut and propensity for too-tight jeans, but at least he used the expensive exercise bike Sylvia had begged him for and then never touched. At least he tried.

“Look at this.” Carlos handed over the photo. His wife plopped down next to him, and the whole bed sunk to his left.

“She looks just like you. Who is it?”

“Apparently it’s my mother.”

On second glance, his mother looked pretty good for sixty. Her hair was styled in a chopped, chin-length cut, and she wore a tailored suit with matching blue pumps. Some kind of career woman, it seemed, like the ladies who worked in the office above his store and occasionally wandered in to ask questions about this or that floor project, always hardwood. They never bought much, but he liked watching them bend down to examine the wood samples.

“I thought your mother was dead,” Sylvia said, interrupting his thoughts. “What’s she doing in this photo?”

“Beats me.” Carlos took it back, then stuck it in his breast pocket for safekeeping, “But I’m sure as hell going to find out.”

Part Two

“Just give me the map, dammit.” Carlos ripped the map out of Sylvia’s hands, and his wife stopped talking just long enough for him to find their location on the map. Then she started in again, expounding on her many theories about where his mother, Janine, had been for the past forty years, including prostitution, amnesia, and a sex change.

“I just don’t understand how a mother could abandon her only son,” Sylvia said for the millionth time that week as she munched on Sour Patch Kids, shoving the candies into her mouth in pairs. Sylvia liked to suck the sour crystals off the outside of them before chewing through the center, and the sound of her tongue smacking against the roof of her mouth made Carlos gag.

He rubbed his temples with the pads of his thick fingers, but the mini massage did nothing to ease his headache. He had intended to make the journey across the state alone, just he and his trusty Volvo, but at the last minute Sylvia had asked off from work and forced her way into the passenger seat. “Don’t you want me to meet your mother?” she had asked him as she threw her suitcase into the trunk next to his backpack, and then her makeup bag, and then an extra bag of shoes. He didn’t have an answer, considering he had yet to meet his mother himself.

Janine apparently lived outside of Hillsboro, according to 411.com, which was at least a five hour drive. His maximum tolerable alone time with his wife was normally three hours, and that was with the help of a few Bud Lights. Plus, they now had to pay a sitter to watch their two children, which meant the trip would cost him an additional hundred bucks. Sylvia flipped through the radio channels – soft rock, country, Christian, country, Christian – for at least five minutes before Carlos angrily turned the whole thing off. In retribution, Sylvia popped in an Enrique Iglesias CD from the 90’s and began singing along. And he had thought it couldn’t get any worse.

Half an hour from Hillsboro, he pulled the Volvo into a nearby gas station to get away from her for a few precious moments and made up an excuse about buying window cleaner. The place looked pretty rundown, the greyish red paint on the shack-like siding weathered and peeling, and both the bathroom and the air pump had big yellow signs that said OUT OF ORDER. Carlos tried not to think about what that meant for the employee working inside, and avoided stepping near any of the trees. Only one other car sat in the lot, a blue BMW of all things, and he fought the urge to stare.

Upon his entrance, a bell made a halfhearted *tink* and then went silent. No one waited at the register, so Carlos grabbed a spray bottle of window cleaner and walked toward the back to make his presence known.

"Hello?" Carlos called uncertainly.

"Be out in a minute," a man's voice said, and then he appeared in blue overalls with a blue flannel shirt underneath. He walked strangely, with his chest thrust out in front of him. "Don't be alarmed," he said, giving Carlos a half-hearted smile, "this happens once a month." Then he jerked a thumb back; it was only after the man was two feet away that Carlos could see the gun pressed into his back and the robber behind him.

"You might as well give him all your money," the tall man told Carlos as the robber led him to the register. "Make it easy on yourself. I know this guy, at least his voice, and he won't hurt us if we do what he asks."

"Now wait just a minute," Carlos started to argue, but the thief aimed the gun at him instead and he immediately added his cash to the growing pile the cashier had pulled out of the register and safe below it. "That's all I have," he told them apologetically when both men on the other side of the counter looked down at his measly \$40. "The missus cleaned me out."

The thief stuck all of the cash into a sack hanging from his belt, then backed out of the station and disappeared in his BMW.

"Close call," the man said, whistling. They both breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief, and then Carlos put the window cleaner on the counter and offered the man his credit card.

