

**Novi zvon**

**Novi zvon, letnik II, številka 12**

Urednica / Editor:  
Gaja Jezernik Ovca

Mentor:  
dr. Tomo Virk

Oblikovanje / Design:  
Gaja Jezernik Ovca

Naklada / Circulation:  
∞

Ljubljana, december 2013



## Kazalo

To say a few words	3
Vita Vybihal: Dreams	4
Yeva T.: Discant, In Echo	5
Yeva T.: Stormlit	6
Elisabeth Polucha: Our Dream Made Flesh	7
Peter Edgell: Broken Pathways	8
Alex M.: I'm here	9
Jaša Bužinel: Europe	11
Jaša Bužinel: Fragrance	13
Shelley Nutting: Nothing to say	14
Meredith O. Carino: Mark Twain Sun	16
Princeps Angelus Mors: The Birds of Joy and Sorrow	17
A. E. Doyle: Second Street	19
Maša Ribič: Heavy Heart	30
Felioness: Step on a Crack	31
Špela Šalamun: The Loss	35

## To say a few words

This specific issue of Novi zvon literary magazine is dedicated to literature written in English. The notion first came through several conversations with people I know who tend to write in English rather than in Slovenian. I wanted to offer individuals (like those I talked to) the space to publish their work. But that was not my only (or even main) motivation; I had been in touch with the newest literary writings from foreign writers for quite a few years and even more intensely since I began publishing my own collections of poetry under the pen-name Audrey Rey. I had been lucky enough to encounter several incredible works of art that made me think, *what a shame that the Slovenian readers didn't have access to these works*. That is why this particular edition of Novi zvon is not only a chance for 'our' authors to showcase their art, but also for the readers to get at least a small taste of what literature from across the border (and across the ocean) can offer.

I sincerely thank everybody who participated in creating this issue. I can't remember the last time I enjoyed my position as editor more than I did for this English edition.

And I honestly hope the readers will have just as much fun and satisfaction reading it as I did shaping it.

Gaja Jezernik Ovca (Audrey Rey)



Vita Vybihal

## Dreams

I dream with my eyes closed.

I live with them wide open.

I see stars in the night sky.

I see birds in the bright day.

I dream about the world I'll never live in.

I dream about the dreams I'll never dream.

I live a life that no one else lives.

I see stars when there's no light.

I see faces on the moon when there's no one else to look at.

I hear voices of the woods when there's no one to talk to.

I smell flowers when you're not here with your scent.

I touch the trees when there's no hand to hold.

I embrace myself when there's no warmth to feel.

But I dream.

About the world, about life.

About the dreams.

Yeva T.

## Discant, In Echo

Post blush,

White spit of bedcloth, a cooling current

Staccato touch, nerve years in between, and gone.

Cold folds of soles, echo to the least footfall

In cobra light, sifting the moth breath of burned rolls,

You're appetite:

Essaying, wave by wave, the beat barbed quicks

Ripples of binary emotion, aloof, to fingertips.

Throat foamed, with a sharp, drumming your cheek

In measured takes, flyaway feather hands slope and sink,

Slick surface quakes,

A sore of faucet eyebaths, spent dawn slipping

The cold runs down so fast --

You're dripping.

## Stormlit

wild-tiger-eyed

jaded

I am cracked  
and raining inside

vein-rivered

keyed

to the stretch  
of my moon fray

savagely-glittered

bulleting

the low-tidal rumor  
of his mouth

spit-fired

plunging

I am the comet

I am the gun

**Elizabeth Polucha (Ella Auspicson)**

## **Our Dream Made Flesh**

I speak to you in words which you alone have known always in your heart.

In echoes of love from long ago, it lived through all our tears.

And returned to enfold you in your dream again.

Should my love vanish from your mind once more,

I will appear beside you as a tender lilting sigh,

With a richer heart and lips more passionate.

To gently kiss your falling tear,

And lift away your anguish and long felt suffering.

I will seek your understanding.

For it was but yesterday we met in our ardent dream,

Which returned to this reality.

Forget not, my love, that I shall come back to You.

To the boundless You, The deathless You, The silent You.

For when I drank of your river of silence,

Our song passed across my delighted lips anew.

And it will be heard afresh when you use not your ears,

But listen with your heart.

For this sweetest refrain is but a perpetual song of love impassioned within us.

Two hearts enflamed, Two souls entwined,

Across all Time.

And forevermore we shall yield earnestly unto this deafening silence.

