

*ExPatLit.com*

*A Literary  
Review for  
Writers  
Abroad*



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## Letter from the Editor

Dear readers,

Autumn finds me in Cincinnati, a city close to home but new to me. After two satisfying years in the soul of Asia, my wife and I have returned to the States—at least for a while. Already, I find myself itching to explore again; when it comes to *place*, I am perpetually restless—and I'm certainly not alone.

I am convinced that the traveler's life is shaped by the axiom: once an expat, always an expat. True, I carry a U.S. passport, and I pay taxes to Uncle Sam; I own a car in America, and my family is here, and my friends are here. But leaving Seoul and returning to the Midwest felt less like a homecoming and more like a fork in the road.

The theme for the ExPatLit.com Autumn 2009 Edition is *Meetings and Departures*, and with good reason: the expatriate experience is defined by comings and goings, tattered and stamped passports, frequent flyer miles, wine with new acquaintances and postcards to old friends.

The twelve selections you are about to read explore the emotional tension, the subtle grief and delicious delight that are such a part of what it means to be a citizen of the world.

Enjoy.

*Joe Dugan*

Managing Editor



## **II. dominican nights**

dominican darkness	then lower mangy heads
spawns its own daytime	back to a hungry sleep
a web of moving magic sensed unseen	caribbean breeze brings gentle rain
a mesh of blackness and shadows	to thunder-dance on tin roofs
like a pair of pelvises locked in merengue	to love tropical leaves
the snort of a moto joins the chorus	to caress gutters littered with the day's
of last revelers	sucked in spat out orange halves
a beer-filled stumble	light's morning mist
a loose laugh	creeps over palm crowns
bounce through the window bars	the nocturnal orchestra ebbs
mongrel dogs spew random barks	to await the sun's next sleep
pass bursts of wind	

# Love is Floating Like a Flower Wreath

**Yolanda Steiman**

When I heard about *Wianki*, the summer solstice celebration in Kraków, I imagined a ceremony where I would toss a flower wreath into the river and a handsome Pole would bring it back to me. We would fall in love, of course. I would dance around a bonfire in the moonlight, celebrating the summer moon, my long hair crowned with a wreath of woven daisies.

*Wianki* was the annual ceremony where unmarried women threw flower wreaths into the Wisła River. Legend had it that if their true love brought their wreath back to them, they would be married within a year. If the wreath sank, the maiden would die young. Krakowians celebrated the solstice with a concert preceding the toss and fireworks afterward.

The event was so popular that crowds had packed both banks of the Wisła River and I couldn't get anywhere near the river to watch the celebration. I had agreed to meet friends at the Smok Wawelski, the copper dragon at the base of Wawel castle, but they would not have been able to reach our meeting spot either. I couldn't even get cell phone coverage to send them a text message to meet me elsewhere.

A new friend I had wanted to invite to the celebration was Erik, a tall, blond, green-eyed Aussie who was traveling around Europe before beginning college. I wanted to show him a quirky Pagan tradition in very-Catholic Poland, but he wasn't in his room when I stopped by. We had met the night before at a

going-away barbecue for one of the Canadian students. Crowds made both of us nervous, so we found each other sitting on the fringes of the group. I offered him a beer, and we talked for hours, through the lightning storm and after most of the group had gone home.

Now, afraid that I'd be crushed, or worse, wedged between strangers for the duration of an event I couldn't actually see, I shoved my way through the crowd to the main castle grounds. To avoid going home, I walked to the town square, the *rynek*, and sat at the foot of the statue of Adam Mickiewicz, the honored Polish-Lithuanian poet.

Because the statue was a popular spot to meet up with friends, I wasn't alone. Whoever wasn't on the banks of the Wisła gathered in the *rynek*. Chatter and cigarette smoke wafted around me as people passed by on their way to the next pub. Music from one of the outdoor cafés floated in the warm June evening. A newlywed couple and their wedding party strolled past, and onlookers sang "Sto Lat" (May You Live 100 Years) to the couple, wishing them good luck in their life together. At 10:00, the trumpet notes of the *hejnał*, played every hour on the hour, sounded from one of the towers of St. Mary's Church.

I was leaving Poland in a few days. Tonight I was trying to hold onto every last moment in Kraków, memorize every detail of the city I fell in love with during my first visit four years earlier. The loneliness in me resonated with the wedding party. Romance hadn't happened for me this past year. I hadn't been able to find my friends, but maybe it was better that I couldn't meet up with them. I hated being a third wheel, especially on a night like this, thick with romantic potential. Dejected, I stood up and took the last tram back to my

apartment.

I was home for about an hour and almost asleep when the phone rang.

“I’m in the *rynek*,” Erik said. “Why don’t you join me? I’d like to thank you properly for the beer yesterday.”

My initial reaction was to say, “no thanks,” but impulsively I said, “I’ll meet you in front of *Teatr Bagatela*,” and gave him directions to the theater.

Despite my romantic ideas of the summer solstice, I had no expectations of my date with Erik. We were just going to get a beer and hang out. Both of our stays in Kraków would be over in a few days. Like most of the friendships I had made during my year here, this one would also be short-lived, not by months, but by hours.

The cab let me out on Karmelicka Street. People walked hand in hand after the *Wianki* party. Erik was waiting for me on the steps of the theater, as we had agreed.

Over beers at “the secret garden bar”—so named by my friends because it was tucked away in a courtyard—Erik and I continued our conversation from the night before, talking about history, our homes, our travels. We sat outside until I became cold and considered going home again.

