

ReadTheseLips
Volume Four

4PLAY

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lips**

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Editor Evecho

June 2010

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4Play: Read These Lips, Volume Four

Edited by Evecho

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Foreword

Welcome to the fourth volume of *Read These Lips*.

I've never been so pleased to be able to say that. Read These Lips started on an idea and an inspiration in 2007, and since then we've provided for and, hopefully, inspired readers and writers around the world. We've given away thousands of copies of our books that are still making their way, online and by hand, into our communities. And we couldn't be happier.

Our success is built on the foundation of a strong lesbian literary network that is still expanding. New sites, new writers, new interests and new talent continue to sprout, especially on the internet. We support all initiatives that reinforce and renew links for lesbians seeking other lesbians. Lesbian presses—unwitting archivists—act as signposts marking the issues and fashions of a period. From the publishers that started it all decades ago to the literary media of the future, we are proud to be among them.

In *4Play*, once again *Read These Lips* presents stories and poetry to whet your appetite and to feed your mind. The brilliant Janis Spehr shares a glimpse of rural Australia life you hadn't expected; Amy McDonald pens a spicy other-worldly tale. Feast on the charismatic poetry of Natasha Carthew, the bittersweet denial in Joan Annsfire's 'trip,' and the soulful passion from Robinet Christian. See the world unfolding through young eyes in stories by R.G. Emanuelle and J.E. Knowles. Read on to Jessica Mason McFadden's take on loving a woman and partake of a breakfast chat with a twist from Rachel Green, before ending on a lover's serenade by Tamara Klinger.

For even more stories in our previous volumes and a beautiful bibliography of lesbian anthologies, visit us at ReadTheseLips.com for links to the wide world of lesbian fiction.

This collection is brought to you by the creative team at www.readtheselips.com. *4Play* is for fun, for life, and for our readers.



Editor-in-Chief, June 2010
4 my darling Carol, my inspiration.



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The Town Where There Was No Campari

Janis Spehr

‘STOP HERE!’

‘Here?’ Elizabeth wore wraparound sunglasses beneath a green-tipped mohawk; she had the look of a bulbous-headed insect, blankly staring. ‘You sure you want to stop *here?*’

‘Yes, here. It’s half way. It’ll be all right for one night.’ The sign out the front of the low, L-shaped pink building with grey stucco trim read Tuckerbox Motel. A few palm trees struggled for survival in the strip of garden set back from the footpath. Without waiting for an answer, Sarah got out of the car, slammed the door, and headed for the part of the building marked Office. Elizabeth sighed, took off her shades and followed her.

‘We’d like a double room, please.’

‘A double?’ The man behind the reception desk looked confused. He was short and slight and shiny-domed except for a dark fringe above his ears. ‘You want a room with a double bed?’

‘Yes,’ said Elizabeth. ‘A room with a *double* bed.’

‘A double,’ repeated the man.

‘If it’s not too much trouble.’ Sarah smiled.

The walls of the office were painted a fussy brilliant pink and trimmed with burgundy. Surely he could not have had anything to do with it: Elizabeth detected the wishes of some busily managing ‘little woman’. She watched Sarah push back the blond

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hair other women were always telling her to cut off and smile at him again.

‘Is there a room available?’

‘Oh, sure, sure!’ Tiny beads of water oozed from his forehead as he flipped through the book open on the desk.

‘That’s the wrong date,’ said Sarah sweetly, pointing. ‘It’s the nineteenth today.’

‘Oh, so it is.’ The little man turned back a page. ‘Now,’ he went on in a determinedly businesslike tone, ‘you girls want a double.’

‘Yes, please.’ Sarah smiled. She handed over money and commandeered the keys.

‘Well, that was interesting,’ she remarked a few minutes later, as Elizabeth dumped the suitcases inside the door.

‘Not as interesting as this.’ Elizabeth bounced experimentally on the bed clothed in bilious mustard chenille. ‘Nice and firm. You want to try?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘Oh, come on.’

‘No!’ Sarah took out bottles of Clinique and an eyeliner pencil and disappeared into the bathroom. The toilet flushed; when she came out she was shiny-faced and kohl-rimmed. ‘We should find somewhere to eat.’

‘It’s a bit early to get a feed.’

‘I’m hungry.’ She picked up her bag and started for the door. Elizabeth groaned and followed. This weekend had been a mistake. Sarah’s family had been bad enough, but then there had been the drive from Sydney in the old Holden, the hot air stretched taut by scratchy silences. They had forced her off the highway into this dusty sheep town, with its

streets wrapped in pale autumn light and carrying the scent of tedium. Two boys kicked a footy on a vacant lot and the words of a Cold Chisel song drifted plaintively on the air. ‘... *one nurse to hold her, one nurse to wheel her down the corridors of healing...*’

‘Isn’t that a song about abortion?’

‘I thought it was about drugs.’

‘They were a good band. I was sorry when they broke up.’ Elizabeth peered through the dirty windscreen as a group of hoons in a hotted-up Monaro drove past shouting.

‘Piss off, you bloody galahs!’ She gave them the finger, then stopped at a flat-roofed, brown oblong; the sign out the front read Tuckerbox Inn. ‘Will here do?’

‘It looks a bit tacky...’

‘Well, you can’t expect the Ritz in a town like this.’

‘...and what’s this tuckerbox thing?’

Elizabeth turned and stared. ‘It’s what the town’s famous for: *The dog sat on the tuckerbox...remember?*’

‘No.’

‘You’re joking.’

‘No.’

‘You’re unbelievable.’ Elizabeth took the shades off and wiped her forehead. ‘I can’t believe you don’t know. The Dog’s an Australian icon.’

‘Well, I’m very sorry. Obviously an important aspect of my education has been overlooked.’ Sarah got out and slammed the car door. The lounge bar was deserted except for the intermittent bleepings and spittings from a bank of poker machines. ‘Is it too early

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for counter teas?’ she called.

‘No, love, you’re right.’ A heavy-busted, middle-aged woman stood behind the bar polishing glasses. ‘What’ll it be?’

‘Shandy,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Do you have Campari and soda?’ asked Sarah.

‘Campari...what’s that, love?’

‘It’s an Italian wine, sort of pinkish-red, in a tall slender bottle...’

‘A tall slender bottle...’ said the woman doubtfully. ‘No, I don’t think we’ve got it. Just a tick...’ She stood perusing the row of bottles along the top shelf of the bar. ‘There’s ouzo,’ she said at last. ‘That’s Italian, isn’t it?’

‘Ouzo!’ echoed Sarah, rolling her eyes.

‘Don’t be such a bitch,’ whispered Elizabeth. ‘She’s only trying to help.’

The woman finished her search, picked up a tea towel and wiped her hands.

‘No, sorry, love. We haven’t got it.’

‘Gin, then. Gin and tonic, please.’ While she waited for the drinks, Sarah stood at the bar and watched Elizabeth wander over to the juke-box. She looked completely at home in this barn-like expanse of cheap chairs and mottled carpet; she must have often come to places like this when she was a kid.

‘Just don’t choose any Cold Chisel!’

Sarah’s family were in business; she’d been raised to wear pearls. ‘Well, even if you don’t do anything with your degree, perhaps you’ll meet someone nice,’ her mother had

said when Sarah went off to university. Sarah had met several nice boys and might have settled down with one, but six months ago, at an Amnesty International fund-raiser, she'd met this generous-thighed woman wearing a denim jacket with cut-off sleeves over a shirt from army disposals. Elizabeth liked to wear denim, slightly grubby and too tight and sometimes she'd go for two or three days without washing. Sarah loved the gamey smell and taste of her then, the wild wrestling which was a prelude to more delicate complex games. There had been less and less of these lately and she wanted to know why. When she put the drinks down, she lit a cigarette and blew smoke across the table.

'So...what's going on between you and Biscuit?'

'Not a lot.' Elizabeth picked up the coaster advertising a local plumbing business.

'Do you want something to be going on?'

'What do you mean?'

'You *know* what I mean.'

'Well...there is nothing going on.'

'*Biscuit*,' murmured Sarah. 'Jesus, fuck!'

'I know, I know,' agreed Elizabeth, although secretly she quite liked the name and thought it suited its owner. Biscuit, who had been baptised Anne, had creamy beige skin and hair of a thick wheaten gold. She had several currant-sized beauty marks on her belly. She even had one on her clitoris as Elizabeth had recently discovered. There had been a lot of jokes about eating going around when Biscuit changed her name, but she didn't seem to mind. She worked at one of the women's refuges, was good with the kids there and wore floaty, severely out-of-date cheesecloth dresses.

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‘Oh...,’ crooned Sarah. ‘Sweet Biscuit!’

‘Cut it out. Let’s order.’

It was over the Steak Diane and grilled flounder with chips that they decided to visit the Dog.

‘You really want to go there?’

‘Well, it is famous. It is an *Australian icon*.’

‘Yeah, all right, don’t take the piss.’

‘No, I’m serious. I’d like to see it.’

‘Yeah, something to laugh about with your colleagues at the gallery. D’you want another one?’

They had another one, then another. By the time they left the Tuckerbox Inn they were both rather drunk. When she opened the car door, the collection of plastic dinosaurs Elizabeth had blu-tacked to the dashboard lit up eerily. The car lurched forwards then backwards then forwards again.

‘We could walk.’

‘No, it’s on the edge of the town.’ Elizabeth dug her nails into the flesh of her other arm; the pain helped her focus as she trundled the Holden onto the highway. A truck big as a ship sailed past and they saw dark eyes in dark faces pressed behind metal bars.

‘There’s a track winding back to an old-fashioned shack...’

‘I don’t think there’s anything wrong with monogamy,’ Sarah said.

‘...along the road to Gundagai...’

‘Lots of people live quite happily with just one other person...’

‘...where my mummy and daddy are waiting for me...’

‘Stop that! What is that?’

‘*The Road to Gundagai*, as sung once-upon-a-time by Peter Dawson.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘He was a famous Australian tenor, around in the thirties, forties and fifties...’

‘Another icon?’

‘Dad had a record of his. He used to play it when he got on the piss. ...*so no more will I roam*...ah, here it is.’

‘Oh, it’s like a little shrine,’ whispered Sarah. The dog squatted on its sturdy metallic haunches under floodlights which illuminated the inscription from Banjo Paterson’s poem.

‘What kind of dog is it?’

‘I think it’s meant to be a kelpie.’

‘They herd sheep, don’t they?’

‘Yes, fantastic dogs.’ Near the statue was a shop advertising all kinds of Dog on the Tuckerbox merchandise. There was complete silence except for the distant *hoosh* of cars along the highway.

‘Let’s graffiti it,’ said Elizabeth suddenly.

‘What?’

‘Let’s graffiti it!’

‘Why? I mean, it’s kind of kitsch but it’s quite nice, really, I think we should leave it alone.’

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‘No, I want to do it!’ Elizabeth ran to the car, rummaged in the boot and came back holding a can of spray paint.

‘Where’d you get that?’

‘I’ve got all kinds of shit in there.’ Actually, it was left over from last week, when she had helped Biscuit make a banner for the rally the refuge workers were attending.

‘What about video surveillance?’

‘It might be 1984, but this is Gundagai, not Checkpoint Charlie.’ Elizabeth climbed over the low mesh fence. Soon the Dog was covered in a fine red film. ‘What’ll we write?’

‘How about Die, Doggy, Die?’

‘No, it needs to be something political.’

‘Political?’

‘Yeah, it should say something.’

‘We haven’t got time. Someone might come!’

‘Wait a minute...’

‘No, come on!’

In the end Elizabeth just sprayed Free Abortions around the brick base of the statue. She drove off, tyres squealing, hooting with laughter.

‘What a stupid thing to write! As though you’re ever going to need an abortion!’

‘That’s not the point.’ Elizabeth steered the car down a side street. ‘Let’s take the long way home—don’t want some country pig picking me up.’ That didn’t seem likely. Everything had shut and there was no sound except for some distant barking. They were weaving sedately past a row of darkened shopfronts when they came to the Greek Café

floating in its pool of light like an asp in amber.

