

First Place Short-Short Fiction Prize (Tie)
~ In the 24th Consecutive NMW Awards ~

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No Longer Strangers

The road to lure is the road of song as he submarines his way through the penumbras of quarter moon nights, dripping heated pitch down his sung-out throat.

He is patience in faded jeans permanently soiled by dark earth where warm air is breathed upon the skin of timber at dawn and long walking leads to a woman; an early morning woman with auburn hair the length of his arm and coffee temperatured above the inside of her mouth. She wears thin lavender, silk and slit to thigh, smells of crushed opium and her lips tremble every time she takes a drink.

He does not know her name, yet he waits daily to be ambushed by her predictable presence. He thinks her sandals are too small and the missing straps beg eroding conquistador-built roads to unbalance her. Irretrievably drunk on her wobbling, sounds from the street trail off in the corrosive greens that fall from the peripheries of weathered statues.

In the alley, there are pomegranates and men with violins and dehydrated love looking for a place to live.

Today, it is the same sun as yestermorn, inciting competition of shadows between weighted clouds and weighted buildings. *I decide*, it says. *I will always decide*.

With sketchpad and charcoal, she squats amid light and silhouette aside molded sculptures that would move inside her lower half if they could. Her position extends the lavender slit, and caped carabinieri forget to tell her not to touch places on bronze where four hundred years of rain have searched for a missed crevice to lave. Her paper is textured to resemble Pompeii frescos steamed off in layers, and the first of her marks go down with sorrow at the thought of having taken someone else's story to feed her own.

The man peels blackly hued grapes between his teeth and parlance, and October suggests coolly sharpened air is less painful than specific appetite. He tells himself that if strung instruments can imagine love in alleyways as rainfall begins in the backcountry and ends in the valley, then two strangers can imagine love in faded jeans and strapless sandals.

But what will happen when they are no longer strangers?

In walking, the early morning woman buys a mellow pomegranate, opens it with her mouth, and places the largest half in the man's exposed and anxious palm, without pausing, without speaking. As though she has just saved him from abstention. He chokes on bubbled silence rising from his lungs and does not recover in time. In shaded daydreaming, he imagines she slows her pace as he places pulp on her tongue and tells her enough.

In waiting hours he is handsomely vulnerable, aching for immense skies dusted with the ends of stars and the mouths of hope. In this acreage, his needs for one day could be met with the

deeply lit falling of an ocher night, and carnivorous dreams of her. Not above begging for parchment and pen, he would set sorrow's topography to music long enough to surpass the world's compulsions to forget. He fools himself, though, for he would move to the island of Procida if it would erase his need for the early morning woman—the memory of her scent and her sex falling into cracked stone where vapid northern digits of mist that know nothing of love will carry them to the sweet graveless sea bottom. But he would not stop looking for her, even after Procida; it is the truth. Lace and land beneath oceans and sinking cities aside, not even Atlantis could cure him. It is also near to fact that while planning his escape he penned prose long enough to define a road for her and somehow believed she would take it and decide for them both.

He thinks he will have to set fire to that same prose in grasses and fields until the sky burns the colors of war and lights his way away. Yes, tomorrow he will be gone from walks and a woman's pomegranate carmine tongue so love can never rehydrate in him.

In the repercussions of his leaving, when clouds surround buildings and together they prevent the casting of shadows, cicadas will not know to end their songs begun in darkness. In piles of fallen autumn leaves of fading siennas and mahoganies degrading in sand and sediment, before the dreams of children cease, the landscape will play ghostly echoes of anonymous midnight conversations among musicians and will satiate its own needs for sapphire rain and a woman and a speechless man with a descending fog.

Publishers of prose and layers of brick will toast their commonality, as if he'd already lined a path with his words and held fire in his other palm. He is beyond minor years, but he dreamed of writing as a child, trading games for graphite and gulping lyrics aside remnants of the shattered lives around him. Now, he dreams of olive trunks swallowed whole by Mediterranean vipers content in their feed and heaviness and impending drowning inside a flood the early morning woman brings.

Tomorrow, he will wear a suit and disguise himself from roaming desiccated love, using diction from the south to convince himself he is no poet and there are no roads save the one he is on. Sometime that day her drawing pad will perish in saturating rainwater. Lemon trees will bear fresh in far off acacia-bordered orchards of Sorrento.

Not so slowly, his verbiage will betray him and his suit will smolder in the protests of fire held hostage. With swelling winds and traveling smoke, he will have to change his clothes before he can change his mind. He wishes to change his mind.

When he finds her, she will be barefoot beside her drenched drawings on a road hedged with qualities for the taking. She will become the late evening woman. He will tell her he tried to leave but his clothing burned and all that remained were his writings.