“It’s not every day I get to have a drink with a beautiful girl in Kraków,” Erik said, coaxing me in his Australian accent to stay. I couldn’t resist.

Moliere on Szewska Street was still open. All the bars in Kraków had atmosphere, but Moliere was probably the classiest, with a glass ceiling and large green plants in the corners. At the table, we talked, and he held my hand and eventually kissed me.

At 4:30 in the morning, I noticed sunlight streaming in through the glass overhead.

“Let’s go back to Wawel castle to see if any wreaths are still floating in the river,” I said.

The longest day of the year had been followed by the shortest night of the year, and when we left Moliere we squinted from the shock of sunlight. People still walked around, and some lay on benches, hung over. We walked hand-in-hand down to the Wawel castle grounds, where only a few hours earlier a crowd had thronged and pulsed along the river.

No wreaths remained in the river for Erik to hand to me. Nor did I end up dancing naked around a bonfire or throwing a wreath into the river hoping that true love would find me. Instead, I found myself on the grassy bank of the Wisła River, litter scattered from the night before and city workers already cleaning the mess, kissing a beautiful Australian who, like me, was only passing through.

# Voyage Dream

**Chloe' Yelena Miller**

Her land heaved with poverty,  
mushrooms.

When she crossed or circled  
the mountain, was the paper  
money pressed flat against her thigh  
like an inner pocket?

Her literacy would be deleted  
by the approach of English: her  
renaming at the port.

She learned her name's alphabet  
to change continents.

Into the boat's steerage  
her limbs, money, sank.

She shifted her weight  
against the boat's rocking  
to keep her body as level as the  
horizon.

She peeled the homemade casing  
off fatty salami, rationed what was  
left in the straw bag.

She knew she was asleep  
because she saw daylight.



© melabee m miller

# Shuttle

## Foust

It seemed like the thing to do. My lease was up. I was done with college. My mother had died. My father's new wife was having a baby. So I flew to London.

I was not one of those rich people who dialed up a new country if things didn't go well. In the sixties and early seventies, when I was a kid, those people were known as jet-setters. It was 1985 when I left. I took the congratulatory checks people sent me for sitting through four years of college and I put them in a pile on the counter at my bank. Cashed every one of them. Bought travelers checks. Closed my account. Packed a duffle bag so full it looked like an overstuffed caterpillar. Loitered in Newark Airport for a stand-by flight. Flew to London.

I didn't know a soul, but I'd always wanted to go there.

The first few weeks, I lived in a hostel and slept in my clothes. I had a different bed every night, because I always went out in the morning assuming I would find a flat and a job and not come back. How hard could it be? As the days passed, I got my answer. It was hard. Bloody hard. England was an island, and it was full. London was the fullest part of all.

I finally found a job washing dishes at a pub in South Ealing. Cash-in-hand, they called it. Which meant there would be no record of my work there. No taxes paid, no checks—sorry, *cheques*—written out to me. In theory, I didn't exist.

They let me have a little room over the back of the pub. It was pressed up against the eaves, with a sloped ceiling. I could only stand up straight at the central peak. Otherwise, I had to crouch. There was a plastic-covered mattress on a folding canvas cot. It rustled like dead leaves whenever I changed position. There was also a chair with a partially broken leg from where a previous occupant had leaned back in it once too often. It still worked, if I balanced carefully. Down the hall, in a windowless room, a toilet and tub in a grey state. I took some of my cash-in-hand, bought some steel wool pads at the corner shop. Busied myself scrubbing all the surfaces when I wasn't down in the pub kitchen scrubbing all the dishes and pots and pans. My first impressions of being a Londoner involved mounds of soapy foam gradually deflating and going dingy.

In the kitchen, I was known as "Yank." I was a verb. I'm not sure anyone ever called me by my real name. Sometimes, after closing, the bar staff would invite me up front for a drink. The guy who hired me, a fellow with a perpetually stubbly beard named Derek, liked to ask me why a rich American girl would be washing dishes in a pub instead of living it up at a posh hotel in Kensington or Mayfair. No matter how many times I answered him, he would still bring it up again as soon as he saw me. Eventually, I started inventing answers. I told him I was operating undercover for the Tax Office and that he was going to get done for letting me work without the proper permits. I told him I was an escaped convict who stowed away in the baggage compartment of a 747. I told him I wasn't really American, that I came from an obscure part of Ireland where everyone sounded American.

One particular day—it was a Tuesday—I'd spent the afternoon at a little

diner on Ealing High Street, the kind of place the English call a “greasy caff.” I sat at my favorite table, drinking milky tea the color of sand and reading a tatty book I’d bought in the Oxfam shop. I liked this particular table because it was in a chilly corner near a cracked and leaky window, and therefore, unpopular. One of the things I’d learned was that in London, all you could claim was a chair. Meaning, if there were empty chairs left at your table, complete strangers would sit in them and pretend like you weren’t there.

So, anyway, that Tuesday, I’d just left the caff and was walking back to the pub. It was early afternoon, overcast and seeping damp. I went around to the back stairs, planning to have a short lie-down on my crinkling mattress before my shift started.

Derek waylaid me. “I believe your—uh—spaceship just blew up,” he announced.

“My spaceship?” I gave him a cockeyed look, waited for him to explain.

“On the news.” He jutted his chin toward the front of the pub. I followed him over to the television that hung on the wall behind the bar.