"Sorry, we have a \$10 minimum." The cashier pointed to a creased sign attached to the register. "Do you have any cash?"

Part Three

The minute Carlos turned the Volvo onto the street lined with cookie cutter homes, he became self-conscious of the way his car sputtered down the

road with a display of empty French fry cartons on the dashboard. Then he told Sylvia to hide them in the glove compartment.

“Who’re you trying to impress?” Sylvia asked, but he saw her sneak her greasy hair back in a ponytail and wipe crumbs from the corners of her mouth.

He had imagined his mother’s house as some kind of mansion, complete with lion statues at the gate and old fashioned paintings on the walls, but 147 Hillsboro Drive was just another box with vinyl siding and a two foot grass perimeter. Carlos parked the car on the street and turned off the engine, and then he and Sylvia sat looking at the red door, waiting for the other person to make a move. Finally, the ever-impatient Sylvia stepped out of the Volvo and stretched her stubby legs. Carlos followed close behind, and then approached the door quietly, like a hunter, until he pressed the doorbell; *da-da-da-da*, it sang loudly.

When no one answered, Carlos happened to look to the right and notice the car parked in the small lot: a blue BMW. A coincidence, he told himself, but a tiny pinch at the back of his neck was trying to tell him otherwise. He slapped at the skin like one might slap at a mosquito and the pinch disappeared, but he couldn’t help cringing a little when whoever was on the other side of the door started fooling with the deadbolt.

The door swung inward and there she was: Janine Juarez, wearing a sensible white collared shirt, a tan sweater, shapely slacks, and a holster with a familiar black handle sticking out the top. “How did you find me?” she asked Carlos, and Sylvia innocently looked back and forth between mother and son before her eyes settled on the gun.

“Wait a minute,” Sylvia started to argue, but in just a few seconds Janine had un-holstered the gun, grabbed his wife, and pressed the weapon into her back.

“If you want your wife to live, you won’t make a fuss,” Janine said in a cold voice that lacked all of the motherly charm Carlos had imagined during their long drive. He probably wouldn’t be tasting any home baked cookies, either. “We don’t want the neighbors to suspect anything.”

Carlos and Sylvia stepped into the house, and Janine closed the door, then led them into the living room and sat them on a plush, pink love seat that creaked dangerously when Sylvia sat down. "Carlos, explain yourself," Sylvia hissed, and Janine waved the gun in her face to shut her up.

"I didn't want to worry you," he whispered back, which sounded better than saying he didn't want to listen to her talk about it for thirty minutes. "Besides, how was I supposed to know my mother was the gas station robber?"

"What?" both women said at the same time.

"Sylvia, meet the woman who took my cash at that rundown gas station and who is also apparently my mother. Janine, meet my wife, Sylvia."

They stared at each other, and Janine relaxed her hold on the gun. "I did abandon a baby once, and as far as I know, you could be him. Well, I suppose I can't kill you now," she said, her voice disappointed, "after all, you're kin, and I'm not ready to go back in the slammer anyway."

"Very generous of you," Sylvia said with a heavy exhale, and she tried to climb out of the plushy trap.

"Now wait just a minute," Janine said, and Sylvia dropped back down next to Carlos. "I said I wasn't going to kill you, but I didn't say you were free to go. I know he's dry...how about you?"

"You want my money?" Sylvia asked in her who-stole-my-puppy voice. "But I thought when you found out—"

"You thought wrong. This house doesn't pay for itself," Janine said, waving her French manicured finger nails toward the well-furnished room, "and that gas station heist was a bust."

Sylvia rummaged in her pockets and pulled out three twenties, which Janine eagerly bent to pick up. Before Carlos could even think to act, his wife threw her whole two hundred and fifty pounds at Janine and both

women fell onto the glass table behind them. Considering they had to change their intimate moment positions after the last child (Sylvia weighed so much that she squeezed the air out of Carlos's lungs), he could only imagine what she would do to his mother's middle-aged bones. Sylvia reached a hand up so Carlos could help her stand, and they both scurried for the door while Janine moaned on the carpet, surrounded by shattered glass.

"This might not be the best time to mention this," Sylvia said breathlessly as they ran for the car, "but we're almost out of gas."

