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Cover *Holiday Heroes* Khadija Ejaz



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Sleeping in a Rain Forest Tree House

robert ferrier

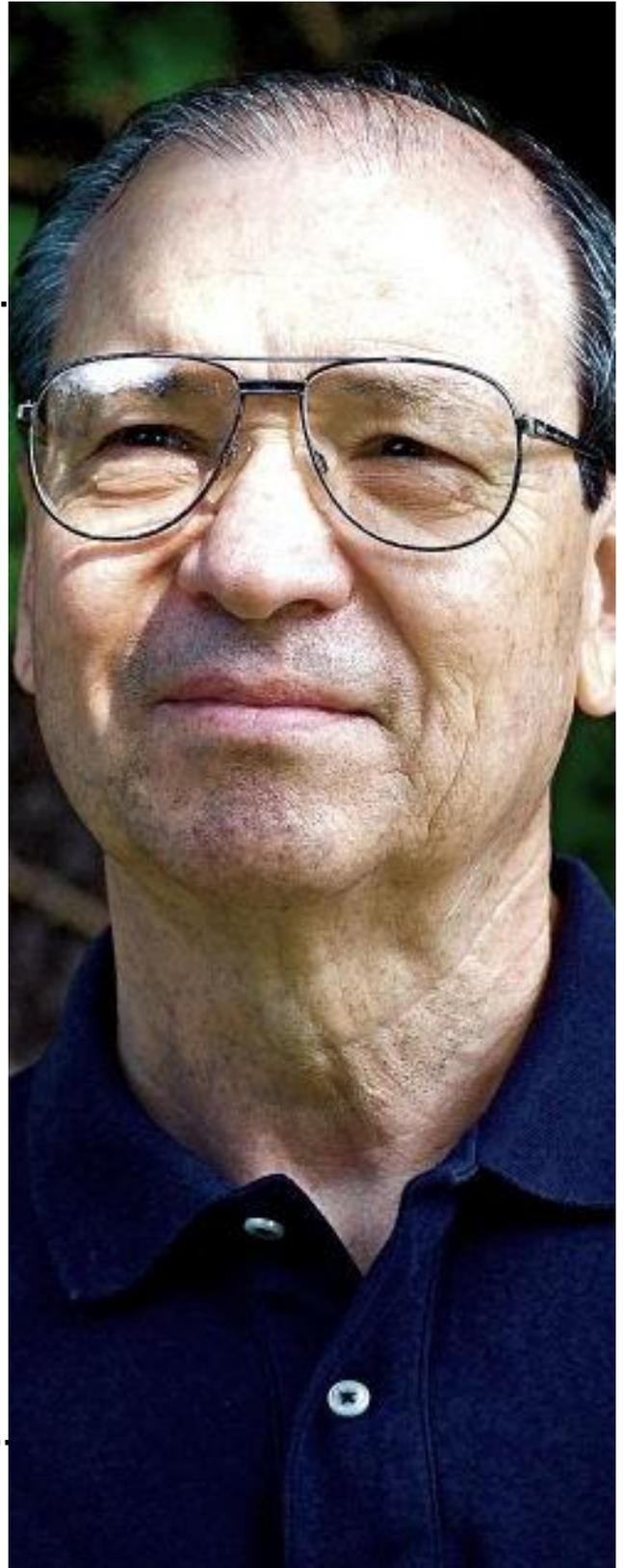
Tonight I hear the jaguar's cry
somewhere below and west
plaintive tear through
dripping leaves.
Each wail disturbs the fliers
squirrels and monkeys
their hysterics gliding down
some unseen scale
like webs of shadows
strung in trees.
Even the Quetzal weighs in
two high-pitched notes
one ascending the other descending
in disapproval.
I stare through a draped white ghost
mosquito net gauze
over the bed
screening moonlight that tries
to ply the wooded green.
Through staccato animal calls
I hear the taut strum of zip lines
steel strands linking warrens
of rich high hermits
gliding through mist
toward cocktails in trees
the aroma of grilled meats



flaring the nostrils of prowlers
who measure the girth and height
of trunks
and wait for the forest to absorb
this construct of misadventure.

Fog seeps its trackless way
as I mourn your love now lost to me
and dance
alone
to the jaguar's
song.