The screen showed a plume of smoke making a frothy scribble across sharp blue sky. The space shuttle. I had forgotten about it, had no idea it had launched that morning. Images of the astronauts, their photos caught in single squares, flashed up on the screen. They had such brilliant, confident smiles, looked so fresh-faced, so wholesome. So American. I watched the frayed remains of the explosion trail off into nowhere.

That evening, everybody stared at me. It was as if I had some kind of strange disfigurement; something they all noticed, but took obvious care not to

mention. After the pub closed, I came up front, got a pint, and sat alone at a corner table. I pictured little broken pieces of myself, scattered out over the big blue bowl of the sky. Falling across the sea.

Suspended above the bar, the Challenger blew up over and over.

# Harvest Time

**Michael Lee Johnson**

A Métis Indian lady, drunk,  
hands blanketed as in prayer,  
over a large brown fruit basket  
naked of fruit, no vine, no vineyard  
inside-approaches the Edmonton  
adoption agency.

There are only spirit gods  
inside her empty purse.

Inside, an infant,  
restrained from life,  
with a fruity wine sap apple  
wedged like a teaspoon  
of autumn sun  
inside its mouth.

A shallow pool of tears  
mounts in native blue eyes.  
Snuffling, the mother offers  
a slim smile, turns away.  
She slithers voyeuristically  
through near slum streets,  
and alleyways,  
looking for drinking buddies  
to share a hefty pint  
of applejack wine.  
looking for drinking buddies  
to share a hefty pint  
of applejack wine.

# That Foreign Feeling

**Chantal Panozzo**

When I was young, one of my favorite books was *The Little Prince*. I especially liked the moment when the Little Prince realized he could be unique in the world despite the thousands of little boys out there if he just learned to love someone.

But I thought I could be exotic the easy way. Moving 5,000 miles from home to live in Switzerland surely had to make me different and interesting—at least to the locals. After all, as an American, I was taught at a young age that I was special and individual and I knew from watching television that I could become even more so by whitening my teeth and firming up my abs—in the United States, being extra special is only a few monthly installments away.

So I moved to Switzerland with high hopes of impressing the Swiss with my specialness, only to realize that Switzerland has a foreign population of 20% and as an American, I was about as exotic as a cowbell. I was tolerated to help the Swiss economy, but they didn't care about my extra white teeth or my shiny brown hair. Often, I didn't feel very well liked or even acknowledged despite my unique attempts at the German language—which involved speaking entirely in the present tense and trying to maintain at least a 33% score when it came to picking out proper articles.

Unlike the experience of my American mother, who lived in Gabon in the 1960s and tells stories that include all the locals touching her hair and admiring her “foreignness,” most Swiss people can't tell I'm not Swiss until I open my mouth. And they certainly don't care one way or the other about touching my

hair (not that I mind).

Three years after moving to Switzerland I had almost given up the fantasy of feeling foreign— until one day, while hanging out with some linguistically talented Swiss friends at the Sechselaeuten Festival in Zurich, we noticed a couple of guys in lederhosen and didn't want them to be alone. So we invited these mountain men, clad in gold-plated cow suspenders, to join us in celebrating the Swiss tradition of watching a snowman being burned to oblivion.

The lederhosen guys were from Appenzell and had come to the “big city” to transport their horses to the festival. Unlike most of my Swiss friends, they didn't speak English or High German, but that didn't matter. It was part of the allure since most Swiss liked to correct not only my High German, but my English as well. These guys just kissed me.

Through translation, my friends informed me that these men worked on a mountain in the middle of the Alps and did things like milk cows, make cheese, chop wood, and yodel.

The Appenzellers wanted to know where I was from, but “Chicago” got blank stares.

“Obamatown,” I offered.

“She's from the town where Obama lived,” translated my Swiss friend Hans.

Now I was a celebrity, and I wasn't about to waste my fame.

“Can you yodel for me?” I asked, “All Americans—even those of us who have been here awhile—dream about hearing yodeling in Switzerland.”

Before I knew it my request had been translated and the Appenzeller

guys were giving me a private yodeling concert on the steps of the Zurich Opera House.

“It’s like no big deal, they learn to yodel when they’re little,” Hans whispered to me as I filmed them with my digital camera. “And have you noticed that they are short? All guys from Appenzell are short. It’s because of all the incest,” he added.

Shortness and incest aside, I found them beautiful.

When they were finished, I tried to ask if they would mind if I posted a clip of their yodeling on YouTube.

They didn’t understand.

“She wants to put your singing on the Internet,” translated Hans into dialect for them.

We don’t have the Internet, was the reply.

Wow. No Internet. These guys were growing more and more exotic by the minute.

“Please grill some sausages with us, American girl. We’ve never hung out with an American before,” said the dark-haired one shyly.

But my English-speaking Swiss friends were leaving, and suddenly I got scared.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” I lied.

As the Appenzeller guys kissed me in parting, the blond one stroked my hair in the process.

I couldn’t wait to tell my mom.

***This essay first appeared in Swiss News.***

# Nighttime at a Café in Osaka

**T. Paul Buzan**

The cacophonous free-for-all of a multitude of conversations; the smell of cigarettes and coffee; the students, the artists, the tourists and young couples; jazz music played too loudly: nighttime at a café in Osaka.

An old Japanese man, seventies, wearing heavy-rimmed glasses and grey tweed blazer; one renegade lock of his comb-over has broken free and hovers about his shoulder like a wisp of cloud, a haunting ghost. He is missing a front tooth. Entering the café he is preceded by two young women carrying shopping bags in each arm. The old man takes their orders and heads for the counter. The women sit.