‘Oh, stop, stop, let’s stop here! Oh, look at it!’ Sarah lurched from the car and stood staring at the stippled Bakelite, the tall glasses frilled like ballerinas and the name of the place spelt out in a squiggle of pink neon. She ran to the door but the sign said Closed. ‘Oh, it’s straight out of the thirties! We should have gone here!’

‘Yeah, they probably would have had Campari, too.’ But the place had Elizabeth under its spell: she gazed at the gleaming, leather-cushioned booths and art deco mirrors and saw a jade-green satin doll on the arm of a handsome tuxedoed butch.

They belonged in a place like this. ‘Dance with me.’ She took Sarah’s hand and together they twirled slowly beneath the stars.

‘There’s the Southern Cross,’ said Sarah dreamily.

‘Oh, yeah...’ Elizabeth looked up and grinned. ‘So it is.’

‘I would have liked to have met both your parents. Would they have liked me?’

‘My dad would have liked you. He would have called you a classy sheila. My mum would say you were a snobby bitch.’

‘One out of two’s not bad.’ Sarah laughed.

‘Better than I did with yours. Are your family always so polite?’

‘My family,’ said Sarah—and her tone hardly changed from its dreamy unconcern—‘my family are a photo ripped in half. They’re an old shawl left in the corner and pissed on. Cattle trucks leaving in the middle of the night. You don’t know anything about my family.’

‘Ohhh,’ said Elizabeth, stopping and staring. ‘Ohhh...I knew...I mean, I knew you

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were...you never talk about it.'

'No,' said Sarah. 'Years of practice.'

'Oh,' said Elizabeth. She put her hand on Sarah's waist and resumed their slow waltz. 'Do you want to talk about it now?'

'No,' said Sarah. 'I don't know how to, really.' And it was true. She read books and saw films, had tried to make sense of them, but all the images and words had bled together into one great amorphous river. There should have been a word she could have plucked which would have unraveled a sentence and led her into her own story, but all her life she had only heard, 'lucky', 'pretty', 'gifted', 'lucky'... *Never speak of these things*. She glanced down at her linen slacks and silk shirt. 'I'm cold.' She shivered. 'I'm cold. Let's go.'

'That can be arranged.'

Neither said anything on the way back. When they reached the motel, Sarah went straight to bed, but Elizabeth sprawled on the other side cradling a Scotch. She thought about Sarah's parents. Hadn't people like that had numbers tattooed on their wrists or their arms? Perhaps she had missed something. Perhaps they had had them removed. That was possible, wasn't it? They hadn't seemed very shattered, although they were obviously having a bit of trouble coming to terms with the changes to Sarah's 'lifestyle' as her father called it. He had tried to draw Elizabeth out about her job, but there was a limited amount you could say about half a journalism degree and a part-time job on a community newspaper. Sarah's mother had just kept staring at Elizabeth's hair, which had given Elizabeth a certain satisfaction. Not many people got past the mohawk, she thought,

as she fell blearily asleep.

When she woke she was still in her clothes. Her mouth was gritty and her whole body felt sour. Sarah sat at the table, scrubbed and brushed, slowly turning the pages of the *National Times* and eating a poached egg.

‘Where did you get that?’

‘Mabel brought it.’

‘Mabel?’

‘I assume she’s the better half of our little friend from yesterday.’

‘Oh.’ Elizabeth staggered to the bathroom and ran the shower. Pieces of the night came back to her while the cold water poked her skin. ‘Let’s go and look at the Dog,’ she said as she stiffened the mohawk with gel.

‘Again? Why?’

‘Because I want to.’

Sarah put down the paper and looked at her. ‘All right,’ she said at last.

When they got to the Dog there was a large bus parked in front of the shop and a group of Japanese tourists stood around wearing cameras and bemused expressions.

‘What do you think they’re saying?’

‘Something like: “What an inherently beautiful and complex culture these Australians have.” Come on, let’s have a look.’ But as they got closer they saw that except for a few reddish flakes around its paws and tail the Dog was completely clean.

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‘It’s been scrubbed!’

‘It’s easy to rub off...’ Sarah stared at the Dog’s gleaming bronze ears and was glad the paint was gone. ‘I found the poem from Biscuit,’ she murmured. ‘The one where she likens your vulva to a ripe mango and your nipples to pearls.’

‘You’ve waited till now to tell me?’

‘I’ve been testing you...waiting to see if *you’d* tell *me*.’

‘Obviously.’ Elizabeth indicated the shop. ‘Do you want to go in? Buy a few fridge magnets or pencil sharpeners?’

‘No. I want to get out of here.’

‘All right, then.’ They crossed to the car, but when Elizabeth went to turn the ignition she abruptly opened the door and swung her body out, head between her knees. ‘Can you drive? I’m maggotted.’

‘You didn’t have that much to drink.’

‘No, it must be the heat.’

She should have cleaned, Elizabeth thought as she sank into the passenger seat. She lost track of things because she didn’t clean up. She had been hoping to juggle both relationships until she made a decision—if she needed to make one. Biscuit didn’t mind—she’d shrugged her shoulders easily when Elizabeth told her she was involved with someone else—but Sarah was different. At first Elizabeth had found these differences exciting, exotic. ‘Where did you find her?’ Renée, one of the women who made up Elizabeth’s group household, asked incredulously. ‘Is she some closet case you picked up in a bar?’

‘She has to dress like that to keep her job.’ Elizabeth couldn’t admit she found the

nail polish a turn-on or how much she liked putting her hands up the skirts of the neat little suits. But this testing, this setting a trap; there was something devious about it, something wheedling and manipulative. And the stuff about Sarah's family: Elizabeth didn't really want to cope with that. Biscuit would be easier. As the town receded like a bad postcard, grainy and slightly out-of-register, Elizabeth thought longingly of Biscuit's soothing hands and clever tongue. She was studying massage part-time and liked to practise on Elizabeth, adding a few little embellishments of her own. Would things have worked out differently if she and Sarah had gone to the Greek Café, Elizabeth wondered: possibly, but who could tell. This place unsettled her. The city had given her a life, but this bleached and anaemic landscape brought back her childhood, people she hadn't seen for ten years... Memories can come back and float in the mind like islands of bruises or clots of fear. She didn't want that. No, she didn't want that stuff. Biscuit would be much easier.

She let out a soft moan which Sarah mistook for contrition or at least continued indisposition. She had been feeling squashed and miserable but driving gave her a renewed sense of control and now she looked calmly across.

'You're nearly twenty-five. You're getting too old to be a feminist vandal.'

'I know, I know,' murmured Elizabeth as her hands beat out a rapid tattoo on the dash. She did feel slightly ashamed of her behaviour, but as the car reached the highway all she could think of were the raised spots of velvet on Biscuit's belly which followed the formation of the Southern Cross.

Janis Spehr

Janis Spehr is a writer whose short fiction has been widely published since 1996 in publications that include *Westerly*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Space: New Writing*, and *Antipodes* (USA). She has twice won the Sisters in Crime Scarlet Stiletto Award and has been equal first prize winner in the University of Canberra National Short Story Competition (1999). She is currently writing a novel about the French lesbian artists, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.

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Sing If You're Glad

Rachel Green

'THANK GOD WE AREN'T GAY,' said Linda, pulling a day's worth of wet laundry out of the washing machine and letting it pile like a nest of twisted tapeworms in the laundry basket. 'Them poor buggers at number sixteen got egged again last night. I saw him trying to wash down the walls with an 'osepipe an' broom this morning.'

'Him?' Melanie –or 'Mel' for short – dropped her paper to 45 degrees and pulled her spectacles down to focus on her partner.

'The tall one with a bald head.' Linda huffed as she stood upright and crossed to the tiny room next to the back door. She raised her voice. 'He was in his dressing gown an' slippers. Terry, funnily enough. I always imagined him in satin.'

'It surprises me that you imagine him at all,' said Mel softly. She raised her voice. 'Jonathan, his name is. The heavy one is called Peter.' She used the interruption to pour herself another cup of tea. A rarity on a weekday since it generally became too strong in the pot for her taste. She added extra milk and retreated behind the paper again. The sound of the tumble drier starting up drowned the radio. It was probably a mercy killing.

'How do you know what their names are?' Linda came back into the kitchen and pulled two pieces of hard, black bread out of the toaster. 'Remind me to get a new toaster next time we go shopping.' She put in another two slices and crossed to the fridge, pulling out a plastic carton of pretend butter and pots of Marmite and marmalade.

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Mel sighed, folding her paper and putting it to one side. She leaned back as Linda put a plate with the two pieces of toast in front of her, then removed her glasses and reached for the butter. ‘I did something quite radical,’ she said, scooping a knob of the milky-yellow margarine onto her knife. ‘I talked to him.’

‘When? You didn’t mention this to me.’ The two fresh pieces of toast popped up and Linda put them on another plate. ‘When was this?’

‘Ooh, a few days ago at the library,’ said Mel. She pressed too hard with the butter knife and the toast shattered into several pieces. She scowled at it briefly and reached for the second piece. ‘We had quite a chat over the new Patricia Kingston.’

‘I thought you didn’t like murder mysteries?’

‘I don’t. There was of pile of the dreadful things on one of those display tables. He’s an interior designer, you know. He did that new Italian restaurant on the High Street.’

‘I haven’t been in,’ said Linda. ‘It’s out of my price range.’ She touched the side of the teapot. ‘Shall I make a fresh?’

‘Please do.’ Mel handed her the cup as well. ‘It’s stewed and ghastly. I wouldn’t give it to a builder’s mate.’

‘Not that you’d ever see one. It’s always me that looks after the builders.’ Linda emptied the tea into the sink and the leaves into a red plastic bucket she kept by the back door. ‘What about the other one, then? The big one with the beard.’

‘Pete? What about him?’

‘What does he do? Did Jonathan say?’

‘He’s in catering, I think. A chef, perhaps. We should invite them over for dinner.’

‘If he’s a chef they should invite us.’ Linda grinned and put the kettle back on to boil.

‘I honestly don’t know why you don’t get an electric kettle,’ said Mel. Having successfully managed to spread margarine on her toast, she reached for the Marmite. ‘Honestly, they’re cheap enough in the supermarket.’

‘This was my aunt Hilda’s,’ said Linda, ‘as you know very well.’

‘You should keep it for best, then,’ said Mel. ‘Afternoon tea and Earl Grey on a summer afternoon in the garden. I’m sure an electric one would boil faster.’

‘You’re probably right.’ Linda measured two spoons of tea into the pot. ‘We could buy tea bags, too.’

‘Nonsense.’ Mel bit into her toast, chewed, swallowed, and dabbed at her lips with a napkin. ‘One has to have some standards.’

‘Does one?’ Linda grinned and began spreading her toast with butter substitute.

‘Anyway, you can talk,’ said Mel. “‘Thank God we aren’t gay” indeed. What are we, if not gay?’

‘We’re lesbians, Melanie. It’s different.’ The kettle began to boil and she hurried to take it off the stove. She was lost in a cloud of steam for a moment until she’d finished filling the teapot.

‘How is being a lesbian different. We still fornicate just like they do.’

‘But our fornication is socially acceptable.’ Linda stirred the tea and put the pot on the table before taking a seat. ‘People think lesbians are sweet. Our kind, anyway.’

Mel spooned marmalade onto her plate and dipped. ‘What other kinds are there?’ She began dipping pieces of broken toast into the condiment. ‘I don’t want to hear anything

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about the butch/femme dichotomy, either.’

‘Militant lesbians,’ said Linda. ‘Dykes. People get frightened by the spiky haircuts and political slogans. It’s all in your face then. People like us are looked upon as spinsters who don’t have husbands.’

‘And nor will I.’ Mel poured herself a replacement tea. ‘Useless articles, men. Tried one once, didn’t like it.’

‘Don’t let your new best friend hear you say that,’ said Linda, cutting her toast into quarters and picking one up.