The silence of our Infinite Love Eternal.



Peter Edgell

## Broken Pathways

She was beautiful then  
and tasted of nuts and black coffee

her neck draped in auburn  
curls on her shoulder

She smelled like fresh paper  
cinnamon sticks  
sometimes an autumn potage  
with red pulses

She felt brown and still  
or rapid with shivers  
her skin like a river

solid, yet not

She sang with an accent  
to soften the deepest

most devious paths  
of the heart

She was beautiful then

a child, a martyr  
a memory now  
and faceless

Alex M.

## I'm here

I didn't remember moving until I stopped in front of a large window.

I stood there.

Unmoving.

Frozen.

My lover was behind that thick glass.

Lying in a cold room.

In a cold bed.

He was covered in wires and with a tube down his throat.

It looked like I was watching a new episode of X-files.

One of the best series ever written.

We loved to watch it together.

Thinking about it, I almost fainted.

I was never going to watch it with my beloved ever again.

I couldn't move my body.

It was like that my body didn't want to let me see my dying prince.

It didn't want to let me see my Marc's body in pain.

*"John? You can go in."* Dr. James' voice startled me.

"I can't." I whispered with a dry throat.

*"John, you need to go in."* She repeated, patting my shoulder.

She was getting on my nerves.

Again.

Trying to not act as idiot as I looked, I just shook my head.

*"I can't go in. I'm not strong enough."* I started to sob.

Again.

I'm useless.

Pathetic.

*"Stop, John. You need to go in. He's dying, dear."* She said trying to push me inside that room that screamed Death.

*"Stop. Saying. That!"* I growled to her.

I wanted to chock her.

*"John, it's the reality. He needs you there."* She pushed me.

Again.

But she was right.

Finally nodding, I opened Marcus' door.

The sterilized room was too clean, too bright.

I hated it.

Step after step, I was getting closer to his bed.

Marc was covered in bruises and the *beep beep beep* sound coming from a machine close to his big bed, was unnerving.

But I needed to be strong.

My right hand started to move closer to Marcus'.

And then, my hand was in his.

Grabbing it tight.

*"I'm here, Marc."* I whispered.

Jaša Bužinel

## Europe

I don't have a story to tell, Europe!

I don't have a vision to sell, Europe!

I am stuck between the glorious past  
and the bleak future.

Help me see it through,  
help me find an answer to this quest  
on reconciliation, regeneration,  
release my imagination  
and carve it into pillars of marble –  
to entrench a new hope  
onto our common soul.


But the task is complicated  
for we don't possess a common soul –  
an artificial artefact of the western fathers.

Alas!

We, children of Europe, are  
in dire need of a story,  
a story which history used to  
tell us but does no more.

And we are worried, wasted,  
empty and lost.

Tell us who we are  
and give us a story  
to turn into our future,  
to discover who we are



and what all this is,  
what we share and where we live.  
Europe, be our loving mother!  
Not an orphanage, a hopeless land  
of economic prostitution,  
a capitalistic whore,  
addicted to financial injections.  
Let's make it through together,  
you and your children,  
the boundless generation.

## Fragrance

I pour and pour and wish

I were like them -

flowers.

Live fast and die young,

make people happy while it lasts

and then fade away with no big surprise.

Or maybe become a fragrance of seduction,

make lovers fall in love;

or be the perfume forever on your skin:

an unconscious substance of your subconscious -

divinity.



Shelley Nutting


## Nothing To Say

This silence.

White,  
..... clinical  
melamine  
that squeaks  
beneath my finger,  
its surface  
damp  
with gathered breath.

I long to break it,  
shatter its perfect curve  
with my fists,  
fracture the smooth  
walls with nothing  
more than a  
carefully  
pitched  
.....whisper

No sound  
is forthcoming,  
it catches  
upon the fabric



of my tongue  
and sticks  
painfully  
in my gullet  
as I swallow.

I have nothing to say.



Meredith O. Carino

## Mark Twain sun

sittin' on the hood  
playin' crazy eights  
sidwalks a-steamin'  
under a Mark Twain sun.

white-buckled clogs  
over mottled toe nails  
a scabbed knee  
and legs a-swingin'  
Wolf Man Jack spinnin'  
on the d-battery radio  
puffin' on a cigarette bubblegum  
with berry stained fingers.

laundromat kid comes out  
with a big red basin  
dumpin' water over the crazy eighters.

there they go again  
squealin' and chasin'  
soaked and laughin'  
breathless and runnin'  
under a Mark Twain sun.