The women are dressed provocatively enough to draw stares: garters and fishnet stockings; very high heels and very short skirts; one girl has a tongue ring, they're both peroxide blondes.

The old man returns and the women take their drinks. This old man is shabby in every way. He reminds me of a dusty, watermarked book no one has bothered to open in many, many years. He is a profligate, a degenerate. You wonder what he is paying these girls for their company, what they are taking him for.

One girl alternates sips of an iced caramel macchiato and drags from a cigarette as she solves a Sudoku puzzle in the back of a magazine. The other is looking around the smoky room, bored, a quick flash of lime-green panties as she works down the hem of her dangerously negligible skirt.

This old lecher is nearly beside himself. He can't keep his eyes, or his

hands, off either of them. The women play their roles apathetically: now humoring their patron with a smile or an occasional glance; more often ignoring him and texting on their cell phones.

By now you can hear snickers and muffled giggling throughout the café aimed at this pitiful burlesque. The old man doesn't seem to notice; the young women don't seem to care.

After a few moments of groping about these two disinterested dolls the old man stands and shuffles away.

What is longing if not memory made self-aware?

Longing is memory's awareness of the limits to its mimicry. It is memory's recognition that it is itself not a duplicate, not a representative—hardly even an echo—of what it seeks to imitate but rather a sort of vendor that ultimately peddles in deception.

Longing is memory's attempt to replenish a past that never was through a present that cannot be.

When the old man returns from the restroom the two women and their many shopping bags are gone.

Standing, he takes one final drink of his coffee and surveys the crowd. Some are blatantly staring, others secretly dart their eyes at him and then away again; he does not lower his face; he will not be judged in either victory or defeat.

The old man dons his blazer and leaves the café, that renegade lock of hair still bobbing defiantly about his shoulders.

# You Say Goodbye and I Say Hello

**Niamh Griffin**

As you walk through another set of airport gates, do you ever think about your first departure? Your first expat posting or maybe the first time you set off for an international boarding school while your parents stayed behind. It was probably a lot more dramatic or exciting than the mundane way you pack up and leave these days.

The queasy mixture of excitement and nerves is hard to explain to anyone who's lived all their lives in one country. And the sadness we feel leaving people behind is even harder to explain. A settled person will just shake their head and say something like, "Well, if it's that difficult and emotional, why don't you just stay here or go back home?" You'll open your mouth to explain and then realize that anything you say will sound arrogant or rude, so you change the topic and move on.

Because that's what we're good at; moving on. How long have you known your present friends? If you're reading this from a settled life, you may have met them in college or possibly even elementary school. But if, like me, you've lived an expat life, then your friends will be an international bunch you met last year or even last week. We keep in touch with family and friends at home, but every posting sees new additions to the address book. And at some point, whether consciously or unconsciously, we make decisions about who to meet again and who to leave behind.

When you sign up for your first expat post, no-one warns you about this.

You hear about the challenges of working in a foreign country, the cross-cultural training, the holidays you'll take, and the fun international world your work will bring you. And it's all true, but there's another side to all of this—one made up of loneliness, superficial friendships, and an eternal round of leaving parties. That's definitely not something to share with your family back home.

Saying goodbye to family can be the hardest of all the goodbyes you'll say. Some expats do leave home because they just can't stand to stay there for one more minute, but most of us leave because we've got the proverbial itchy feet. It's harder to hold onto that excitement when you see the pain in your parents' eyes or suddenly realize that your siblings are older now than when you first went traveling.

That first departure from home is both the easiest and the hardest for most expats. Hardest because you're not quite sure that your skills are as transferable as you made out at the interview, because you've had your head stuck in a phrase-book for days and still can't say hello, and because you're really leaving. You're standing at the airport and it's not just for a vacation or for a school-term; this is it. Your family is trying to be cheery, and talking about the adventures you'll have. But all you can think is that when they meet up to watch the game you won't be there; when your sister's new boyfriend finally meets the family you won't be there; when the trees bloom next year you won't be there. One more hug for everyone, and you take off through the gates, wondering if you're mad and what was wrong with being normal anyway?

For most of us, these thoughts fade as the plane takes off and everything gets easy again. You might never again enter a country with that level of

excitement. Everyone you meet is so interesting and seems to have done so much with their lives. You flick through their passports with envy and want to be everyone's friend. And making friends is so easy. Big groups of you hit the local expat pubs, go looking for the secret local bars and take vacations together.

Every now and then, you might stop and ask if you'd actually be friends with this person at home. You might think that Sophia is a little racist, that Paul is a little too friendly with the local women. But they won't be here too long so it's not that big of a problem. A two year post in a popular city like Bangkok or Sao Paulo means crossing paths with dozens of expats and locals.

And even though you still think about your school friends, and constantly invite them out to visit you, you're making so many new friends that you don't really miss your old life. When Jack your college roommate comes for a visit, you have a great time—but when he leaves it's not that sad. There's so much to do you hardly have time to take him to the airport. On with the party.

For most of us, it's the passing of time that starts to drip down the excitement. When you've introduced yourself to hundreds of people, and had intense moments with most of them, you start to feel a little tired of the meeting part; you start dreading the departure dates. It grows especially hard if you put down roots somewhere but still have mostly expat friends.

There are times at the annual party when you think about wearing a card on your forehead with all the basic information: where you come from, how long you've been here, the best spots to visit, where else you've worked, and of course what you do. But you're also getting better at meeting people and sorting out potential friends from the folks with whom you are simply marking time.