Robert Ferrier's poetry has appeared in *Oklahoma Today*, *Möbius*, *The Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Broomweed Journal*, *Crosstimbers*, *Westview* and *Metro Library Magazine*. His books, *Rhythms* and *Ambient Light*, each won the Oklahoma Writer's Federation Inc. award for Best Published Book of Poetry. He was a 2007 nominee for Poet Laureate of Oklahoma in the US.

The Plantation

khadija ejaz

A young white woman lay sprawled across a wooden bed. She wore a light blue dress and buried her face in the white sheets her grandmother had embroidered for her with sunflowers. A framed piece of fabric hung on a nearby wall in the room. The name "Zelia" was pierced into it with expert cross-stitches. That was the girl's name. She lived here in this house.

The late-afternoon sun burned the grass outside and shot blinding yellow beams into the room. Zelia's room. A shaft of light hit her in her wet eyes, and she turned her face away from the summer sun and buried it deeper into the sheets. Her fingers gripped the sheets, and she felt a deep dread in her stomach. She had been crying for a very long time. She couldn't remember when she had stopped waiting for anyone to be able to hear her, but that had also been a very long time ago. On a yellow summer day like this one. She continued to lie face-down on her bed the way she had been since that day she first heard the terrible news. The sheets were wet and warm from where her face had rubbed her tears into the fabric, and messy strands of her limp brown hair stuck to her wet face.

"Baby Miss?" a warm voice called out to her, but Zelia didn't move. Slow sincere footsteps brought an old black woman into the turquoise room. She was round and bent in several places, and her hair was snow-white. She wore a thick grey dress that rustled as she moved. She drew nearer to the girl who felt like she was going to die. She placed her thick, round palm on the girl's small shoulders. Zelia didn't make a sound, but her body trembled as the boulder in her chest splintered into a hundred pieces. The old black woman sat down beside the girl on the bed and stroked her hair.

"Come on now, Miss Zeelee," the old black woman said. "Old Abby is hee-ah. Donchu cry now."

The girl twisted her body and lay her head in Old Abby's lap. Her short eyelashes were clumped together like so-many thorns. Her face was covered with golden freckles, and her features were plain. She was not beautiful. Her eyes were swollen from all the crying, and they bulged out like a frog's.

Voices reached the two women from outside the room. The last tour group of the day was already halfway through the plantation house. They had finished walking through the first floor where they had seen the parlour and the family room, and now they were on their way to the bed-chambers above. The first room they would see was the girl's turquoise room.

The voices were getting closer to the two women, with one voice leading the rest.

"...called the Green Room because of the turquoise walls..."

A group of eight people entered the room. Four of them were white, two were Asian, and two were black. Old Abby looked at the black people with interest. It was a young couple, and both the man and the woman were tall, thin, and very dark. Old Abby had still not got used to how some black people these days looked better off than some white people. And how small women's clothing had become. Why, the women in this group were wearing tops so thin that they looked like under-garments. And their pants too—they were barely long enough to cover their behinds. The men were covered up more than the women, and they looked more comfortable too. At least Old Abby thought so. How would she ever be able to shear the sheep or stoke the hearth dressed like that?

The group listened on to an old white man who was leading the group. He looked like he was in his seventies. He had a short white beard and a puffy pink face. Green varicose veins snaked down the back of his legs out from where his khakhi shorts ended. He smelled of ointment and cheap flowery air-freshener. The name on his tag read, "Seth Bishop."

Seth was a local. He had been conducting weekend tours of the plantation house his whole life and had his script down pat. The house had been built in 1803 by Abner Orville, a French businessman who made his status in the New World as a planter. His descendants had continued to live in Orville Hall until the early 1900s when they decided to sell their family home and the nine hundred acres of farmland that surrounded it so that they could move West. Since then, the plantation had passed through several hands without ever seriously being occupied; that is, until a local historical society decided to buy the house and restore it to its original glory. The Historical Society of Bethel maintained the estate as a living museum and a resource for their community. The estate was often rented out as a venue for weddings and Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas parties. The weekend tours were also popular.

This tour was going to be Seth's last. He was going to retire and move to Arizona to be close to his children and his grand-children. One of his grand-daughters was going to have a baby soon. His wife had passed away three years ago, and he had no other family in Bethel anymore. It had been a difficult decision for him to leave—he had been born and raised in Bethel, and he hadn't been outside the state very much, except for his honeymoon trip to Ozark Springs in Arkansas and a few trips he had made to visit his family in Arizona. His hair had once been the colour of Midwestern corn. He was curious to see if his new great-grandchild's hair would be the same.