Princeps Angelus Mors (Hugo Moreira)

## The Birds of Joy and Sorrow

### The Bird of Joy

*Enwreath'd 'twixt mantles wrought of iron mist,  
Thrice dost bejewelled turrets pierce wintry Sky;  
Heav'nly repose where Seraphs cavort nigh,  
O'er bruised amber peaks Sun and Earth ne'er tryst.*

*Clad in lace and gold brocade She stood, whilst  
I sank midst feral throes, seeking Her eye;  
Seething wings scorn'd me, jagged teeth glisten'd wry,  
Sulphur breath choked me in words dared not wist:*

*"Night and Day I follow'd thee thro' the dim,  
My threshold thou cross'd into this Abyss,  
E'er twilit and crepuscular and grim.*


*A song of Joy sired thee weeping hymn,  
Perch'd psalm'd cruelly, a sov'reign submiss,  
Lest fore Daemons cast this realm into glim."*

\*\*\*

### The Bird of Sorrow

*Etch'd amidst flesh entwined and wounds profound,  
From veins ajar ebbs wine sweet'r than disdain;  
Thus, may'st sapphic sylphs exchange kiss profane,  
Neath thousand brazen stars' glow high abound.*

*Brooding She sat, shrouded silence around,  
Plague swarms whilst laughter becometh arcane;*



*Kind eyes gazed into me, Her voice ordains,  
Midst the soft strum of strings doth hers resound:*

*"Day and Night I follow'd thee thro' the bright,  
To th'ethereal spheres thou ascend monarch,  
Ne'er-writhing lustre of celestial light.*

*A song of Sorrow harpies' talons smite,  
For when the dusks art long, and days grow dark,  
Join will thou Chaos and Eternal Night."*

*"O Progeny of heav'n, empyreal Thrones,  
With reason hath deep silence and demur  
Seiz'd us, though undismay'd. Long is the way  
And hard, that out of hell leads up to light;"*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, Lines 430-433

A. E. Doyle

## Second Street

*El stands under muted chrome lights, legs splayed apart and left hip cocked out like the jagged end of a lipstick smear. The soft undercurrent of voices drifts from the club crowd up to the stage, quiet murmured conversations below the chink of glasses and clicks of the mike stand slotting into place. If she listens close enough she can almost hear the bare echoes of a young man's laugh, a woman's soft tinkling sigh, the swell of a family's conversation.*

*"All ready," the man before her grunts around the toothpick hanging out the corner of his sun-cracked mouth. El reaches a hand over to tug at the length of color-faded silk knotted around her left wrist, stepping forward to take the place he vacates. The same hand rises to wrap around the cold silver shaft, glossed lips parting as she ghosts them towards the microphone.*

*The crowd has dropped in volume, calm falling over the haphazardly arranged three-legged stools and half-rickety tables. It's a quiet she's felt many times, countless times, slotting into the places between attention and anticipation. One that she's lived by and in and for. But tonight is different, just like all the nights before it. Because no matter how long it's been she'll never really get used to this stage, never go quite as far as to take anything for granted.*

*A steady bass starts up, smooth tones of the keyboard falling in with a slow blues, and lids slip shut over chestnut eyes as a velvety voice joins the fray.*

Elinor Chaffer was born in the winter of 1933, daughter of the widowed owner-by-default of the Second Street Club. The club's founder, Theodore Chaffer, had been a widower himself, an ex-soldier settled in Louisiana with a four year-old son and his own New Orleans jazz club when he married Stacey Waites several years after the end of the Great War. When he succumbed to his old wounds half a decade later, Stacey Chaffer spent three months in mourning before promptly declaring a fresh start and leaving for the West with her stepson. Little Hank was nine at the time, too young to deny otherwise when she returned barely a year later, an infant in her arms but no new name, claiming to have been left pregnant before Ted's death.

Hank had taken both well and quickly to his new half-sister, who quickly became a staple among the club staff. Ellie spent her early years in the dusty spaces of the backstage, half helping the crew at her own insistence and half being a small bundle to trip and stumble over, all laughing eyes and brown hair held back by her favorite purple ribbon gifted one year by the kind manager.