Sounds terrible, doesn't it? But really, when you meet new people that often, you just can't keep in touch with everyone.

And with the once-futuristic video call now just a matter of logging onto Skype, departures never seems so permanent anymore. Why feel sad saying goodbye to someone in Rio when you'll chat with them once a month and probably fly over to their birthday party in London anyhow?

After a while expats start to break down into groups: the ones who are happy with the superficial goodbyes and never take anything too seriously, the ones who put down roots in one country because they want meeting someone to mean something, and the ones who move back home and keep their memories alive through vacations with their still-traveling friends.

It takes a different kind of person to live through all of this and come out the other end with a belief in family, friendship, and love. The expat who learns to genuinely love friends she hasn't seen for years is the one who makes it through the international experience in one piece. Every post, every country changes us and leaves a different mark. Only the people who were there at that time can really appreciate that. So if you make a point of dropping everyone when the contract finishes, there's a good chance you'll cross the finish line a very lonely person.

Not everyone who comes to the airport with you, whether to meet you or send you off, is going to be in your life forever. That's something expats have to come to terms with in a way that settled people never do. But we never say goodbye to the people we really love; they're always with us no matter where we call home.

# “Ruhrgebiet”

**Jesika Brooks**

After the plane descended,  
wheels bouncing along a fog-choked  
runway;  
after the train doors hissed shut, and  
wheels thundered down the worn  
rails,  
they apologized.

They apologized for smoke-stain  
buildings,  
for machinery rising up mantis-like  
from cobbled electric parts;  
they apologized for towering drills,  
for coal and lack of Kohl,  
for an infrastructure worn down by  
daily  
use and misuse and abuse.

However.

They spoke not of  
the wide green fields clustered with  
rabbits,  
of the Sunday walkers with dogs in  
leash;  
they spoke not of  
the flowers that colored the landscape  
like the sunset  
that washed over the smoke-stain  
buildings and rendered them  
yellow and orange and vivid, startling  
pink.

After the plane ascended,  
cabins shaking in the bloom of low-  
lying clouds;  
after smart-dressed stewards carted  
refreshments, and the  
cabins filled with the hum of  
conversation,  
I refused apology and remembered.

# Baggage

**C.A. Marshall**

As I prepare to leave, I can't help but feel lost and homeless and empty. I should be happy, I should be sad. I can't seem to fit an entire year of memories into two suitcases. I can't pack up my life here easily.

Why, and how, do we become attached to places? What difference does place make? Of what concern is the angle of the street, or of the light as it comes through the windows in the afternoons? What does it matter that this is the floor plan, with the bedrooms just here, and the windows this way so that, when you sit on this sofa on a cloudy afternoon and you've curled up with a cup of tea and a book and are napping and it begins to rain, you feel suddenly surrounded by the rain on all sides, and you put your book down and just watch it slowly come down on the hydrangeas?

The magpie's cry will sound the same from the back garden of another flat. The wind will simply rustle the leaves of different trees. But I will not be here to watch the pigeons swoop over the Tyne when it is lit up at night, or to watch the cat on the wall through the kitchen sink window.

It's strange to me, despite my twenty-four odd years, despite my own sense of practicality, and intelligence, and reason, the things we can and cannot keep.

# The Slip of a Sleeve

**L.K. Clark**

“Okay. Everybody out.” The driver shifted into park and switched off the engine.

Ryan Drue and the twelve Ugandans squeezed into the van with him straightened in their seats and leaned toward the windows to look outside.

“Hey, wait a minute,” one man protested. “This isn’t Malaba. You’re supposed to drive us to Malaba.”

At nine p.m., twilight’s deep blues were nearly gone. The taxi van driver had chosen to discharge his passengers in the middle of nowhere, miles between the last town in Uganda and their destination in Kenya. The only hint of civilization was the border crossing, a quarter mile further down the road.

“Yeah,” several other voices buzzed in waspy irritation. “We paid you to take us the whole way.”

“Well, I’m tired and I’m not driving all the way to Kenya. So come on out if you want your things.” He yanked up on the emergency brake and clumped down the steps and out the door.

The Africans rose quickly to disgorge from the vehicle, bumping and jostling each other on the way. Ryan huffed audibly before following his sticky, sweaty travel mates. Squabbles and squawks sprung up in a babel of English, Swahili, and several tribal languages as the group tripped and traipsed toward the rear luggage compartment. When Ryan’s foot touched the ground, his seatmate grabbed him by the arm and dragged him through the noisy crowd

until they stood face-to-face with the driver. Somehow, Ryan's quick smile and the friendly jumble of crooked teeth it revealed had won the man's concern.

"Hey, listen mister," the man said, only inches from the driver's face, "this *mzungu* paid you to take him to Kenya. You can't just leave him here in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh, hey," Ryan said, holding his open hands in front of him, "I'm good. I'll just follow everyone else."

"No! No!" his seatmate protested. "This isn't good. He can't just leave you like this."

"Listen. I'm too tired to go through all the paperwork at the border." Stubbornness clutched his words and his brow as the driver spoke. "He can take a boda-boda like the rest of the passengers. Here they come now." By this time, the driver had tossed the luggage to the ground, impervious to a clutch of nettled protestations. "You can get rides from them. I'm leaving." He waved to the men swooping toward the stranded group like flies to mangoes before climbing back into the bus.

