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The Weight of an Empty Room; Tomorrows; Will-o'; Lozenges: Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

The Weight of an Empty Room

She writes

Your heartbeat is under these floorboards—in the wide, orange room that looks over the rimy bay. I drop a marble and watch it run across twisted timber—as decades ago you did, laughing at the wood's curl and torque. Your ghost taps my body with the force of a reflex hammer—that striking involuntariness we knew; the wheezing of wood and dust as evening squeezed and closed. Now, in darkness, your image catches between eyelashes. We are lying on the Persian carpet, levitating over pine.

He writes

In my small room, your hands are shadowy spiders on my skin, running over me time and again. Can breath travel half the world to meet in our separate rooms? I sense warmth on my neck, smell a toothpaste's mintiness. There are surprises of light, like blurs of the known. Your returning words expand, as if you might be uttering your tight, clenching sentences again. Yet the weight of space jemmies us. I sing those lyrics we composed.

She writes

I don't sleep well. Your breathing's familiar rhythm haunts me here. I stare past your sleeping silhouette—yes, I see it—to the horizon's lights. I have lost our sense of synchronicity: you disturb me every night. Do you remember the floor-to-ceiling window where the moon gathered the wind-varnished sky?

He writes

My room becomes an idea of a different room. Empty space has collared me and your words open our old opacities—each puzzling at the other's meaning. The room is walled in words and arms. A faint light hesitates, as if through drawn blinds. I'm hemmed in, like an injunction—but what holds in memory's cycling spaces? Here are dull right angles. Here is cold plaster meeting my hands.

Tomorrows

Beltway Poetry Quarterly is an award-winning online literary



journal and resource bank that showcases the literary community in Washington, DC and the surrounding Mid-Atlantic region.

In Washington...the salutation is not "How do you do?" It is "What do you do?" Foreigners are embarrassed by this. They make up funny answers: "I am an anchovy curler at the British Embassy." "I am the Vice-President's taster." "I stick the little worm in bottles of Mexican booze." Washington is not amused. It cares deeply what you do. That is how it knows whether or not it wants to know you better.

— *Diana McLellan*

1.

Memories tiled in deep blue; I ride on the lateen sail of a galleon back to you. In afternoon's echo, fire erupts from pans; smoke and seafood mingling on our skin. I'm singed by the moment, even as it is unfolding; caught in the space between heartbeats as we prize clams and mussels from their shells. Sitting on bar stools, our knees brush as we dip bread into garlic, oil and clam liquor. In borrowed light, you tell me it's impossible to suspend time—but I try anyway.

2.

From cross-hatched light she looked at the ocean and buoys bobbing like regret; considered the way the view gathered itself in her. He had yet to come, after so much conversation. She tidied oranges in their bowl, placed napkins. Soon her guests would ask her about her apartment and plans, and she'd make up anything that it pleased her to say. In truth, there were no clear tomorrows, only this air like caress, naked recollection that stood with her, and blue and yellow light like a painting. She made a few flourishes, as if painting the colors into air.

Will-o'

I heard it beneath the subway's ruminations
and a train's cacophony; beneath a swirl of water—
as if a hand bubbled across a river's surface;
beneath the coughs and caws
of birds at the zoo in skimming colours
and criss-crossing flurries
where my daughters gathered bright, dropped feathers
and a snake slow-sidled over a dry branch
in an adjacent glassed-in enclosure,
its green and yellow skin
like a memory of a childish Icy Pole.
It was a murmur that disfigured me.
Mostly indistinct, it slid next to my life
suggesting the irretrievable—loss
and desire's slow-shifting complexity
occupying its own feathery space.

*

I exist as a wisp in time; one moment in ten thousand. You feel me at the edges of evening; moth wings against a naked bulb. There's a pinch in your spine as I sizzle and become dust. Still, there is a flapping of wings; a speck of glitter on your collar; my scent in your car. You store me in your lungs for the time I'm gone.

Lozenges

1.

Lazy Roman mornings, you doze while I tidy the clothes erupting from my suitcase. In our in-between space I feel your breath as a promise; imagining we might inhabit more than this early moment beneath a wall of painted nasturtiums. When you wake, I clamber on top of you; white sheet moulding our nakedness. You raise the blinds, the day breaking over my shoulder. I slip my hand across your waist and its familiarity belies intimacy's restiveness.

2.

She writes from the Protestant Cemetery in Rome: 'I love Keats' headstone, it's taken me back to the poems.' When we walked there the cats arched their backs and we remembered our avowals. Oleanders and pines; a dense shade. Words occupied our mouths. We held past occasions like bodies; drank in warm air like breath from the graves. You said love was a forestalling. Over and over, through failing years: 'And words, too—sour lozenges in the mouth.'

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Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer and scholar of prose poetry. She was a Visiting Scholar in English at Harvard University and a Visiting Fellow in Literature at Sophia University, Tokyo. Her books of prose poetry include *Exhumed* (2016), *Pre-Raphaelite* (2018) *Leftovers* (2020) and *Fugitive Letters* (2020). She is currently writing a book of prose poetry on the atomic bomb with funding from the Australia Council. Cassandra co-wrote *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (2020) with Paul Hetherington. She is a commissioning editor for *Westerly magazine*, associate editor for MadHat Press and Professor of Writing and Literature in Melbourne, Australia.

Paul Hetherington is a distinguished Australian poet who has written and/or edited 37 books and chapbooks and has won or been nominated for more than 30 national and international awards and competitions. He is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) and joint founding editor of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He founded the International Prose Poetry Group in 2014. With Cassandra Atherton, he is co-author of *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-editor of *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (2020).

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