Part Four

"You've got to believe me." Carlos looked up at Officer Lee, who wore black Maui Jims and a crew cut, and waited for the man to scribble what Carlos had said. "We tried to make it to my Aunt Lydia's house in Carrolton, but only got as far as this highway before the car up and died on us. We were afraid for our lives, which is why we called you."

Carlos had just finished explaining the less-than-believable story of his cross-state trip to find his mother, previously thought dead: the gas station robbery; the visit to his mother's house, the realization that Janine was actually the robber from the station; and his wife's creative escape.

"You say she sat on her?" Officer Lee repeated, peering into the car to get a better look at Sylvia, who was eating the last of the Sour Patch Kids and licking her sour fingers.

"Yes, Sir. Well, knocked her over and landed on her is more like it, but either way, she squished her. We're not sure if Janine was injured or dead, but we didn't stick around long enough to find out."

Officer Lee got a call on his radio and walked back to the police car, still shaking his head.

"I'm hungry," Sylvia complained, reclining her seat. "How long is this going to take?"

“As long as it takes to find her, arrest her, and put her in jail,” Carlos said for the millionth time. “If we go home, she might follow us and hurt the kids.”

“They could at least give us a ride to the station,” Sylvia said as she closed her eyes. “I’m sure there’s a spare doughnut lying around somewhere.”

“How can you possibly think of food right now?” Carlos asked, ignoring his own rumbling stomach. “You could stand to lose a few pounds, anyway.”

Sylvia started to cry, and he instantly regretted snapping at her. Before he could apologize, however, Officer Lee was back.

“We found her,” Officer Lee said like a cop in an action movie. “She was chasing you in that blue BMW you mentioned. I’ll take you to the station so you can identify her, and we’ll have someone get gas for your vehicle and give you a ride back.”

Sylvia didn’t say a word the whole time, not even to ask for a snack or can of soda. When they asked her to identify Janine as the thief, she simply nodded her head and went back to staring somewhere above Carlos’s left ear. They signed a few forms, initialed here and there, and were almost out the door before Sylvia pointed to a piece of paper on the wall of missing persons and wanted posters.

“Isn’t that Janine?” Sylvia asked.

Carlos walked over to the sign, and sure enough, his mother’s photo was dead center on a wanted poster: WANTED: JANINE JUAREZ, MAIDEN NAME CRUZ.

“That’s her, alright –” Carlos affirmed, but stopped in the middle of his sentence once the maiden name had sunk in. “Wait a minute...there must be some mistake. If her real name is Janine Cruz, then she’s not my mother after all.”

Carlos struggled to sort through his emotions. Even though his mother had turned out to be a gas station robber and the type of woman who stole her own son's money, at least she'd been a real person Carlos could claim as his own kin. If Janine wasn't his mother, then Carlos would be back to square one.

"But if we're not related, why would my grandmother have a picture of her in the bottom of her closet?" Carlos asked out loud.

"We might never know." Sylvia took his hand, and they walked out of the station.

For the first time in the fifteen years they had been married, Sylvia didn't demand they stop for fast food on the whole ride home. For dinner she fixed a nice chicken salad, and for breakfast the next morning, egg whites. Carlos did not comment on the change and neither of them mentioned their near-death experience to their children, but between them, something was different.

The next afternoon, Carlos returned to his grandmother's closet. As he'd dozed off the night before, his wife already snoring, a sudden revelation about his grandmother's motives had occurred to him, but in order to be sure, he would need to look at photographs of some of the relatives he had actually met. Carlos found the box of keepsakes, emptied it out on the bed, and gathered the photos he had suspected he would find, all printed with names of different aunts and uncles who had died over the years. Specifically, Carlos found a photograph of his favorite uncle, the man who had been like Carlos's father, but the man staring back at him, though he shared the same kind smile and leather rancher's hat, was decidedly not his Uncle Joe.

His grandmother had lived a hard life, not the least of which involved the early death of her eldest daughter. Carlos couldn't blame her for finding photos that looked and sounded like they could have been her relatives and holding onto them, the way she couldn't hold on to those people in real life.

How lucky I am to have my real family, Carlos thought. Then he boxed up the photos, turned off the lights, and walked off to find the dumpster.