Still grumbling, the passengers snatched their luggage before taking seats on the boda-bodas. Ryan followed their lead and, as he sat, the bicycle driver said, "Okay. That will be five thousand shillings."

"Whoa! Five thousand? Don't you think that's a little steep?"

The driver shrugged. "Five thousand. That's how much it costs."

"Don't listen to him, *Mzungu*," Ryan's former seatmate said as his driver began pedaling. "It's five hundred shillings."

Ryan turned back to his driver. "Well. You heard it. Five hundred."

“No. He’s mistaken.”

“Okay,” Ryan said, swinging his leg over the back of the bike. Several other boda-bodas were standing nearby, so he strode to another and asked, “How much?”

“Five hundred.”

The first driver erupted with a torrent of syllables Ryan didn’t understand. The second responded in kind, beginning a shouting match between the two. After several minutes, they settled their squabble and the second driver turned to Ryan. “Five thousand,” he said.

“F-ine!” Ryan snarled, slinging his pack over his shoulders and heavily plopping on to the boda-boda seat. *Perfect*, he thought. *Maybe Gwen and my buddies were right about me coming to Uganda.* Not because it was dangerous, but because it was so frustrating. The nine-hour bus ride to cover 115 miles was a perfect example. Holes, dips, and washouts made traveling fifteen miles an hour a necessity.

After Ryan paid, the boda-boda driver rolled up behind his compatriots to a large hole cut into the chain link fence several hundred yards from the guard booth, big enough for the bikes with their riders to slip through.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ryan said, tugging his driver’s sleeve. “This isn’t the border crossing.”

“It’s okay,” the man assured him. “Everyone goes through this way. It saves time.”

*Yeah*, Ryan thought, *but everyone’s not a mzungu.*

A border guard who was scanning each bike with a large flashlight

seemed to agree with Ryan. “Okay. Okay. Okay,” he’d been saying, granting each boda-boda permission to pass through. When his light hit Ryan, however, he called out, “You. Stop right there.”

*Great, Ryan thought, just what I need: a border incident too far away from anywhere to get help. Maybe if he just played dumb...*

“Oh, hello sir. Is there a problem?” The U.S. Marine Corps had drilled one thing into Ryan’s brain exceedingly well: address people respectfully no matter what you think of them.

“Yes,” the man barked. “You can’t cross here. You must go through the official border crossing.”

“Really? I was sure my driver knew where to take me.”

“Hey,” the driver said, “don’t get me involved in this. I’m just a driver.”

The guard surveyed the driver’s face with his flashlight; the boda-boda man squinted his discomfort. “You know foreigners have to go through the official crossing.”

“I don’t get many foreigners. I forgot.”

The guard sniffed, tilting his head backwards slightly for emphasis. “Take him to the official crossing. You can wait for him on the other side.”

As the driver pedaled toward the small booth that stood to the side of the road, a border policeman emerged, his khaki uniform suggesting danger for transgressors.

“What’s this?” he asked the guard who had followed the bike.

“This *mzungu* was trying to sneak into Kenya.”

“Wait. Wait!” Ryan protested. “I’m just trying to visit Malaba. The boda-

boda man decided to take me through the fence.” His clear blue eyes and clean-cut cropped hair weren’t going to win him special treatment with this guy, he realized.

“Passport,” the man said.

*Why*, Ryan wondered, not for the first time this trip, *did I ever decide to come to Uganda?* He knew, though. It was the stupid travel bug. As a child, his parents towed him along with them on trips to thirteen different countries. Now he could boast that he was the first in their family to visit Africa. If he ever made it home, that was.

Ryan pulled the blue-backed document with the silver eagle embossed on the cover from his backpack.

“So you’re an American.”

Ryan felt like responding with a, “duh,” but resisted the urge. “Yes, sir.”

Since the beginning of his trip, he’d worked hard not to stick out as an American. He wore the casual khaki-type slacks and short-sleeved dress shirt Ugandans favored. He couldn’t change his skin color, but he didn’t want to advertise himself as an American. And, for the most part, he’d succeeded. Most everyone he talked to assumed he was European. Too bad he couldn’t continue that innocent deception here.

“Okay,” the man said after flipping through the pages. “One hundred U.S. dollars and you can go to Kenya.”

Ryan knew the fee was half that amount.

“Um, excuse me, sir, but I read that the visa costs fifty dollars.”

“One hundred,” the man said, this time more firmly. “Or I keep your

passport.”

It wasn't as though Ryan hadn't expected to encounter some corruption during his stay. He'd brought along a walkman and several DVDs as well as some low-denomination bills specifically for this sort of incident. But those items clearly weren't sufficient here. The border policeman wasn't giving Ryan a viable choice. If Ryan tried to return home without a passport, he'd have some serious problems.

Ryan reached out to retrieve the document before digging for the money.

The man's hand was instantly on Ryan's arm, halting him mid-motion. “What's that?” he asked, indicating what he meant with a backward nod of his head.

Ryan looked at his arm and understood. The man had seen the bottom edge of his tattoo in the light of the bare bulb in the border station.

“Nothing,” he replied casually, using his opposite hand to pull his sleeve down.

“It's something,” the man said. His hand slid up, pushing Ryan's sleeve as far as it would slide over his biceps. Still, the man couldn't see much more than the bottom inch. Which was good. The heavy black mark was the traditional Marine insignia tattoo, a sign of solidarity with fellow Marines and loyalty to his country. Stars surrounded a spread-winged eagle, and the initials—USMC—announced the call of the few and the proud.