But he would have to get through this last tour first. His last tour. He had lost count of the number of tours he had conducted over the years. He had had visitors from all over the country and the occasional one from overseas. There were so many places in the world outside of Bethel, Georgia, but Seth would never see most of them. Why would he want to? Bethel had a Chik-Fil-A now. And a mall. It was forty-five minutes away by highway from where he lived.

One of the tourists—an overweight white teenager with blank eyes—scratched her armpit. The Asian tourists asked Seth lots of questions and surprised him with their American accents.

“Yes, this was the bed-chamber of the daughter of the house,” Seth said. “Zelia Dee Orville, if you remember.” The young girl on the bed looked up in Seth’s direction. “She had this room painted in her favourite colour. She died of dysentery at nineteen and is buried on the estate in Mount Pleasant Cemetery two miles from here.”

Zelia stopped crying and sat up on the bed. She wiped her tears but didn’t look like she had stopped feeling sad. She sat there on her embroidered sunflowers with Old Abby, and they both looked on at the group of visitors that had come to see their house. The visitors didn’t see the two women on the bed. The room didn’t have much furniture, and the bed was only a replica of the original, but the historical society had been able to get their hands on Zelia’s bedspread and a few other personal items. Seth showed the visitors the cross-stitch nameplate on the wall and told them about the embroidered bedspread.

“Abner Orville had lost his wife Aletha to influenza many years earlier, and Zelia had been their only child. She was raised by one of the elderly house slaves. Her name was Old Abby. Abner later remarried and started a new family. Old Abby didn’t live long enough to see them.”

Some of the tourists nodded. One of the white tourists—the teenager’s father—looked at his cell phone. His wife nervously looked her daughter up and down, wondering if dysentery would help her lose weight.

A shadow fell over Zelia, and she knew her mother had come. That is all she ever saw of her around the house. She had no memory of the woman called Aletha Dana Orville. She had never even seen a picture of her. All she knew of her appearance was that she had not been beautiful. Her father had married her for her inheritance. She was only sixteen when they got married. He had been thirty-eight.

Zelia had never been close to her father—he was like a stranger to her. She had had no other brothers or sisters and no friends. The only people she ever saw were the slaves that belonged to her father or the occasional visitor. She knew the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic from the few lessons a local teacher had taught her at Orville Hall, and she had learned how to weave and sew from Old Abby. The old slave had taught her how to cross-stitch, and she had been so pleased to see Zelia embroider her own name. She had told Zelia that someday a young man would marry her for her needlework skills. These were all the people Zelia ever saw. The Orville plantation was far from the nearest town, and she ended up spending all her life on the estate.

Except for the many visitors that started coming by her home over a hundred years after she had died. And Seth Bishop. She had first seen him when he came with his parents as a tourist to the house. He had just been a boy then. He was the first boy she had seen, except for the slaves. He came by often, first with his family, then as a young tour guide. She watched him grow over the years into a handsome young man with yellow hair and a deep voice. It was Old Abby that had mentioned the word “love” to her one day when Seth was twenty years old and leading one of his tour groups through the house. It was then that Zelia realized

that she loved Seth. She wanted him to be able to see her, she wanted him to think she was beautiful. But he couldn't. He didn't even know what she looked like because her father had never had a picture made of her. She had seethed with hatred for Seth's new wife when he had brought her to see the house. Her heart had quietly broken every time she had heard him tell the other staff about a new baby. Seth grew older but Zelia did not. She wept to Old Abby for decades as Seth reached his prime and then crossed it, growing rounder and slower with age. And now, he was going to go away. And Zelia would never see him again. How would she face eternity then?

Seth took one last look at the Green Room and began to walk out. The last tour was moving on. Zelia was suddenly overcome by feelings more desperate than when she first learned that she had died. She tore herself away from Old Abby and flung herself at Seth, the only man she had known, the man who had once been young and strong and full of tenderness and so unlike her dark father. Her wail filled the entire plantation. Her tombstone, now covered with tall grass on the other side of the estate, trembled and cracked ever so slightly. Old Abby covered her ears and shut her eyes.