‘New best friend?’

‘Jonathan the interior designer.’

‘Ah!’ Mel took a sip of the tea, grimaced and added sugar. ‘I’ve spoken to him twice. That hardly counts as “BFF forever”, does it?’

‘You tell me.’ Linda dusted the edge of her mouth. ‘All I’m saying is that we have it easy compared to the blokes. Your average chav on the street thinks it’s sexy when two girls snog, as if they might be in with the chance of a threesome. When he sees two guys going at it he picks up an ‘ammer. That’s not even counting the social leprosy. How many years have we lived here?’

Mel narrowed her eyes. ‘Between five and six.’

‘Right, and how many times have we had eggs thrown at our windows and “poofsters” spray-painted on the door in the night?’

‘We got egged last year.’

‘That was because you wouldn’t give those kids any sweets at Halloween.’

‘I didn’t count wearing hoodies with the hoods up as any effort at a costume.’

‘You’re lucky you weren’t knifed. You’re missing the point, though. We have it easy. We don’t get shops turning us away and churches telling us we’ll burn in Hell.’

Mel put her tea cup down. ‘We don’t go to church on account of its obsolete patriarchal dogma.’

‘But we could if we wanted.’ Linda stood and collected up the plates. ‘All they’d say would be “Look! There’s those two girls who share a house on Bechdel Terrace”. They wouldn’t actually stop the service until we left.’

‘That didn’t really happen, did it? Not at St Jude’s?’

‘No. St. Pity’s.’

‘Ah! Catholics.’ Mel’s fingers strayed to the paper again. ‘We all know what they’re like.’

‘That doesn’t make it right though. And they can’t be done for discrimination because religions are exempt.’

‘Which is all tied in with the freedom of speech.’ Mel picked up the paper and folded it in two. ‘Look, however you feel, you can’t stop the bigotry that’s endemic to this right-wing society. Ever since Thatcher there’s been a bigger and bigger backlash against the liberal left and trying to stop the tide is like Canute standing on the beach shouting at the sea.’

Linda shook her head. ‘You’ve changed your tune. When I met you, you were all equality for women and gay pride. Now you can’t fight the establishment because you are the establishment.’

‘We all have our imperfect pasts, Linda. You used to smoke dope and let mink into

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the wild where they destabilised the local ecology. Nobody called you up for that, did they?

‘Animal testing was wrong and still is. I’d do the same again.’

‘The laws are stricter now. Pull that kind of stunt these days and you’d be branded a domestic terrorist and be remanded without trial. Where would your moral high ground be then? Sinking into the morass of political lobbying, that’s where.’ Mel glanced at her mobile phone. ‘I’ll have to go and get dressed or I’ll be late for work.’ She stood, pulling her dressing gown tighter.

‘Right. Sorry.’ Linda put the dishes in the sink and turned back, scooping up a napkin to dab at the edges of her partner’s mouth before kissing her. ‘I laid out a fresh uniform for you, though there was a button missing on the blouse that I’ve had to replace. It doesn’t quite match so I swapped it with the one on the left cuff.’

‘Thanks.’ Mel smiled and wrapped the slighter woman in her arms. ‘What would I do without you?’

‘Pick up some tart with a better house who’s just lost her husband.’ Linda grinned and leaned in for a kiss. ‘You were never a girl to let the grass grow under your feet.’

Mel laughed and released her. ‘Now let me be,’ she said. ‘I have to be out the door in five minutes flat.’

‘Right.’ Linda stepped back and watched as Mel dashed upstairs. It had become a habit to take breakfast in her dressing gown since the incident with the blackcurrant jam and the only clean blouse. She cleared off the table and opened the back door to let the cat inside, filling its bowl with dry food. It was such a cliché for lesbians to have a cat but she’d had it when Mel moved in with her, and the older woman had elected not to make her

choose between them. Even after seven years together the cat might still win.

She'd hardly even filled the washing bowl before Mel came back down in her freshly ironed uniform, stopping at the hall mirror to make certain she looked professional. Linda dried her hands on a tea towel and picked up the clothes brush, removing any stray hairs from the heavy serge of her partner's jacket.

'I'll drop in on Jonathan after work,' said Mel, straightening the line of her shirt as Linda worked. 'See if I can work out who's been giving them trouble.'

'Then you can go 'round their house and give them a kicking. It's the only thing they understand sometimes.'

'I wish it were otherwise. It depends how old they are as to what course of action I can take. I will try to get Jonathan to make an official complaint if I can.'

'Proper channels?' Linda put down the clothes brush and dry kissed Mel on the cheek. 'Most of the police won't do anything about it bar a shake of the 'ead and a "what's the world coming to". I wouldn't put it past a couple of them to have egged the place themselves.'

'Go easy.' Mel picked up her handbag. 'Those are my colleagues you're making inferences about.' She picked up her policewoman's hat and set it perfectly on her pinned-back hair. 'Not that I disagree, mind, unofficially of course.'

'Of course.' Linda picked up the cat, who was about to rub itself on Mel's legs, shedding as much fur as felinely possible in the process.

'If I get any leads I'll try to pursue an arrest, but I can't promise anything. Hate crime is low priority, after missing cats and little old ladies dodging bus tickets.'

Rachel Green

‘Figures. Will you pick up something for dinner tonight?’

‘Sure.’ Mel picked up her car keys and opened the front door. Her smile faded as suddenly as it had come. ‘What were you saying about not getting victimised by the local youth?’

‘What do you mean?’ Linda stepped forward as Mel opened the door fully, allowing her to see the two words in blue spray-paint, ‘Filth’ and ‘Pig’, and the dried-on egg stains.

Rachel Green

Rachel Green is a forty-something writer from Derbyshire, England. She lives with her three partners and three dogs. Her novel *An Ungodly Child* <http://tinyurl.com/5rxve6> was published in 2008 and her novel *Screaming Yellow* will be published at the end of the year. When not writing, Rachel walks her three dogs, potters in the garden, and drinks copious amounts of tea. www.leatherdyke.co.uk



Guest House

Amy McDonald

WHEN HE CLIMBED OUT OF THE TRUCK, the man was older than I had imagined. Sixtyish. I picked up my backpack, dusted off my shorts and walked over.

There was yelling from behind. The little brown man from the store was fussing, pointing at my Pepsi.

‘What? I paid.’

He kept ranting and reached out for the bottle.

‘Look, mate, I’ve paid you already.’

‘Hang on,’ the tall man said, coming up behind me. ‘He wants you to finish it here.’ His accent was Australian but had a tired, dry quality to it. His eyes were green with flecks of yellow.

I sucked down the rest of the warm Pepsi and handed the store keeper the bottle. When he smiled his remaining teeth were brown.

‘Come on,’ said the Australian. He took my backpack by one strap and hauled it into the back of the truck. ‘Sawat’s in the front, so you can ride in the back.’ He tilted his head in the direction of my bag.

‘Is it far?’

‘Couple of hours.’

‘I thought Ubon was the closest airport?’ I said as he stamped out a cigarette and

opened his door.

‘It is,’ came the reply through the window.

Town after tiny, dusty town whizzed by. In between were paddies of rice, plantations of cassava, fields of buffalo. Wind pounded my ears until my brain rang like a temple bell and I had to tie my jumper around my head for protection.

The Australian pulled the orange truck off the highway and it bumped down a dirt road. Another turn and we approached a lake. On the far bank was a peaked pile of rocks. As we crossed the bridge I watched a large white bird pull a fish from the water.

‘So, here we are.’ The Australian let down the tray and I slithered out. ‘You’re over there,’ he said, pointing across a courtyard to a small wooden hut on stilts. ‘It’s the old rice barn. Now it’s the Guest House.’

I felt a hand on my shoulder. ‘Sawatdee Kaa.’ The Thai woman was noticeably younger than her Australian husband. ‘Sawat,’ she said.

‘Sawatdee Kaa,’ I replied. ‘I’m Meghan.’ We shook hands.

She took my bag from the truck and set off for the guest house.

‘Hey, what was that pile of rocks over by the lake?’ I asked the Australian.

‘It’s a grave.’ He butted his cigarette with his heel.

The rice barn was one small room. There was a bed, a wooden desk and a chair. Someone had placed a vase of dried flowers and some candles in one corner. Sawat lifted a wooden shutter and propped it open with a stick. She pointed to the mosquito net and spoke to me in Thai.

‘Yes, okay,’ I said, guessing her meaning. ‘What are they for?’ I pointed at the candles

Amy McDonald

and the pile of dried flowers.

‘Phi,’ she said. She paused, thinking, then added, ‘Ghosts.’ She smiled and left.

Through the open window I watched the sun sink, orange and fierce, down into the lake. Music started up nearby. Heavy bass, drumming, a gong and a man wailing gently. When the mosquitoes started humming, I shut the window, pulled down the net and retreated under it.

The sounds of crickets. Frogs. A far away bass beat and someone at the door. I sat up, pulled the sheet up over my chest. ‘Who’s there?’

A face appeared, lit by a candle. ‘Sorry, did I frighten you?’ The stranger didn’t wait for an answer. She pulled the door closed and ducked in under the net. ‘The mozzies are a killer,’ she said. She had long blond hair and green eyes that glowed in the candlelight. ‘I’m Anna.’

‘Meghan,’ I said, trying to remember if I’d booked a private room. As I reached for my singlet, Anna pulled off her own T-shirt and slithered out of her shorts.

‘Bloody hot, eh?’ She licked her fingers and pinched the candle wick. There was a hiss in the darkness and then the smell of sulfur. ‘You can come closer,’ she whispered. ‘I promise I won’t bite.’

Anna had left when I woke in the morning. The rice barn was already heating up. I dressed and walked over to the main house.

‘Good morning!’ The Australian grinned around his cigarette. ‘Sleep well?’

‘Yeah, great.’ I wondered if they’d heard us. I wanted to grin back, but also to keep the pleasure of the night before to myself. I looked away.

Sawat handed me a bowl of boiled rice and an egg.

‘What’s the plans for today?’ the Australian asked.

‘Might take a walk out to the lake.’

He nodded. ‘Good idea. But be back by dark.’

‘Why?’ I asked as I peeled my egg.

‘Sawat here has a big night ahead of her. Didn’t you hear the band practicing last night?’

A flashback of our candle-lit hips rocking in time to the bass made me blush. ‘Oh, yeah. So, a party then?’

‘Sort of.’ The Australian lit a cigarette from the one already between his lips. ‘Sawat is set to join the village elder. Show the old crones what she’s made of. We’re having a ghosting.’

‘Ghosting?’

‘Hm. Her mother’—he nodded to his wife—‘is the town medium. Apparently the skill is passed down the maternal line. I’ve got to go into town and buy a heap of crap—booze mostly—so she can prove that she’s got what it takes too.’

‘So she can see ghosts?’

‘Find out tonight, I guess.’

‘Is it a good thing if she can?’

He snorted. ‘Bloody oath. Great little money earner. Real competitive too. Only one

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per village. Mei's really cornered the market.' He chuckled. 'Of course, they all reckon it's the real deal. Far be it for me to get my Western sensitivities in a knot.' We both watched a woman herd three buffalos and a calf down the road. 'So, come watch. You can decide if I'm being a crotchety old bastard or not!'

An ancient woman dragged a bag of cassava into the kitchen, squatted and began sorting and peeling.

I watched her work as I finished my rice. Sawat pointed at a pile of dirty dishes and I balanced my plate on the stack. On the wall above was a framed photograph. The Australian had his arm around a younger woman.

'Anna,' I said, pointing to the photo.

The old woman flicked her face to me. She squinted and chatted at her daughter.

Sawat nodded and watched me.

'What is it?'

Sawat smiled. 'Mei,' she said, pointing at the old woman. 'Phi.'

'Yeah, I know,' I said. 'Your mother sees ghosts.'

Sawat smiled, pleased at our transaction.

But as I left I could feel Mei's eyes on my back.