Ryan remembered the day he went with two reservist friends to the tattoo parlor between his first deployment to Afghanistan and his second to Iraq. He recalled how they had each encouraged their buddies during the

painful, tedious process. His mother's voice had returned to his mind with annoying regularity during the procedure. "Ryan, just think long and hard before you decide to get a tattoo. It's something that could mean trouble for you some day, and you really can't change your mind once you've taken the plunge." What a time for his mother to be right.

"You are a U.S. Marine," the guard said firmly.

This kind of situation was the precise reason Marines from Ryan's unit had warned him against taking this trip.

Thoughts raced through his mind like a cat in pursuit. There were images of Marines in Iraq who'd been beheaded; grisly pictures of their severed heads were later posted on the Internet. He remembered times he'd been forced to duck behind vehicles, buildings, and—once—the dead body of a friend to avoid being killed himself. Then his inner vision revisited the casket of the eighteen-year-old PFC from his squadron. Tears pooled in his own eyes as he heard weeping parents and siblings. And there was the last time he'd seen his own parents, the lines on their faces exposing their concern about his redeployment in a few months.

There was no use denying the fact he was a Marine. This guy wasn't stupid. Besides, he was the one carrying the gun. "Uh, yes, sir, I am. A Marine reservist. But I'm traveling as a civilian now. I'm a student; I'm taking a course in African Studies at the university." Which was true.

"Take your shirt off," the official ordered.

Ryan again surveyed the surrounding area, barely visible in the faint moonlight. All he could make out beyond the border police booth where he was

standing was a nearby fence. Behind him and far out of sight was the last Ugandan town the van had passed through. He could see nothing but a dim patch of road leading back to it. Ahead of him was no-man's land: a half-mile expanse between him and the Kenya border. He knew there'd be no cavalry thundering to his rescue from either direction.

He unbuttoned his shirt slowly, sizing up his armed opponent. Ryan's Marine training had taught him several ways to kill a man in hand-to-hand combat. He thought through his options. He could swing his shirt around, then throw it over the guard's head. From there, he could easily sweep the man's legs, dropping him to the ground. Once there, Ryan knew he could do whatever was necessary.

But the other guard, the one with the flashlight, was nearby. He'd surely hear the scuffle, and he might be carrying a gun as well. Ryan berated himself for not noticing. It was just that his inner radar was down; Ugandans had been so friendly up to this point.

The border policeman, though, hadn't pulled his gun. In fact, he seemed curious, almost entranced. His eyes were still fixed on Ryan's arm. Maybe Ryan should wait. *Don't cause an international incident if it's unnecessary*, he warned himself.

He unbuttoned the shirt, then quickly extracted an arm from one sleeve before letting the shirt drop behind his back. Passing his free hand across the front of his body, he swiftly pulled the other arm loose.

Once the guard was able to see the entire tattoo, a huge smile appeared on his lips, separating to unveil teeth that seemed to glow in the moonlight.

“I am honored to meet another Marine,” the man said.

Ryan had noticed that Ugandan English, though not always enriched with a large vocabulary, was always *proper*: a little stilted and never peppered with the slang Americans used.

Was he reading this man correctly now? He seemed happy that Ryan was a Marine. Was that even possible?

“The first U.S. Marine I ever met saved my life,” the man explained. “We were both sitting in the same bar in Malaba. I had an argument with the man seated beside me. When I left, a little drunk and unsteady, the Marine noticed that the other man followed me out the door. Outside, the man yanked a pole from the ground and was ready to strike me from behind, but the Marine grabbed it from his hand. I believe I would be dead if it had not been for that Marine.”

Ryan was at a loss. “Oh,” he said finally, unsure of how else to respond.

The guard released a guffaw and slapped Ryan’s arm. Then, letting his hand linger, he looked at Ryan’s eyes, showing dimly in the scant light.

“I’m sorry I can’t drop the entry fee for you, my friend,” the man said, his voice dropping to an intimate level. “They frown on corruption here.” A wink followed.

Ryan smiled tentatively.

“For you, the fee is fifty dollars.”

As Ryan extracted the money from the pouch that hung from his neck, the man turned from him. “Boda-boda!” he snapped.

Ryan’s driver soon materialized through the darkness. “Take this

*mzungu* to the Tourist One Hotel in Malaba.”

“Sure.”

“How much did you charge him?”

“Five h...” The driver looked at Ryan, then back at the guard. Dropping his head forward, he corrected himself. “Five thousand.”

The guard stepped toward him and grabbed his shirt at the neck. “Give him back the four thousand five-hundred shillings you owe him,” he demanded.

The driver’s shoulders dropped and a look of disgust skittered across his face.

“Hey! You do what I say or you won’t be giving any more rides at all while I’m on duty.”

“Okay, okay.”

“And tell my uncle there won’t be any charge for the room at the hotel.”

Turning again toward Ryan, the guard stuck out his hand and smiled. “We men in uniform have to stick together.”

“You’re right about that.”

*The End*

# Matakohe: Limestone Island

**Alysson B. Parker**

*dedicated to Tim Clark of Onerahi, Whangarei, New Zealand*

His island is him, an old man,  
teeth knocked out;  
daily walkers stroll right by  
the history, it is  
forgotten rubble.  
A case of mistaken identity  
occurred this morning:  
t-shirt, cigarette ash,  
shuffling slow—tired, worn,  
hair bleach white and skin burnt  
into deep wrinkles where age shows  
the bay still caresses the edge.