The tourist group noticed nothing. Neither did Seth. Zelia could not grasp the man she had loved his whole life. She stood at the window of the parlour and looked outside, watching Seth and his last tour group walk away from Orville Hall towards the parking lot.



Khadija Ejaz is an internationally published and translated poet and the author of several books. She was born in Lucknow, India, raised in Muscat, Oman, and has also lived in Toronto, Canada, and New Delhi, India. Khadija now lives in the United States, where she earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in information technology. She has also worked in broadcast journalism at New Delhi Television and dabbles in filmmaking and photography.

Thoughts from a High School Senior

justin hill

I think back
To when I was young,
And I remember the seniors
From my youth,

And I remind myself that
They have no idea
What the hell they're doing
Either.

~ ~ ~

it's strange.
I only ever get the
"Wow, This Is Happening"s
whenever
I glance back
to my younger days,
and reminisce
on how distantly
my high school graduation
loomed.

~ ~ ~

Hope.



that's what it is.
Hope.

with so very many
adversities
gnawing
and howling
at my door,
Hope is what I feel.

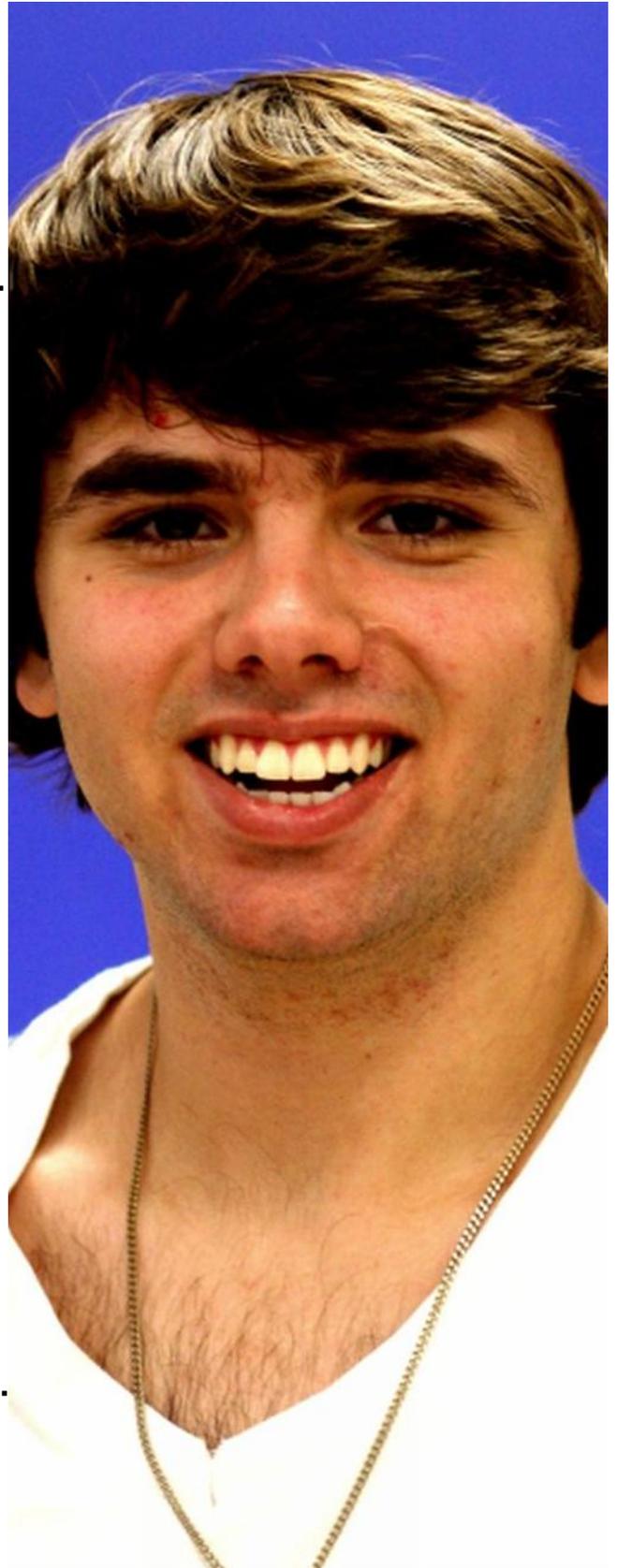
Hope –

–because I know the future is mine.
–because I am the director of my life.
–because I can do anything, be anyone I want,
and I don't care how cliché that saying is,

–because It's the truth.