By the time I'd made my way around the lake it was already getting dark. The dusty road back to the village was lit sporadically with street lights, incongruous in the jungle and swarmed by flying insects. The sound of the band grew. The smell of curry made my mouth water.

The courtyard was packed. Scores of people sat on grass mats surrounding the band, Sawat, and Mei. Both women wore traditional clothing, red silk skirts and fabric draped over one shoulder. Pots of incense, plates of tiny green oranges, and animals made of folded palm fronds were scattered about.

A woman handed me a plate of curry.

‘Glad you could make it,’ the Australian said, offering me a bottle of rice whiskey. ‘Get that into you.’ His eyes were glassy.

‘Thanks,’ I said, juggling the bottle and my plate.

He tipped an imaginary hat. ‘You know, you remind me a bit of my daughter.’

‘Really?’ The whiskey tasted like acetone. I struggled to swallow. ‘Is she still in Oz?’

‘No.’

I looked up at him, interested now. ‘So she lives here in Thailand?’

It was his turn to swig whiskey. ‘She did. That’s her grave, over by the lake.’

‘Fuck. I’m so so—’

‘Ah, I shouldn’t have brought it up. It’s this stuff.’ He clinked his bottle to mine. ‘Bloody rocket fuel gets me all sentimental.’

We watched the musicians while the moment passed.

‘Hear Mei doesn’t like you much,’ he said.

‘Hm. I’m not sure why.’

‘She’s a crazy old bat but normally alright with the tourists. Don’t worry, though.’ He took another mouthful. ‘Enjoy!’

I saw Anna sitting in a shadow on the other side of the courtyard. She waved me

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over.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘You got up early this morning.’

‘Did I wake you?’

‘No. I slept like a log,’ I said. I spooned rice into my mouth. ‘You must have worn me out.’

Anna giggled and the candles flashed yellow flecks across her eyes.

In the centre of the circle old women stood and began to dance. They moved their hands like fans, flicking and twisting. The music became more frantic and people clapped in time. Some men started chanting.

When Mei rose from the floor the chanting quietened. She threw fistfuls of uncooked rice out into the crowd as she repeated a mantra I couldn’t understand. Her voice was reedy and soft. She scanned every face. When she got to Anna and me she paused and raised a hand.

‘Looks like we’re in trouble.’ I felt a little fogged already from the whiskey.

Mei’s voice became louder, accusatory. Everyone turned to face our direction. Mei was yelling now, walking closer to us, her finger pointed like a wand.

‘Hey, Meghan.’ It was the Australian, watching from across the courtyard. ‘Maybe you’d better call it a night, eh?’

‘We were just going,’ I said, turning. But Anna had already left.

I picked my way back over to the rice barn. When I pushed the door open I heard a match strike. Anna lay on her stomach on top of the sheet, touching the flame to the wick. Her naked skin glowed. ‘You took your time,’ she teased over her shoulder.

Next morning I woke alone again and dressed. Mei squatted in the courtyard, smashing betel-nut with a pestle. She hissed at me. When she spat, it landed, red and shiny, just short of my foot.

The Australian and his wife were eating omelettes in the kitchen.

‘I think I might head off today,’ I said and sat opposite them.

‘Don’t like it out here?’

‘No, it’s Mei. I think I’ve upset her. Something just doesn’t feel right.’

The Australian set down his fork. ‘I’ll go and have a talk with her if you like.’

‘Nah. Would you be able to drive me back to Ubon?’

‘Not a drama,’ he said. ‘Shame we can’t tempt you, though. I liked having you around.’

Sawat handed me a plate of eggs sprinkled with coriander. ‘Coffee?’ she offered.

I nodded. ‘Please.’ It was thick with sugar and condensed milk.

The Australian stacked his plate and walked to the door. ‘I’ve got a few things to do now. We’ll leave in an hour or so.’

Sawat began washing the dishes in a plastic tub on the floor.

‘Do you know where Anna is?’ I asked her, handing her my empty plate.

She looked confused again.

‘Anna?’ I repeated.

‘Chai. Anna.’ She nodded now, pointing in the direction of the lake.

The waterlilies were still opening in the morning sun. Men with shiny torsos swung

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nets out into the water and gently pulled them back in. I couldn't see Anna anywhere.

I swatted flies with a branch and walked to the grave stones. There was a tiny plaque set into one side of the monument.

'Lucksow,' I read under my breath. I touched the stones, felt their warmth.

A horn tooted and I looked up to see the orange truck. The Australian stuck his head out the window. 'You ready?' From the distance I could make out the shape of my backpack in the tray.

I jogged over. 'I haven't had a chance to say goodbye,' I said.

'Problem?'

The passenger seat was empty, so I heaved open the door. 'I guess not.'

We drove back along the bridge, the dirt road, then hit the highway. The drive was different watching it as it came, rather than as it went. Like seeing everything before rather than after.

'I had another look at the grave today. I hadn't noticed the plaque before.' I kept my eyes on the road and could sense he did too. 'Was that your daughter's name?'

'What?'

'Lucksow? Was that her name?'

'Lucksow is Thai for daughter,' he said. 'Her name was Anna.'

Amy McDonald

Amy lives in a small rural town in Victoria, Australia where she writes copy for governments while valiantly searching for a publisher for her novella. Amy loves a woman who doesn't love her back but is learning not to mind. Her short stories can be read at www.amymcdonald.com.au



Barfly

Natasha Carthew

Clinging onto every word
a girl two stools tall
teetering
breaks down
mouths me a come on
from the bottom of her glass
sucks me a lemon
a sour back-lash crash
outside
sitting pretty middle of a sun shower
LA hot
she unbuttons her shirt
too far gone
licks her bitter lipstick
biting hold until it hurts
she is sodium numb
hanging onto the bar
her dear life eludes her
sets them up
slammers a row of good friends
a wink
a kiss
a mumbled promise
unsatisfactory fumble
and she's gone.

Four Journeys

Natasha Carthew

Four journeys
the girl with her face pressed tight
against a frosted pane
stuck in one lockdown moment
in the stark moonlit night.

Four journeys
kisses the cross goodnight
turns into the bed that already lies like a memory
a damp distance creates and resonates
dark to dusk.

Four journeys
first up before the cockerel crows
the ghost of her former self
stepping stones throughout the house
tiny graves of sentiment
first this then that then this.

Four journeys
starts with the first stumble forward
the girl with her winter wardrobe
tied tight to her hands and back
clicks the latch and stands tiny mighty to a cold wind
just sixteen
and ready for anything.

Hands

Natasha Carthew

The most beautiful hands
pulling the page towards you
drawing it in
captivating in ink.

Tattooist to the virgin
writing memos and stick-it notes
when you should hold court to the king
turning lists into love notes.

A woman's touch
stitching letters into meanings of not much
a painting of words
the world could read you all day through
and your beautiful hands
pulling me towards you.

Laid

Natasha Carthew

Animals get laid
in the cold and the dark
wandering warriors
taking it all in
what's on offer at the thrift store
animals don't play
at side-step mind games
don't skirt about
wooing at the crossroads
to get her into bed
animals don't pray
for 'the one' to come round spinning
love at the door
pan-handling for compliments
sentiment in a bowed up wrapper
animals don't suffer
the mercy of others
animals just get laid
leave no clues
and fade.

Gun Shot Wound

Natasha Carthew

You blow my mind
every time
your face shines
up and out
dazzling the stars
into blasts of earth
missed
you are the keeper of heart
cutter opener
this love hurts
a kiss that lies waiting
across thin skin
burnt through flesh
like fresh Sunday morning food
you are my safe and my danger
lover and stranger
marking me out from the crowd
barely breathing when you're around
gun shot wound.

Natasha Carthew



Natasha Carthew is an accomplished country poet from Cornwall in the UK and has been published in hundreds of UK and international magazines. She has garnered awards for poetry and has had three books of poetry published, the latest being *Flash Reckless* which was published by internationally acclaimed lesbian/feminist publisher Onlywomen Press. Natasha lives in the country and is currently writing her first work of fiction. Her new poetry book *Cabin Fever* will hopefully be published in 2011. For latest news and readings, see her website: <http://natashacarthew.tripod.com/>

Rocky Mountain High

Joan Annsfire

“I’M HUNGRY, let’s stop for lunch.”

“We practically just finished breakfast.” Wendy sighs and flicks back her long brown hair like an exasperated mom dealing with an incorrigible teenager. She has an irritably calm logic, the trademark of someone with a camel’s water reserve and almost no need for nourishment.

For more than two weeks we’ve been traveling throughout the country, concentrating on the West and Southwest. Wendy found the van in the classifieds for \$200. We split the cost and it became our magic bus, a big old Ford Econoline step van with a stick shift, a high seat and a lap-level, flat steering wheel. Sitting in the driver's seat, I feel big and powerful.

Originally, the van had been owned by a place called Jenkin's Flower Shop and it still has the name painted on the side. So we call him Jenkins Van Ford. We are two city girls riding high in Jenkins with the magnificence of the mountains and deserts unfolding all around us.

The year is 1972 and we are both at an age with clouds of romanticism floating around it. I know now those are added by folks looking back. The actual sky of youth is full of thunderheads more like those that precede hurricanes. My friendship with Wendy has a foreboding and empty quality, like something big is either on its way or missing entirely.

We pull off the road into a rest area overlooking scrub-covered desert. I've already broken out the dried apricots and sunflower seeds as Wendy flings open the van door to let in the last cool air of morning. "Okay, okay, you can chow down, but I'm going to do some sun salutations."

I watch as she jumps out of the van and lands on the ground as delicately as a dragonfly alights upon water, her long, wavy brown locks falling into lovely arrangement no matter what the circumstances. Wendy is a truly amazing travel companion with stellar credentials that include making a fire in seconds flat and getting pasta to cook on the camper stove at high altitudes where, for me, all water refuses to boil. She never snacks between meals, can read a map upside-down, and has a positively annoying facility with nature. She keeps her cool composure as I push forth into my losing battle with the elements.

One time, in a campground in Wisconsin, I got such a bad mosquito bite on my eyelid, I couldn't open it all day so Wendy, who the mosquitoes seem to shun, had to do all the driving. In another situation we'd been in New Mexico when I'd gotten so sunburned I could barely move my arms. I loaded up on aspirin and slathered myself in vinegar and Noxzema while Wendy—tan, rested and ready—gave me a sympathetic glance as she took the wheel.

It is still cool enough, so I sit on the foam mattress in the van eating, day-dreaming, and gazing lovingly at the wooden shelves Wendy built, neatly stacked with cans and packages of food. The cooler and camper stove each occupy their rightful places on the counter. When she added some curtains to Jenkins' interior, presto! He morphed into our

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funky summer home.

We'd departed without a clue as to our destination with the word "Southwest" as our goal. With only a modicum of food, clothes, drugs, and a pile of maps, we departed Columbus on that first day, thus avoiding the dreaded but customary summer with our respective families.

Wendy's body is still bending and whipping around like a fiberglass rod as I close up the bag of granola and the packet of powdered milk. I'm glad that today we will be leaving the dry red-rock canyons behind and heading west toward more lush, green landscapes. Beneath our wheels, the terrain is a changing kaleidoscope of summer color. We drive like women possessed. The massive buttes and mesas give way to evergreen and deep blue hillsides that announce our entrance into the mystical state of Colorado.

Boulder is our last stop on the urban trail before heading up into the mountains. We stop to load up on gas and supplies. In the station bathroom I come face to face with a most amazing woman standing in front of the mirror running a hand through short, dark curls. She's wearing men's style carpenter's jeans and a T-shirt with two interlocking women's symbols. The smell of sandalwood incense mixed with vanilla extract is wafting off her. Turning dark, direct, no-nonsense eyes toward me she asks, "Where you from?" in a voice low and smooth as a cello.

"My friend and I drove out here from Ohio." The words fall out of my mouth which is still gaping a bit. "What about you?"