Prompt: Run With It, March 2014

Kelly Ann Jacobson



Kelly Ann Jacobson is a fiction writer and poet who lives in Falls Church, Virginia. She recently received her MA in Fiction at Johns Hopkins University, and she is the Poetry Editor for *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine*. Kelly is the author of the literary fiction novel *Cairo in White* and the young adult trilogy *The Zaniyah Trilogy*, as well as the editor of the book of essays *Answers I'll Accept*. Her work, including her published poems, fiction, and nonfiction, can be found at www.kellyannjacobson.com.

Are there any themes that tend to pop up frequently in your writing? What draws you to write about these? What appeals to you about the particular genre(s) (i.e., poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc) you tend to write in?

Literary fiction, especially novella-length or novelette-length fiction, is definitely my home base, and from there I venture into poetry, YA, nonfiction, flash fiction, longer novels, or any other strange fusion of these forms and genres that I can come up with.

My writing is usually very serious, though you wouldn't be able to tell from the pieces I've published in *Promptly* – then again, that's the beauty of the prompts! They take you out of your comfort zone and into a new space you may never have considered, and keep you from writing the same thing over and over again. I kept saying to my boyfriend as I was writing the various sections: "I'm having so much fun! It's just so fun!" "Carlos & Sylvia" was a great wakeup call about how I should always be having fun as I'm writing, and that it's okay to be funny and just enjoy yourself. In general, I often write a lot about family and what ties them together/tears

them apart. I've also noticed a theme of drowning, though I'm not sure that's positive, and I have no idea where it came from.

Does your writing tend to be factual, fictionalized, or some combination of the two? What about these pieces in particular?

As a young adult I used to write a lot of my fiction based directly on my personal life, but it was pretty terrible. Then I wrote a "memoir" when I was about eighteen years old about my life up until that point, just hashed out all of the anger and happiness and frustration I had inside me at the time, and though I never published it (and never will!), from that point on I was able to shift into fiction "inspired by" my personal life but not directly about my personal life. This piece, however, has almost nothing factual about it, it's fun and ridiculous, and that's what I loved about writing it. I had a great time, and as most writers say, that's the most important part. You, as a writer, need to be entertained by your own writing before you can entertain others, and it's refreshing to just let loose and write a piece meant purely for enjoyment.

How do you go about revising a piece, and how do you know when a piece is finished?

I am the first to admit how terrible of an editor of my own work I am — thank goodness for my wonderful editors at Musa and Books to Go Now (and you!), who catch my mistakes and point out any inconsistencies I missed. Honestly, the biggest indicator for me that a piece is finished is that I get bored. As I mentioned above, you should be entertained by your own work, and when I stop being entertained and figure out the ending (I do this as I write, not beforehand), I know the piece is coming to an end. After I'm done I evaluate my piece, and if it's terrible I usually scrap it (unless it's *Cairo in White*, my literary fiction novel, which I worked on for five years before starting all over again from the beginning), and if I think it's any good, I send it out to see if anyone else thinks it's any good.

What pieces or projects are you currently working on? Is there an idea you've had that you've been wanting to see come to life but hasn't yet?

I just finished a short novel that I'd planned on turning into a long novel, but, per my rule, ended early. I went back through it, desperately trying to find places where I could add or subtract, but there weren't any. Pieces find their own form if you sit back and let them, and they find their own

length too. I just try not to get in the way. Since I write poetry, I tend to hate fiction that goes on and on with no substance, too wrapped up in its own language to remember that it's supposed to be entertainment first, not last. I'd rather have a short, tight novel than a long-winded novel any day, even if it would sell better. That's why I love well-written YA so much—the story is always moving forward.

Back to the short novel I just finished, all I can really say right now is that it takes place in the Maldives; it's third person but moves between characters, times, and countries; and the main character's name is Ibrahim Waheed.

What was the first (or an early) work of literature you remember falling in love with? What appealed to you about it?

I had so many favorites as a kid, I'm not sure I could pick one. I loved *Dealing with Dragons*, a young adult fantasy novel by Patricia C. Wrede; though I haven't read that book in a long time, the memory of it and how much I loved it really influenced me as I wrote my own young adult book, *Dreamweaver Road* (Books to Go Now). The dragons and the magic were wonderful, but I also just enjoyed the sense of adventure and the way that book opened up a whole new realm of possibilities for me. The same thing was true with *Ella Enchanted*, another book I read over and over again.