Currently in his senior year of high school, Justin Hill attends the Huckabay Independent School District, which is just outside of Stephenville, Texas, in the United States of America. After graduating as valedictorian, Justin aims to earn a Bachelor of Arts, double-majoring in Sociology and Theatre Arts, at the University of North Texas. He wishes to become a foremost expert on adolescent sociology. In his spare time, he likes to write poetry, paint, and play the guitar; his favorite books are *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Atlas Shrugged*, both of which he is very passionate about. Justin was also named a 2014 National Merit Commended Student.



Best Halloween, Ever

vickey malone kennedy

Carol Anne tugged the costume's collar. She insisted she was much too old for Trick-or-Treat. Mother demanded she not spoil Halloween for her younger brother and sister. Mother forced her into the same tattered witch's costume that had been two sizes too small two years ago when she'd last worn it. Mother mandated she drag Buddy and Sissy door to door begging for candy. Candy they wouldn't even be allowed to eat until Mother had taken their bulging bags into the ER to be x-rayed like all the broken promises kids accumulated from adults.

"I hate Halloween," Carol Anne moaned.

She stood on the sidewalk sending Robin Hooded Buddy and Sissy in her tiara and frilling pink tutu up to knock on the doors. Sissy carried two hand painted grocery bags, one for herself and one for Carol Anne. Not that it mattered. Mother always poured all the candy into one big bag before examining every piece and doling it out in small quantities each day. It usually lasted until Christmas. Carol Anne doubted Mother ever relinquished the entire Halloween Haul. They weren't allowed that many sweets.

Mother had put them out of her brand new 1977 Oldsmobile Delta 88 and waited for them to walk to the next corner, cross over, and walk back toward the car. They knocked only on the doors with porch lights shining. Dusk rushed into darkness. Mother honked her car horn reminding them it was getting late. Buddy switched on his flashlight. He shoved a chocolate bar into his mouth.

Carol Anne slapped it out of his hand. "You know you're not allowed to eat that before Mother checks it."



He gobbled the mouthful he'd managed to bite off. "Don't be so skeptical. It came from old lady Mason. She ain't gonna poison nobody."

"Anybody," Carol Anne corrected.

Buddy darted across the street –without looking both ways first. "Them neither."

"We need to head back to the car," Carol Anne called after him. "You know Mother doesn't want us out after dark."

Sissy slipped her tiny hand into her big sister's. "Just a few more houses, please, Carol Anne."

"We'll hit the ones between here and the car," said Carol Anne.

The five year old skipped across the street dragging Carol Anne in tow. Buddy jumped out from behind a bush. Sissy screamed and hid behind Carol Anne's wide flowing skirt.

Carol Anne pulled her pointy hat off her head and knocked Buddy's green felt cap to the ground. "Don't scare the baby."

"Stop hitting me," he yelled.

A group of girls ran screaming from behind the Jones' hedges. They rushed passed so fast Carol Anne didn't get a good look at them. Judging from their size they were probably younger than Buddy. Probably fourth graders or younger.

The girls darted across the street –without looking.



"Someone is going to get hit by a car before the night is over," said Carol Anne.

Sissy giggled. "They'll get squished like bugs."

Carol Anne shook her head. "Kids."

Tim Reigns and his brother Frank leapt over the hedge squealing like little girls. Tim blushed when he bumped into Carol Anne.

"You got stuck chaperoning the little guys too," he said.

"I'm only a year younger than her," shouted Buddy.

Tim laughed. "What does that make you, big guy? Ten?"

"Eleven," said Buddy and Carol Anne in unison.

Frank rushed down the street in the opposite direction than Carol Anne and her siblings headed. Carol Anne sighed. Finishing off the night walking next to Tim Reigns might be enough to make having to dress up in the ridiculous outfit and participating in the most hideous holiday of the year worth the trouble. He was the cutest boy in Junior High. As far as Carol Anne was concerned, he was the cutest guy in the world. Well, maybe not as cute as Happy Days's Fonzie, but a close second. He even looked like a younger version of Henry Winkler.