"San Francisco, we've been driving for almost two days," she responds matter-of-factly, pushing her octagonal, wire-rimmed sunglasses up on her nose. Then she smiles,

revealing teeth that are large and dazzlingly white.

“I’ve never been out there, but maybe after graduation...”

“Better hurry, it’s getting full.” Her laugh is deep, resonant and comes from her belly. I am still searching for a snappy comeback as she slips out the door. In the parking lot, I watch her approach a pickup truck with a camper shell. Three other women are standing out in front of it, laughing. A petite, nearly-bald black woman is putting an arm over her shoulder.

“What are you staring at?” Wendy walks up to me biting into an apple as she tries to follow my eyes.

“Those women in that truck...” I begin, but realize that I really don’t have a whole lot to say about them.

“Yeah, there are a lot more unconventional people out here.”

The two of us have shared so much on this trip. We watched gulls circle at Glendo Lake in Wyoming and gathered their feathers as souvenirs. The Grand Canyon gaped at us with majestic streaks of purple and magenta painted over water-carved valleys of sandstone. All the while, Wendy has been drawing sketches of desert flora and fauna, as I’ve been jotting down rambling descriptions of our travels, vowing to transform them into poetry when I return. Lately, I find myself watching her fluid movements as she strides competently through unfamiliar landscapes. We are now constant companions, yet the only thing that happens when darkness falls is that we both tumble into bed, exhausted, and sleep soundly. But in my dreams we don’t sleep. We cuddle and stroke and perform extraordinary, unspeakable acts. In waking life, I have peered deeply into Wendy’s gray-

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green eyes for signs of my dream-woman's passion, but all I can find there is my own reflection.

One morning in New Mexico, Wendy breaks the silence unexpectedly. "I think maybe everyone is bisexual, you know, that gender-preference is more of a continuum than a dichotomy."

Clearly, she's been thinking about this one. "A lot of famous people are bi...look at Janis Joplin," I say, trying to support her philosophy before the moment vanishes.

"Janis is cool, but even though she plays with women, I really think she craves acceptance from men."

"You're right, she does seem male-identified." I use that catch-all term that has been appearing so much in the women's liberation essays I've been reading. "But it's a big deal for anyone to renounce the whole heterosexual world. It must be like giving up everything and hacking out a trail through the wilderness."

"Yeah, it would take a ton of inner-strength."

"Not a ton maybe, but a significant amount," I reason as our conversation wanes.

The ensuing silence feels jammed full of stories, ideas, and rationalizations.

Beyond Boulder, we journey deep and into the wilds of Colorado. The Rockies embrace us like the expansive green palm of a hand. Mountain springs dot the roads and hillsides. After filling our huge containers with water, we realize that we are self-sustaining and can camp anywhere. We have plenty of canned and packaged food. When we come to a dirt road that looks private and promising, we follow it to a flat clearing totally surrounded by mountains. It's as remote a place as I have ever been and just the

kind of spot we've been looking for. Flat, yet on a hillside. Surrounded by trees, yet enclosed, near enough to the road so as not to get lost, but not so close that we can hear a passing car. We set up the tent and some reed mats for a front yard. With Jenkins' doors open, he is almost like a mobile home. The car will be our shelter if it rains. Now we have established ourselves in the middle of nowhere, both of us thrilled with our new residence.

The first order of business this morning is the long-awaited highlight of our journey, our trip within a trip. The Orange Sunshine was carefully wrapped and set aside to take when we arrive "someplace safe." Orange Sunshine has nothing to do with bright daylight or any other meteorological phenomenon. It is LSD, commonly known as acid. We take our hits with fruit juice and sprawl out on the camping mats, awaiting departure.

My trip begins in the usual way. Everything starts moving faster, as if the world's filter has broken down allowing sensations to pour in from all directions. I am enveloped by a storm of sounds, thoughts and images. Light and color begin swirling up, encircling me in a whirlwind of motion. I can no longer speak, only watch and listen. Wendy's face becomes Chinese, then turns fierce, like a vampire's. Her pointed incisors, that in reality are a bit pronounced, become fangs. As she sits on the blanket on the ground, carpenter ants begin marching over her. They grow as big as rats and then as huge as squirrels and are now black and shiny as obsidian. They are taking over our campsite. I need to move, to shake loose these visions. I walk into Jenkins' interior. The sun is getting higher in the sky and the temperature is rising. The soup cans on the shelves which, at first, had a perfect Andy Warhol look, now appear more Dali-esque and are melting. It's too hot in here, I decide, and flee the confines of the van to try and cool down.

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Outside, I look at my reflection in the van's side mirror. What I see looking back at me is not a disheveled college student, but an old, sun-bitten, mountain mama with wild grey hair and deep, wrinkled, all-seeing eyes. She knows this mountain as if she had birthed it herself. Her footing is certain and sure as a mountain goat. I take one last look at Wendy and the ants and begin to climb.

My center of gravity has never been quite so perfect, the foliage so lovely and lush. On my way up the chipmunks, squirrels, birds, and insects speak to me and I answer back in their respective languages. Zip-a-dee-do-dah, I am now a mélange of Dr. Doolittle, Tom Sawyer and Mother Earth, the star of my very own Disney production. The leaves are dancing in time to the music of the spheres. I never miss a step or feel the least bit winded. In about an hour's time, I am beginning to see vistas, treetops. Another hour and I have arrived at the peak of our mountain. A chipmunk runs across my lap. A butterfly lands on my shoulder. This zenith of earth is the intense green of Chinese jade with long, deep, amethyst shadows. In the distance, tree-capped mountaintops repeat into endless horizon. I begin to cry, the sobs of a city girl unaccustomed to such beauty. I sit on a rock and watch the sun journey down the sky as it turns pink, orange, then deep indigo. I marvel at the fact that this will happen again tomorrow, that this performance happens every day, even when no one is around to witness it. Still shaking with the fervor of discovery, it dawns on me that night is falling fast. I must return to camp and share all my new insights with Wendy.

I make it back down the mountain quickly and easily, more by feel than by sight. The acid is beginning to wear off, but my heart is still racing. Wendy has already made a fire

and as I approach, she looks like a silver-robed wizard in a shimmering peaked hat in front of her cauldron of fire. She seems relieved to see me. “I was really starting to worry,” is the first thing she says.

“I’ve seen the most wonderful things,” I begin and continue on in great detail, giving a blow by blow account of my spiritual awakening on the peak of creation. “The trees just go on forever and there’s nothing else around, except more trees and more mountains,” I declare with dreamy-eyed nostalgia, ready to return to the magic spot first thing tomorrow morning. “I’ll take you up there and you can see it for yourself.”

“If I saw mountains and more mountains in the distance, it would make me really depressed.”

“Why? How can you say that?”

“I’d just feel like the first pioneers must have felt, after coming all this way only to be reminded of how much hard traveling was still left. I would be devastated.”

That perspective has never even occurred to me. But all information is difficult to process at this point because crashing from acid is like rolling down a rocky hillside naked. We have only each other to help cushion the blows. So we talk on into the night. She tells me how important college is to her and that her dream is to be a veterinarian, to prove wrong the people who think of her as white trash. I, on the other hand, want to write poetry, to learn to speak at least two foreign languages, to see the world and do political organizing. I want to share my other discovery with her as well. “I don’t think I’m bisexual anymore. I think I’m just lesbian,” I venture tentatively, feeling the shape of that scary word on my tongue.

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“I thought so,” was all she said.

“Does that make a difference to you, to our relationship?” I am now headed down an overgrown jungle trail lacking any signs of civilization. Wendy is still unfazed.

“Since it’s something I was already aware of, it won’t have any negative effect on our friendship.”

She always seems to have so much poise and self-assurance. I look at her and finally realize that I am completely alone—alone in my discovery, alone in the world, alone and abandoned on an ice-floe drifting out in an arctic sea with Wendy, the hypothetical bisexual, sitting right there beside me.

We stay on at the campsite a few more days, cold sober. There is time for walking, reading, feeding squirrels, and trying to identify plants and insects. But Wendy never climbs that mountain. And, as our journey draws to a close, she begins talking more and more about her boyfriend, Mark, and all the great things they will do together in their senior year.

Her words fly past me faster than the now familiar scenery. Like a dog sensing the approach of home, she is increasingly happy and excited as we draw nearer the university, while I am more unresponsive and depressed. And as hard as I try to listen, my attention often wanders. My focus has already shifted away from Columbus, Ohio, to the mountains and valleys of the immense world beyond.

Joan Annsfire

Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, **Joan Annsfire** has lived in the Bay Area for nearly thirty years. She now makes her home in Berkeley. Her work has appeared in these literary journals (among others): *The Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom* (many issues), *The SoMa Literary Review*, *13th Moon*, *Bridges*, and *The Evergreen Chronicles*, as well as in the following anthologies: *Queer Collection: Prose & Poetry 2007* edited by Gregory A. Kompes, *The Cancer Poetry Project* edited by Karin Miller, *The Other Side of the Postcard* edited by devorah major, *Identity Envy* edited by Jim Tushinski and Jim Van Buskirk, *The Venomed Kiss* edited by Anita M. Barnard and Michelle Rhea and an upcoming lesbian-themed issue of the E-zine, *Soundzine*, which will be edited by Mary Meriam.



Experience

Robinet Christian

When I come
It is taking all
The goodness
In life
Topping them
With you.

Coming with you
Leading the way
We glide through
all time.

I did not look
At your body
Simply saw you
Being
Playing a tune—
Sweet melody.

We sing a honey song.
Feel your hands
Linger in this
Physical universe
Our center.

Give essences
Of me
To you
Taking me.

Oh Chile! Oh Chile!

Robinet Christian

Babe, you're runnin' me in circles,
Switchin' round the way you do.
I've seen how God works miracles
When She was makin' you.

Years of searchin' high an' low
For someone rare, true, fine.
Lo an' behold, kiss my grits
When that day came, you were mine.

Amazin' how we get along
Mesmerizin' all who see.
Makin' you an' me so strong
Harmony, bliss—complete!

It's so thrillin' jus' to know
As we live in our style.
The love you give an' give to me—
Oh Chile! Oh Chile! Oh Chile!

Robinet Christian



I have been writing poetry since 1969. I was an editor of *Azalea: A Magazine by and for Third World Lesbians* from 1977 through 1984. My poetry publications are *Coming Together*, 2002, and *Lady, These Are for You*, 1979. My poetry has also been included in *Kuumba Magazine*, 2002; *Tickle Spot of the Goddess Magazine*, 1998-99; National Library of Poetry's anthology *Through the Looking Glass*, 1997; *Fordham University Magazine*, 1996; and *Jemima from the Heart: A Third World Lesbian Anthology*, 1977. Currently I am composing another book of poems entitled *Heap Some, Few Know*, poems of life and loving, truth and happiness from a lesbian perspective. My work includes visual art and hand crafted jewelry, which can be viewed at <http://mysite.verizon.net/vzex8mc8/piecesof/>.

A Day In Vermont

R.G. Emanuelle

STANDING ON A PIER overlooking the Hudson River, I blankly stared at the water, trying to decide what to do. After a few minutes, I chose a bench and sat down, placing my suitcase on the ground. In my turmoil, I almost didn't feel the sun, unusually hot for October, hammering the back of my head. I felt my knuckles going numb from squeezing my suitcase's vinyl strap, thin and hard under my thumb. Looking at me, no one would have guessed that I was supposed to be on my way to work. I was terribly late and wasn't sure I'd make it at all.

I moved slowly toward my office building, stopping at street vendors' tables to peruse books, African art, and woodcuts that I had no intention of buying. By the time I got to the office, I figured my decision would be made—I'd either go to work or hail a cab.

The converted stone warehouse where I worked as a biller for an insurance agency was decrepit and cold, the smell of musty caves emanating from the walls, and the carpeting stained with floods of decades past. When I arrived, the numbers above the entrance seemed to coast on imaginary waves and my skull felt like it was shrinking. I stepped onto the elevator and pressed the "7" button, but as the doors closed, I thrust my body between them and ran out into the street, where I flagged a cab and told the driver to take me to Penn Station.