I like to roam this way on starlit  
nights  
past the Clarks' silent doorway  
reminiscent of gin-coloured sky,  
tomatoes, soft light  
leaking out front windows, not  
affecting  
the deepness, nor the simmering  
evening, but dark limestone  
and oyster shells sprawling on the  
lawn  
  
And angel trumpets, fragrant,  
tendrilling the hill. Now,  
a few houses from the beach,  
you would join me, exhausted from  
anger;  
I recall the stars warming us,  
your lips strong against my cheek  
and the calmness of us whirled with

the breeze

off to a ragged corner of the shore.

Much later I was still crushed

when I glanced over; the solemnity of the island

moved me to smile. But always—

heartbeats slow in the center—

I feel it.

This evening there is a small boat tooling over

to the diminutive forgotten floating stone.

I stare with you and mumble

that it really is quite a story.

## About the Authors

### **Jesika Brooks**

Jesika Brooks recently returned from a study abroad in NRW, Germany. Though newly-infatuated with her American hometown, she still feels a sense of longing for the late-night Kebab stands and the cramped railways of Europe. She is an English major, art minor.

### **T. Paul Buzan**

Originally from Kansas City, Missouri, T. Paul Buzan has lived and worked in South Korea since August 2007. This is his first publication.

### **Lisa Clark**

Lisa Clark is a freelance writer of both fiction and non-fiction. She currently lives in Bulgaria with her husband.

### **Foust**

Foust is a writer and printmaker living in Richmond, VA. Her stories have been accepted by *Minnetonka Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Word Riot*, and *Flash Me*. She holds an MFA from Spalding University.

**Niamh Griffin**

Niamh Griffin has lived and worked overseas for 15 years in six countries. She is now living by the sea in Ireland, back where it all began. She works as a writer and course developer, writing about travel, fitness, and community issues. Along the way she discovered Muay Thai and the best friends any woman could want. Who knows where her next stop will be?

**Christina Hoag**

Christina Hoag is a reporter for The Associated Press in Los Angeles. She was previously a foreign correspondent for nine years in Latin America, where she was based in Venezuela; she traveled the region to cover coup attempts, guerrillas, mudslides, and general mayhem. Now back on the relatively tamer U.S. shores, Christina writes about all that stuff in her fiction.

### **Michael Lee Johnson**

Michael Lee Johnson is a poet and freelance writer from Itasca, Illinois. His new poetry chapbook with pictures, titled From Which Place the Morning Rises, and his new photo version of The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom are available at: **<http://stores.lulu.com/promomanusa>**. The original version of The Lost American: from Exile to Freedom, can be found at: **[http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/book\\_detail.asp?isbn=0-595-46091-7](http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/book_detail.asp?isbn=0-595-46091-7)**.

Michael has been published in over 22 countries. He is also editor/publisher of four poetry sites, all open for submission, which can be found at his Web site: **<http://poetryman.mysite.com>**. All of his books are now available on Amazon.com: **[http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_ss\\_b?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=michael+lee+johnson](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_b?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=michael+lee+johnson)**. E-mail: **[promomanusa@gmail.com](mailto:promomanusa@gmail.com)**.

### **C.A. Marshall**

C.A. Marshall has recently completed an M.A. in Creative Writing from Newcastle University in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, and has a short story published in *Lit by New Writing North* in conjunction with Newcastle University. In addition, several of her works have been published in *Blackberry Winter*, an annual chapbook of Rochester College where she earned her B.A. in English and Professional Writing. She currently lives at the edge of a cornfield in Emmett, Michigan with her dog Mollie and spends her time writing novels.

### **Chloe' Yelena Miller**

Chloe' Yelena Miller received an MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She has poems forthcoming or published in the *Cortland Review*, *Alimentum*, *Lumina*, and **PrivatePhotoReview.org**, among others. She teaches writing online for Fairleigh Dickinson University, edits *Portal del Sol*, and reads for *The Literary Review*.

### **Chantal Panozzo**

Chantal Panozzo is a writer in Zurich, Switzerland. Her work has appeared everywhere from *The Christian Science Monitor* to *Swiss News*, where she writes the monthly "Expat Adventure" column. Last spring she served as a National Geographic Glimpse Correspondent, where she reported on the lack of cheddar in the land of cheese. Chantal has also been commissioned to write and perform a corporate drama by World Radio Switzerland, and her work has appeared in several best-selling anthologies. She is currently writing a memoir about life abroad. For more, visit her website ([www.chantalpanozzo.com](http://www.chantalpanozzo.com)) or her blog, One Big Yodel ([www.onebigyodel.com](http://www.onebigyodel.com))

**Alysson B. Parker**

Alysson B. Parker is a poet by passion and high school Humanities teacher and freelance editor by financial necessity. She has published work in *The Binnacle*, *Northern New England Review*, *Ophelia Street*, *Scars*, *Kota*, *Deep South* (New Zealand), *The Dominion Review*, *Common Lives*, *A Room of Her Own*, and other publications. She has lived in many different countries and situations, but presently she and her partner, their two daughters, and three cats—who should be paying rent—live north of Boston.

**Yolanda Steiman**

Yolanda Steiman was a student in Poland during the 2001-2002 school year. She is working on a memoir about the year she lived there; “Love is Floating Like a Flower Wreath” is one essay from that collection. She has been published in *flashquake*, *Transitions Abroad*, and *The Columbus Dispatch*, and lives in central Ohio with her husband, dog and cat.