Tim ruffled Buddy's hair, retrieved the feathered hat from the ground, and twisted it back onto the younger boy's head. "You're probably old enough to brave venturing into Mr. Jones' yard, but you'd best leave the girls at the gate. It's pretty eerie in there."



He winked at Carol Anne and followed after his brother. That wink alone made Carol Anne happy that Mother had forced her out with the goblins. She skipped along with Sissy as they entered the Jones's yard.

Paper ghosts fluttered from tree limbs. Candles flickered inside paper bags filled with sand, and scary faces cut into the sides lined the walkway. Mr. Jones, hidden behind an evil mask, jumped out from behind a bush waving a running chainsaw over his head. The blade had been removed but the kids didn't know that. They ran toward the house.

A black coffin sitting at an awkward angle on the front porch looked like someone had dropped it on the way up the steps. The coffin lid opened. Jerry Jones, dressed in a black suit, blood red slime dripping down his chin, sat up inside the coffin. Sissy tried to climb onto Carol Anne's back. Buddy laughed and screamed at the same time. Carol Anne remembered exactly why she hated Halloween.

Mrs. Jones threw little individual bags of candy at them as they ran from the yard. Sissy cried all the way back to the car. Buddy repeated every detail of the incident to the girls as if they hadn't been present.

Buddy and Sissy climbed into the back seat. Buddy launched into the story from the beginning for Mother's benefit. Carol Anne started to get into the front seat. Something hit her hard in the neck, cracked open, and oozed a foul smelling gore through her hair and down her back.

Carol Anne jumped into the car and slammed the door shut. Another egg smashed into the raised window. Mother screamed. Buddy rolled on the seat laughing so hard he could barely breathe. Sissy wailed like she had just received her first spanking.

Buddy sat up, slapped the back of the seat, and caught his breath. "Best Halloween, ever!"

"You wouldn't think so if you'd gotten hit by a rotten egg," yelled Carol Anne.

"Stinks worse than Dad's farts," said Buddy.

Mother pinched her nose closed between her long slender fingers. "Roll down a window."

"No," shouted Carol Anne. "They're still throwing eggs."

Sissy had already started rolling down her window. Two eggs flew in through the crack like heat seeking missiles locked on their target. They smashed into Buddy's forehead, right between his eyes, one at a time, covering his face in nasty yellow goo.

Carol Anne laughed. "Yep. Best Halloween, ever."



Vickey Malone Kennedy is proud to be a dog (a Yard Dog Press author that is). She is a co-founder of Rose Rock wRiters and is actively involved with the Norman Galaxy of Writers, Oklahoma Writers' Federation Inc. (OWFI), and SoonerCon. Vickey is also an editor at 4RV Publishing. She is the winner of the 2011 Darrell Award for Best Mid-South Short Story and the 2011 OWFI Crème de la Crème Award.

Feudalism on Trash Day

lance hawvermale

They arrive at dawn with cactus-faces,
elbows glazed like cracked pottery.
Men lunge from bumper, boot soles melted
from the summer street, sweating coffee
and diesel. With rattle and clang,
gloved hands dulled by repetition
drag furrows in the pavement,
muscles lashed to a pulley system
of tattoos. The youngest wears
a ballcap low over gypsy-jewel eyes.
His jeans are stuffed with motor oil
and barley and rock music from before
he was born, an American golem
with charm fused to his uneven teeth.
He hoists the can overhead, for a moment
fantastically handsome, poised, revealing
evidence of evolution in his underarm.

They speak in language arcane, trading
more emotion than thought, a grubby
set of words like exploratory trowels,
digging through diamonds and dirt
and revealing only laughter, the vital
sound of peasants in a Japanese field,
toiling in the samurai's shadow.
An empty can spins on its rim as if by



the design of these enviable outlaws,
licking salt from lips and knowing
that rich men's wives would not return
if they let go for a single alloyed
afternoon beneath the sun.



Lance published his first two novels under the pseudonym of Erin O'Rourke. He released his third novel, a murder mystery titled *The Tongue Merchant*, under his own name - and he hasn't looked back since. His writing has won over 20 awards. His novel *Fugitive Shoes* was named to the University of Oklahoma's "Books That Inspire" exhibit. Currently an Assistant Professor of English at Ranger College in Texas, USA, Lance teaches film, poetry, and creative writing courses.



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