I bought a ticket to Vermont and waited only ten minutes before the train pulled out.

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My muscles twitched and my skin burned with anxiety. I'd never done anything like this. I tried watching the scenery, but all I could think about was what I was going to tell my boss, my mother, and Dennis, my fiancé. Then I started to get pissed off. Why should I be accountable to everyone? No one was ever accountable to me, yet everyone expected me to report every move I made. I often wondered why no one had yet asked me to call every time I peed. For once, I just picked up and left, with no word to anyone.

I stared out the window. The first colors of autumn were part of a moving backdrop, blurry and indistinguishable. But as the colors penetrated my thoughts, my anger eased and soon I was engrossed in every tree, every deer, every lake-side cabin that slowly floated by in the distance. The color gradations of the leaves and the little details of the cabins—white-washed frames, ladder-back rockers standing guard on porches, logs piled at doorsteps—soothed me. The visual lullaby coaxed me to sleep.

When I woke up, the train was pulling into the station at Essex Junction, my destination. It was quiet and almost empty. I rented a car at the visitors' center and got directions to a bed-and-breakfast. The road was narrow and twisting like my troubled intestines. Curve after curve, I wound through the tangled mess of my life.

My room at the small inn was just as I'd wanted it, simple and clean. I sat on the edge of the Shaker-style bed with eyelet cover and stared at my cell phone, conspicuous on the Shaker high table. I knew I had to call someone. My co-workers were surely worried and my parents had probably called every hospital and police precinct in the city by now. I didn't want to be cruel, after all. I dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ma.”

“Oh, my God. Louisa! Where are you? Your boss called and said you never showed up for work. Nobody’s heard from you. What happened?”

“I’m in Vermont.”

“Vermont? What the hell are you doing in Vermont?”

“I had to get away for a couple of days.”

“What are you talking about? Are you crazy? Do you realize you’re getting married in a few days? There are things to be done—Vermont!”

My head started pounding. The wedding was more important to my mother than it was to me. She wanted the perfect wedding. The biggest, most beautiful wedding ever. Me, well, that was another story.

“Louisa, you’re being very selfish. There are many other people who are preparing for this day. You have an obligation to them.”

Why? They weren’t the ones getting married. As if she’d plucked this thought from my head, she elaborated.

“The caterers have a problem with the salmon. There’s a shortage or something and they want an alternative selection. The most special moment of your life and—oh, and your father’s going crazy. The limo place is trying to change the rental fee, and he’s spent so much money as it is. Aunt Alice finally found a dress that doesn’t make her look like a tree trunk. You’re lucky to be going to Antigua. I had to go to Atlantic City for my honeymoon.”

This was supposed to make me feel guilty. It did. But I hadn’t wanted this. She had. “Ma, listen. I just need some time to think.”

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“Think? About what? I’ve taken care of everything so you don’t *have* to think. All you have to do is show up. I’ll take care of all the last-minute details. Just come back, sweetheart, and have your dress fitted.”

The longer I remained on the phone with her, the more painful this would be.

“Ma, my bed’s on fire. I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

“A couple of days? What—”

Click.

The old-fashioned brass bell on the lobby desk dinged brightly when I hit it, summoning the elderly man who had checked me in earlier.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me what restaurants are around here?” I asked him wearily.

“There are a few down the road, but they’re all closed. It’s ten o’clock.”

I’d forgotten that I was no longer in New York City. Hunger was making me light-headed and cranky. I wanted to grab him by the collar and scream, “I’m starving! Get me some food *now!*” The old man started swaying, but I knew it was me and not him. I looked around, praying for a candy machine.

“You could get something at Pete’s Bar and Tackle Shop.”

“Pete’s Bar and Tackle Shop?”

“Yup. You can get a sandwich or burger. It’s up the road here, just past the junction.”

I didn’t know exactly what a junction was, but I managed to find it and Pete’s. I

opened the door timidly and looked around. Empty. I slipped in. The bartender greeted me with “Evening” as I moved toward the bar. “Can I help you, Miss?”

“Someone told me I could get food here.”

“Yep. Here’s the menu.” He handed me a single sheet of paper that had an odd array of choices, from quesadillas to chick pea curry to a tofu scramble. I ordered a bowl of split-pea soup and a grilled cheese sandwich, which a waitress brought to my table. I thanked her and dove right into my food. I thought she was staring at me, but I was too hungry to care.

As I devoured the surprisingly tasty soup, I thought about the menu for my wedding and the rounds I had gone with my mother over what to serve. Even with my hunger sated, I became edgy and angry all over again.

I went back to the inn and hoped I’d dream up a solution to this mess.

The next day, I transported myself to a long-ago world by going to a Shakespeare Festival. As I walked down the paths where pseudo-sixteenth-century vendors were selling their wares, I relaxed. It was hard to feel unhappy while playing with Renaissance toys like marionettes and Jacob’s ladders. It was easy to forget that I worked in an office while I ate potato stew out of a bread bowl with no spoon.

I walked around, enjoying the warm Indian summer breeze. Fragrant oils and flute music sweetened the air. I puckered as I sipped the fresh lemonade that I’d bought from a serving wench whose bosom surged from the top of her bodice.

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“Good day. Dost thou know the hour of the day?”

The lilting voice came from behind me, so I turned around. A woman in full Renaissance regalia stood there, holding a lute in one hand and several daisies in the other. Her light brown hair was done in a French braid and crowned with a ring of wildflowers. She looked angelic.

“Dost thou know the hour of the day?” she asked again, surreptitiously looking at my watch.

“Oh,” I said, practically jumping. “It’s three o’clock.”

“Many thanks.” She paused and studied me. Why were people here so fascinated with me?

“Uh, do I know you?” I asked. She looked familiar.

She tilted her head and furrowed her brow slightly. “Your countenance is a bit familiar to me.”

“Did you work at Ernie Samson’s hardware store?”

The lines on her forehead smoothed as she relaxed her face and smiled. “Nay. I know not the shopkeep of whom you speak.” She paused and seemed to contemplate something. “Perhaps we may have discourse when the sun has set?”

It was adorable, the way she spoke, remaining in character.

“Are you saying you’d like to talk when you’re off work? Over dinner or drinks or something?”

“Verily!” Her smile brightened.

“Okay.” I chuckled. It really was cute. “I’m staying at the Willow Inn.”

“Yea, I am acquainted with it. I shall fetch you one hour after sunset.”

“Oh, okay, um...” What hour would that be? “Okay, then.” I’d figure it out.

“Until the eve, fair thee well, fair maid.” She pulled a flower from her little bouquet and handed it to me before she walked away.

The daisy in my hand had pure white petals and a sun-gold center. There was such beauty in its simplicity that I almost started to cry.

The aroma of roasting meat wafted past me, bringing me back to my surroundings.

The woman—I realized she hadn’t told me her name—had me intrigued. I was dying to know where I’d met her. A warm flush in my cheeks surprised me. I downed the rest of my lemonade and headed for the stage to see *The Tempest*.

The old man at the desk called to say that a woman was waiting for me in the lobby. I found her sitting in a floral wing chair in the common area, her hair fluttering in the breeze from the open window.

“Hi,” I said, my voice cracking slightly.

She got up and smiled. Suddenly, the room seemed brighter. “Hi. You ready to eat?”

“Oh,” I said with feigned disappointment. “Does this mean you won’t be speaking in Shakespearean English anymore?” I stuck out my lip in a pout.

Her eyelids closed a little and one corner of her mouth went up. “Why? Does that do something for you?”

My heart almost stopped. What did *that* mean? My belly spasmed. *Damn, that potato*

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soup. “H-how did you know who to ask for? I didn’t give you my name.”

“Oh, I simply asked for the attractive woman with the beautiful strawberry-blonde hair and mesmerizing hazel eyes.” She laughed, turned, and walked toward the door.

Stunned, I stood there for a moment, then rushed to catch up with her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Quin. And yours?”

“Louisa.” I laughed. It was all kind of ridiculously funny. She laughed again too. The sound of her laughter swirled around in my ears and seemed to seep into my skin.

Quin took me to a restaurant that had the look of an upscale lodge. The walls were made up of a lot of large stones, and the naked beams above, drawing attention to the underside of the roof, made it seem airy and expansive. Stone fireplaces gave the place a romantic air. The unseasonable heat of the day had given over to night coolness and the fireplaces were enticing. The waitress showed us to a table adjacent to one of them.

“In summer, they’re electric. Not much heat,” Quin said, catching me scrutinizing the fireplace. “In winter, they take the electric units out and burn real wood. It’s quite beautiful.”

“I’ll bet it is. But what I want to know is where we’ve met.”

“Wow, you have a short memory. Last night.”

“Last night?”

“At Pete’s. I served you.” She raised her eyebrow suggestively.

The waitress who I thought was staring at me. “Oh! I’m sorry.” I chuckled. “I was really hungry and I didn’t notice much apart from my dinner.”

“Hmm. I wish I’d been on the menu, then.”

My throat got hot and my ears tingled. And just as I’d felt her eyes on me the night before, so they were on me again. Her eyes lingered on mine so long that I was compelled to cough.

“You should come back up here when it snows. It’s really like nowhere else.” Her eyes were unwavering.

“Maybe I will.” My smile faltered.

“Are you okay?”

I was having a great time but I couldn’t stop thinking about my mother and Dennis. “I just have a stupid situation at home.”

“You can tell me, if you want. Promise, it’ll never go beyond these walls.” Quin crossed her heart.

“I’m supposed to be getting married in three days.”

Quin fell silent. Had I said something wrong? She shifted in her seat and drank some more wine—a nice, big gulp of it. Finally, she said, “So, what’s the problem?” Her smile had disappeared and her tone held hints of sadness.

How could I explain what I felt when I didn’t know what I was feeling? I shook my head.

“Do you love him?”

Oh, God. She was going to ask me direct questions.

I cleared my throat, nervous. “No.” *There. I said it.* “But he doesn’t love me, either. Not in the romantic sense.”

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“So why are you marrying him?” Quin’s voice was almost indignant.

“Partly out of pressure from my mother. Her voice is always in my head,”—I clapped my hands over my ears—“a piercing, shrill voice that penetrates my head like a power drill. ‘You’ll be old and alone. Someday, you’ll regret staying single.’” I uncovered my ears and gazed into the flickering candle, as if there’d be an answer there. “But I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with someone I feel no passion for.” The picture of my life with Dennis was painted with very drab colors, and not even my mother, I hoped, would want a loveless life for me.

The rush of blood in my head began as the sense of panic returned. I wasn’t sure that the zucchini soup was going to stay down. I looked up and Quin was staring at me again, but with pity this time.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

She already had. What was one more? “Um, sure.”

“How’s the sex?”

The question embarrassed me, but I wasn’t sure why. “Uh. . .we haven’t. . .not since we were younger.”

A strange expression crossed Quin’s face. I waited for her to say something more about it, but she didn’t and we spent the rest of the meal talking about books, music, and movies. Strange.

Back at Quin’s apartment, I sipped an Amaretto and orange juice as I sat on her

couch. After mixing herself a drink, Quin sat at the other end from me. “Okay, so, let’s get back to your problem. Why else are you marrying Dennis?”

I shrugged. Quin’s flirtations at dinner were wreaking havoc on my brain.

“Well. . .” I stopped and sighed. “I figured, what would I have to look forward to if I did say no? Countless dates with losers. Feeling like a charity case when friends hook me up with blind dates. Single, young men ‘unexpectedly’ showing up for dinner to my mother’s surprise.” My own cowardice stunned me. In fact, it hurt me. Right in the guts.

Quin watched me. And waited, as if I were on trial and the jury of one was waiting for me to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me, God.

“Actually. . .” I started.

“Yeah?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m gay.”

But instead of saying, “I’m gay too,” she gulped her drink and got up to make another. Was I wrong? Did I just imagine that she’d been flirting with me?

“How did you meet Dennis, anyway?”

Slightly embarrassed, I sipped my fresh drink and thought back to when Dennis and I played with my tea set. And now, we were going to play house—for real. “We grew up together. About a year before he proposed to me, I heard that Dennis had gone to church, completely out of the blue. The only thing I could get out of him about it was, ‘They think they have the answers, but they’re just trying to control something they can’t.’ A couple of months after that, I overheard my mother on the phone: ‘You have to do something about him, Ida.’ That’s Dennis’s mother. I wondered what he’d done and if it had anything to do

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with the church thing. When I asked my mother about it, she told me to mind my own business.”

Quin sat silently, listening. I had spilled it all to someone I’d just met. I guess it’s true what they say, that it’s easier to tell your problems to a stranger than to people you know. I swirled the ice in my drink. “One night, I went to Dennis’s and as I got to the door, this guy was coming out. Dennis’s father followed him, shouting ‘faggot’ and ‘fairy.’ He said he’d kill him if he ever came back. Dennis cried in my arms that night. That’s when he came out to me. I felt so sorry for him. Still do. And I think that’s really why I agreed to marry him. To help him hide it from his parents.”

I’d come to Vermont to sort out my problems, but meeting Quin had somehow changed my mission. There was no way I could marry Dennis—it wouldn’t be fair to either of us. That decision made, I now needed to get to know Quin. Her effect on my brain and body demanded it.

“You haven’t said anything about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

I pondered momentarily. It would be rude if I didn’t ask fundamental questions first. “Is Quin short for Quinlan?”

“Yeah, only it’s spelled Q-U-I-N-L-Y-N-N-E.”

“Are you from this area?”

“Nope. Originally from Maine. I started going south because I couldn’t take the winters up there anymore.”

“You didn’t get far, did you?” We both laughed.

“No. But it’s okay. I really like it here.”

I looked around. Her apartment had the bare essentials—furniture, some appliances, and a few knick-knacks. About what I’d expect of someone working at a Shakespeare festival during the day and waiting tables at Pete’s Bar and Tackle at night. The only thing that stood out was a collection of various-sized sock monkeys on a little table in the corner of the living room. It was just the kind of silliness that I’d been missing from my life, and maybe just what I needed.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Yes.” I grinned. “Do you really play the lute?”

She wanted to laugh. I could tell by the dimples denting her cheeks. But she didn’t.

“Yes.”

I shrugged, questioning.

“It’s a long story.” She bit her lip. “Maybe I’ll tell you some time.”

My stomach did a rippling thing, but I could no longer blame it on the food. It was definitely Quin’s fault. The one question I wanted to ask her the most, I couldn’t. I was racking up points in the coward department.

As Quin drove me back to the inn, I thought about how I’d told her all this personal stuff and wondered if I’d done the right thing. After all, I didn’t know this woman. How could I be sure she wasn’t some psychotic freak who would use this information against me? But I felt calmer than I had in a long time. Physically lighter. There’s something to be

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said about getting things off your chest. It felt good.

I glanced up at the stars. So beautiful and clear, and so infinite, like nothing I'd ever seen in New York. I searched the cosmic maze and played connect-the-dots with the constellations. Suddenly, I felt dizzy as I came to yet one more realization, the thing that had me going insane for months but that I couldn't quite put my finger on. My mother knew about Dennis. She knew, and she was deliberately pushing me to marry a gay man.

The veins in my neck hardened and I fingered them, tracing the bulges, jutting out like the features on a topographic map.

Quin pulled up in front of the inn. She turned to me and her smile faded for the second time that evening. "Are you okay? You look sick."

"I am sick. Sick in the head."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I need to go home tomorrow."

"Really?" She stared, disappointment in her eyes.

"Yeah. I need to take care of things."

"Well, listen, I'd be happy to take you to the train tomorrow."

"I have a rental."

"It's okay. Leave it with old Mr. Cooper. He'll call and have them come get it."

"Okay, thanks." Like an idiot, I sat there, waiting. For what? I felt stupid. Angry. Confused. At last, I started to turn. Quin pulled me back and kissed me. And I was amazed. I'd never gotten a rush from a kiss before, not like this. Hot cheeks, melting lips, and the desire for more. She pulled away from me far too soon. My question had been

answered.

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night,” I responded, and got out.

Back in my room, I threw my belongings in my suitcase and went to bed. Not to sleep but to wait, impatiently, for morning.

Quin picked me up at seven and drove me to the station. She got out of the car and walked around to my side. Standing there in the early morning light, fair-haired, clear-skinned, and blue-eyed, she looked perfect to play a Renaissance maiden.

“Thanks for driving me.”

“Come back.”

A ripple of pleasure made its way up my core and bubbled in my throat, preventing me from saying anything intelligent.

“Please?”

It was my turn to smile big. “Okay.”

Quin leaned in and kissed me, and the rush came again, along with my certainty. Yes, I’d be coming back—very, very soon.

“Safe trip home. Call me when you get there.”

I nodded, took my bag from the back seat, and went into the station. My first stop back in New York would be my parents’ house to confront my mother. Tomorrow, I’d go to Dennis’s house to pick him up. He’d be coming back with me to Vermont.

R.G. Emanuelle



R.G. Emanuelle is a writer and editor living in New York City. She is co-editor of *Skulls and Crossbones: Tales of Women Pirates*, and her short stories can be found in *Best Lesbian Erotica 2010*, *Women in Uniform*, *Lesbian Lust: Red Hot Erotica*, *Khimairal Ink*, and the online collection *Oysters & Chocolate*. You can find her at www.rgemanuelle.com

With A Woman

Jessica Mason McFadden

A woman who falls in love with a woman
wears stolen bloomers over
her jeans to make a radical statement
to draw in with whatever resources are available
for a resilience that transcends

A woman who falls in love with a woman
wants to know wants to please her woman in ways
unknown to man in ways in unknown
places mindful and deep
unwillingly and willingly appearing as spectacles

A woman who falls in love with a woman
can court for years if necessary
with torture and intensity in intention and gesture
if convinced by stubborn intuition
or desire or what's plain to see

A woman who falls in love with a woman
has the sense to learn new vocabularies
and be even braver than the one she loves
to fight for their freedom struggling to know
by sleeping with respect and compromise before promises are made

A woman who falls in love with a woman
may fall in love with another woman
but only the woman she scolds in the bathroom
mirror only a woman who can handle and claim to enjoy
saying she loves a man, she loves a man

Jessica Mason McFadden



Jessica Mason McFadden is a writer and scholar, and a recent graduate of Western Illinois University's undergraduate programs in English and Women's Studies. She lives in a small town in Illinois with her wife and their two daughters. She enjoys being a stay-at-home mother and plans, in the near or distant future, to pursue her interest in empowering women through graduate studies. She can be reached at masonmcfadden@gmail.com, or at masonismymiddle-name.blogspot.com.

Orange Crush

J.E. Knowles

IT SOUNDED FUNNY the way Emily’s mom told it, in her Yankee accent. One of the kids in her class kept asking if she had seen the “far.”

“What far?”

“The far, out in Gray.”

“A fire? What burned?”

“No, the far, the FAR! The AppalATCHian Far!”

Every year, during what would once have been called Indian summer, the Appalachian Fair came to Gray, and all the people from six counties around had to show up, though at most half of them wanted to. The younger half.

Emily was not prepared for Mom’s suggestion that she take cousin Carson along to the fair, since Carson wanted to go real bad. Carson was only twelve, five years younger than Emily. And while five years wasn’t much of a difference between, say, Mom and Dad’s ages, the five years between twelve and seventeen were a lifetime.

“I don’t want to go with Carson! Can’t she go with somebody her own age?”

“She doesn’t know anybody here,” Mom said. “I thought this would be a good way for you to get to go.”

Emily heard what Mom wasn’t saying: that she, not Carson, had trouble finding friends her own age. And she loved the fair. But she’d never met Carson; they weren’t

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really related. One of Mom's cousins from up north had married Carson's mom, who was from Canada. Emily had heard the little girl even spoke French. She would have nothing to say to her, even in English.

Then Mom said, "Carson is afraid of heights."

That's when Emily knew she would have to go. Because she didn't care for heights either. Not the roller coaster heights you were supposed to take pleasure from. Especially not those nasty take-'em-down set-'em-up rides like the fair had. She liked to experience the fair through all her senses: the warm serenity of cows, glassblowing, all those nerdy displays of historical craft you sure couldn't find in the mall.

If Carson needed an escort to keep her off the rides, that would be okay. And would be an excuse for Emily if anyone should wonder why she, herself, was not on the Vomit Comet.

"All right, Mom. I'll take her on Saturday."

"Good. I already told Aunt Lucie that you'd drive."

Aunt Lucie came to the door at ten a.m. on Saturday, dressed up nicer than most people were for weddings or funerals. She wore a bright white, sleeveless dress, which made her skin look more tan, and white sandals. Emily wanted to doff her hat, only she wasn't wearing a hat, since Mom wouldn't let her "dress like a boy." She stood up instead.

"So nice of you to take Carson along." Aunt Lucie made it sound like Emily's idea and Emily wasn't sure she liked that, but as with most things, she didn't have a choice, since she still lived at home. "She's already in the car."

"My car?" This Emily had to attend to right away. Not that she owned the car, but it

was the one she drove. She couldn't believe a twelve-year-old she wasn't really related to was out there climbing all over it.

The girl in the passenger seat had a couple of years left to grow, but Emily could see she already looked quite a bit like Aunt Lucie—dark hair and a complexion that would tan. Nobody in Emily's family looked like that.

"You're Emily, right?" Carson said. "I'm so excited. I've never been to a fair. All those animals."

"Yeah, okay." Emily started the car, making sure, because Mom would ask, that Carson had her seat belt on. It had been five years since she was Carson's age and in those years, she'd learned not to show excitement.

Gray was a good half hour's drive and Carson never shut up once. "I can't wait to be thirteen. When you're twelve, everybody still thinks you're a little kid." She was, though Emily wasn't about to say so. "But when you're thirteen, you can just sit back and relax."

Where did she get this shit? Turning thirteen was the worst single thing that had ever happened to Emily. She was careful not to look at Carson, since feigning interest would interfere with her driving.

"How old are you?" Carson said.

"Seventeen." Emily attempted a James Dean sneer.

"I bet you can't wait to be eighteen!" Carson said, and though it was just a counting fixation, this startled Emily because it was also true. At eighteen she would graduate. Move away. She could wear hats.

She wanted to ask where Aunt Lucie had gotten a name like Carson, but what if it

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had been Carson's dad's idea? That might make her sad, and Emily couldn't stand girls crying. They made her head hurt.

When they got to the fair it was already crowded, and despite the fact that it was uncool, Emily was afraid of losing Carson in the crowd, so she pulled her close. Carson didn't seem to mind being tugged along by a scowling teenager who was a head taller than she was and had hacked off her own hair. Maybe Emily shouldn't worry so much about looking cool. It was a lost cause anyway.

They started on the bumper cars. Emily had liked these since before she could drive a real car, and that was how she drove them now—not crashing into other cars and getting jammed up, but skillfully and at great speed maneuvering past them, sometimes spinning the wheel with one hand and shooting backwards. Carson pressed close to her side, emitting what in young girls was called a giggle, but which from Carson was deeper and less annoying.

After they'd had their fill of activities that could disrupt digestion—all on the ground—Emily suggested lunch. She meant the sandwiches Mom had packed; their family never bought or ate overpriced junk food. But Carson had five dollars she said Aunt Lucie had given her for lunch. Emily was prepared to swallow her pride along with her peanut butter and let Carson buy her own lunch, but Carson said, "Let's just buy drinks, super large. Orange Crush. I love Orange Crush; we never have it at home."

So Emily stood in line and exchanged five dollars' worth of tickets for two obscene, thirty-two-ounce souvenir cups of Orange Crush.

They toured the displays of cattle, saw a summer squash the size of Emily's car, or so

Carson said. Carson was fascinated by the cows, their gentle eyes and grassy breath. For Emily, used to seeing cows all her life just out the window, it was odd to find everything about her region regarded as exotic, like a giant squash.

At the shooting gallery Carson proved a natural, knocking over ten ducks in under thirty seconds to win an enormous cowboy hat. She plunked it on Emily's head. Emily removed it reflexively, then felt Carson's eyes on her, and flashed on her instinct to doff her hat to an older woman. She shrugged, grinned, put it back on.

It was getting on towards evening when Emily suggested they had seen just about everything and ought to think about leaving. Carson said, "I think I'd like to try the Ferris wheel."

Emily didn't think so. It was a rickety, rusty contraption and the cars were liable to swing, never mind your legs just dangling loose out there.

"Please, Emily. I won't be scared, but you have to go with me."

"All right."

They swapped their last tickets and started up. When they stopped for the first time close to the top, Carson leaned in and said, in a small voice, "Okay, I guess I am scared of heights."

That was all it took to make Emily almost panic. She didn't want to be up there in the first place. Above them, young boys who had just learned to cuss rocked their car wildly back and forth, shouting "Assholes!" to the wind. Emily took Carson's hand, to steady them both.

She smiled to reassure her young cousin, who smiled back, bravely. In between that

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stop and the top of the wheel, Emily didn't notice the distance to the earth below. What she saw in those twelve-year-old eyes was a look she recognized. It could mean "I want to be you," or it could mean "I want to grow up to marry you." It might mean that in five years, or ten, Carson would take up the guitar, or vegetarianism, or some activist cause; grow her hair out, or maybe shave it off. It could mean all these things or none of them.

All this lay ahead, Emily thought, as the wheel creaked once again and they began their descent. Carson let go of her hand and pointed out over the grounds of the fair, which would be packed up and gone after Labor Day, like Aunt Lucie's white clothes.

That was the thing about being twelve. All the future lay before Carson. She was right.

J.E. Knowles

J. E. Knowles lives in London, but is originally from East Tennessee, where this story is set. She previously contributed to *Read These Lips*, Vol. 3. Her first novel, *Arusha* (Spinsters Ink), is a Lambda Literary Award Finalist. She can be reached via <http://jeknowles.com>.



13 Letters to Batsheva

Tamara Klinger

DEAR BATSHEVA,

You left a while ago, but the smell of your perfume is still in the room. It may be old-fashioned to write letters these days, but I was sitting on the couch thinking about our meeting and wanted to let you know that you are someone I would like to get to know better.

You are an amazing woman. There is nothing I would have liked more than to go with you to a movie, to go with you...anywhere.

I am more than interested. I am here and if you want dinner, a movie or other entertainment—just name it and I will be thrilled to provide.

At your service.

Dear Batsheva,

You are busy working and making important decisions and I am thinking about you. About your soft smooth skin, your warm neck, your lovely lips, your hands...if you were next to me, I would kiss the delicate skin of your breasts, follow a trail down towards your stomach and lose myself in you. I miss the feel of your breath in my ear, lips on mine and your smooth tongue over my teeth. I want to breathe you in, inhale deeply of your perfume, bury myself in your hair. What a pity that you are so far away.

If I close my eyes, I can imagine you under me: our bodies pressed close, our thighs meeting. I want to feel wonderful—I want you to know passion. I want you.

I shall listen to your voice on the phone, follow your day by your stories and wait for you to come to me. For you I will light candles, burn incense, pour wine, cook exotic dishes. I would smooth oil over your body, feed you strawberries, massage your shoulders. I would be here for you, give you what you want, give you what you need.

Wanting you.

Dear Batsheva,

The wind outside is so strong and the rain so loud that it completely drowns out all the other sounds. We have just spoken and you are on your way to the shower and I am writing...not as satisfying as being with you or speaking to you, but a chance to put down on paper what I am feeling, thinking, fantasizing.

You are in my thoughts, in my dream, and when I walk into my room, it feels as if you have only just left. I want to be with you again, to touch your soft skin and feel your strong arms around me. There is something exciting in my life, something to look forward to—like Friday afternoon just before the sun sets, like the feeling you get when everything is done and ready for Shabbat, like finding the perfect shell on the beach, like the minute before your favorite film starts, like so many other things that make me tingle with anticipation: your smooth cheeks, your strong hands, your warm neck, your lovely ears, your warm breath, your shy smile, your sense of humor, your sharp mind, the smell of you, the

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taste of you and the feel of you...

Aroused.

Dear Batsheva,

The most talented artist in the world could not have imagined a more beautiful woman. The smoothest marble could not come close to your warm skin. The richest paints could not be mixed to copy the blush on your cheeks. No art can imitate you, your warmth, your strength, your gentleness, your smooth body, your soft skin, your heavenly smell – you melt me.

It is hard to be near you and hard not to be near you—all I can think about is how I can make you feel as wonderful as I do. You make my stomach tingle, my head ache, and my thoughts busy with you. Everything is more interesting, brighter and more exciting.

I am drunk with the touch of you, drunk with the thought of you. Dizzy with the memory of you.

Wanting.

Dear Batsheva,

You make me burn inside.

Imagining you on my bed

Anticipation building—waiting for you to come

Aching to touch you, to hear your sexy voice, to breathe in your heavenly smell, to

feel the silkiness of your bare skin

To have your strong hands hold me, caress me

Imagining your sweet taste, our warm bodies intertwined

Lips on lips

Lips on nipple

Hipbones rhythmically meeting

Bodies melting

My excitement

Our passion...

I want more—I want you.

My Dear Batsheva,

When you said that you never had anyone fall in love with you this way, I thought that you were exactly right.

I have fallen deep and fast to that wonderful place where I feel excitement about another person, where I want to be with her each waking moment, would follow her to the end of earth...yes, I have fallen and I am so incredibly happy that I have fallen for you.

I am in love with you.

You are always in my thoughts. Our phone conversations make the day go by so fast and make me want the evening to come before the sun sets. You make me a better person, you make me want to sing, and you make me want to pick all the flowers that bloom.

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Words cannot describe how I am feeling.

Falling.

Dear Sweet Baby,

The rain is still falling hard outside and I hope you are at home, by your warm stove and with your lovely girls. The house is empty, and without you it is lonely. You make things brighter, funnier and joyful.

I am longing to kiss your soft lips, to touch you where you long to be touched, to run my tongue down over your stomach, to taste you. I want you to lie back, to give yourself up to me, to let me have what I am longing for. I want you to surrender to me, to let me in on your secrets, to hear you, to take you, to feel you shiver, to hold you.

Needing you.

My Love,

I am so excited that tomorrow you will be here. The rain will pour, time will fly and you will be mine to hold, to touch and to pamper. I will make magic if that is what you want—I will make flowers bloom, the candles burn stronger, the night darker, my touch softer—whatever your heart desires.

You say that there are no negative things in our relationship—should there be? Perhaps with time we will find small flaws, but they will be so trivial that nothing I feel for you will change.

You shall remain dear to my heart; your touch will always excite me; your face will always be as beautiful; you will remain the love of my life.

Wanting.

My Sweet Woman,

When I knew you were coming, I went out to the rose bushes and asked for their softest petals. I chose the white roses, pure as snow and pale in the moon's light. Quietly they asked of my love and for whom their petals were destined. They can understand a love so tender that only their flowers can compare.

They dropped their heads and let me take their full flowers. I gathered their treasures, and pressed them to my palms, separated their petals, each pale layer from the layer inside, exposing the last most delicate of them. I let them fall through my fingers, thinking all the while of you, spreading the fragrant petals on my black sheets for you to lie on, for me to love you on. Dressing your body with their paleness, inhaling their perfume and loving you surrounded by their beauty.

I dream of making love to you on a bed soft with their petals, fragrant with their scent, and more perfect because you are lying on them.

In anticipation.

Sweet Woman,

This letter will find you behind your great big desk at the office, busy with a hundred

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other things, telephone calls, clients, faxes...I hope that when you take the time to read this you will be magically transported to a place that is quiet, warm and full of the love I feel for you.

It is odd that when you spoke of our relationship, it was in terms of who will get hurt in the end and who has the greater expectations. I would rather just have the moment, enjoy being with you and next to you for as long as we both desire.

You have chosen a new path and the unknown can be scary. Having been down this path before, I can only hope that you will follow your heart and go where it leads you.

I love you,

I will protect you,

I will be here for you.

Sweet Lady,

I miss you. I am having the most wonderful weekend and the only thing that could make it more perfect is if you were here with me.

Just sitting in the sun watching me work, deciding what delicious thing to cook up, napping on my bed with me in the afternoon, and walking with me in the lush green field...it really doesn't matter what we do as long as you are next to me.

I miss your touch at the nape of my neck. I want to hold you close and feel your heart beating, I want to hold your small hand in mine, I want to kiss your soft lips. I want to feel your warmth—want you.

Dreaming of your smell, your touch, and your kiss.

Patiently.

Sweet Baby,

I was so sad today when I heard that you were going through such a rough time and I was not there to make things better. I cannot change circumstances, but I could have stood next to you, held your hand and perhaps made you feel better.

My dear, I miss you, I miss your smell, I miss you in my bed. My body wants yours. I want to feel you. I long to kiss your long, soft neck...I want you close to me, in my arms and lying under my heavy quilt. Close where I can touch you and feel your warmth. I want to feel your heart, your breath; I want to feel you melt. Come to me soon.

Wanting.

Sweet Batsheva,

Wow! I was thrilled today when you visited—just like that, in the middle of my day.

To tell the truth I had been thinking about you at work. It felt as if you were next to me. I could almost imagine your touching me. I so wanted your hands on me, touching me. I wanted your warm body next to mine, your lips on my lips, my hands over your soft curves...

I went home in the afternoon and closed the shades, lay across my bed and imagined I was with you. When I closed my eyes, I could smell you, taste you, feel you. I touched my-

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self, as I wanted you to touch me. I was wet with the thought of you, warm with my fantasy that you were with me.

You make me crazy with desire. I so want to show you how wonderful this can be...to touch you until you melt.

Come to me.

Tamara Klinger

Kibbutznikit, Israeli, Canadian, mother, partner, registered nurse but work in Jewish not-for-profit, cat owner. I think the smell of yeast dough rising in the morning is heavenly and worth getting up early to make. I am a proud GLBTQ community member and a health activist. I am concerned with Jewish continuity, support the two-state solution for Israel but am often conflicted. I am left on the spectrum, easily moved, inspired by small deeds of ordinary people; I believe in being kind, am proud of my kids and the adults they have become. The best times are those spent on my deck with people I love, just enjoying the moment. I can be contacted at tamara_kl@s-h.org.il



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is brought to you by:

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Evecho prefers cross-genre fiction and contemporary non-fiction in her daily reading. In her downtime, she trips across the internet for lesbian news and lesbian literature, and events that affect LGBTQs. She believes the future is bright for queer girls exploring expression in all media and wants to see more of them. Evecho, in her real life persona, has been involved in local, regional and international LGBTQ events for almost 20 years. You may contact her at editor@readtheselips.com

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Besides copy editing and compiling bibliographies for RTL, Renée also enjoys translating and writing stories, some of which have been published in anthologies from Alyson, Bedazzled Ink, Bella, Bold Strokes, Cleis, and RTL. She lives in Canada on a Great Lake with her partner and their dog Bella, whose name has nothing to do with the publishing house and is short for Belle Amie. Which she is. Feedback is welcome at bibliographer@readtheselips.com

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Ann can more regularly be found in the scene shop of a theatre creating many of the visual elements for live entertainment or business productions. Not a writer but an avid reader, Ann is an accomplished artist, designer, carpenter, props builder, sculptor, but a downright crummy seamstress. She is happiest backstage in the sawdust, paint and darkness, and would rather eat live cockroaches than go onstage and perform. Ann lives in Florida which, about half the time, isn't all that dark. She invites you to click on the pink dots and can be contacted at design@readtheselips.com

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