Stacey, on the other hand, had not been treated well by the years, more commonly found at the bar than in the director's seat. She was the official name in the legalities courtesy of her late husband, a fact which no one had gotten around

to correcting even during her thirteen month absence, though it was Jeremy the manager who had long played the part of the sole proprietor in practicality if not on paper. She loved her children both, unconditionally so despite the lack of blood relation to one, promising herself every day to be never less than a good mother. Her drug of choice was the drink. Not the really strong stuff, but she had a particular fondness for cocktails which showed some nights after the kids had disappeared into their closet-bedrooms on the living story above the dance floor. She had her own room up there, along with a kitchen and lounge space; it made really quite nice an apartment despite the slight squeeze, even if it only got use the times she didn't pass out on one of the backroom couches after the lights went down. The cleaning crew had become accustomed to it. The establishment wasn't quite anything that could be called 'sleazy,' but music clubs were never the height of cultural refinement. Things worked even if they weren't ideal, a father stolen away by a decades-old bullet, a mother half-living in a bottle, children raised in a playground of amplifiers and yellowing sheets and whirlwinds of revelry in the darkness of each night. Things were good. But things changed; they always did.

Ellie was sixteen when she decided it wasn't enough. Hank, ten years her senior, had long taken his own place at the sound-desk and made himself do with a step-mother who cared for her charges but not herself. It wasn't some act of nobility, trying to 'save someone from themselves' or any fantasy like that, but unlike her brother Ellie saw through the crystal-rippled surface. She wasn't the kind of girl that could be satisfied with something less than real, a happy facade as long as the little one was up then out trying to escape as soon as she was down. It wasn't the alcohol or the hangovers, it was the lie.

"--know I love you two, Ellie. You kids are all I have."

"And the club."

"Yea, and the damn club," the middle aged woman slurred, the last word rounding off with a snicker. Ellie set down her tray of glasses on the bar.

"Come on, let's get you up to bed. You have a lunch tomorrow." Stacey hiccupped as her daughter lifted her to her feet, zig-zagging between the last few straggling patrons. It was late--pushing early, really--and the waitressing shifts that Ellie had picked up when she turned eighteen were long enough today that Stacey had hit the bar half-way through.

They climbed the narrow stairs like a lumbering four-legged creature, the taller half tumbling onto the unmade mattress as soon as they stumbled into the master bedroom. "Night, Stace." They'd never really gotten the hang of the word 'mom.' Stacey just gave another sweet-stenched hiccup.

"Shit, El. Disappointed in your ma?"

Ellie let out a sigh. "You don't have to hide, Stacey, not from us." She'd seen enough people--performers and customers alike--who came to lose themselves in the night-life, too many to be bothered by it by now even if they were one of the more respectable places.

Stacey snorted. "You're not like Hank, you know? Never tried asking me why I'm so goddamn broken."

"You're not broken, you're... No one's perfect." She leaned over to press a kiss against the graying hairline then reached up to wipe off the blood-colored stain left behind. "But you're still our ma."

"Prouda me, are ya?" Another snort, but different now. The giddy high had leaked away, loopy grin falling from the older woman's face. "Shit, El, you're nineteen, ya still don't get it. Betcha wouldn't be so proud if you knew. You're not Hanky's sister." Silence.

"Yea, that's right. Dun believed they bought that left-pregnant crap. Nah, I met a fella in Utah and you know what else?" This laugh was cruel, deprecating, razor-sharp peals falling from a sneering mouth. "He was a nigga! Howzat for ya? Ma fucked a nigga, and didn't even remember the rubbers!" And with a last hacking laugh, Stacey Chaffer passed out.

It was no surprise that the owner of Second Street was what she was in name only, with her somewhat worryingly regular habit of waking up with the entire previous night wiped from her mind. She joked about it sometimes, calling it her survival instinct, making room for better memories. It had ceased to be unsettling for her to mentally stumble across a few hours that she couldn't for the life of her remember.

But Ellie remembered. How could she not.

There was a man leaning against the counter, grease-slicked blonde hair pulled back from his cool blue eyes. He muttered a few words to the bartender before turning to flash a grin at Ellie, who hesitated for a moment before smiling back.

There had been some surprise the first time she ordered herself a drink in between serving the tables. She caught a couple of exchanged glances, though Jeremy was the only one brave enough to ask her about it.

*"Something the matter, girl?"*

*"Just learned something, is all."*

It had been four months since she'd found out the truth, four months during which the seat with Ellie's name on it had gradually moved from the artist's spot backstage to one of the grimy corner tables on the floor. Nothing had changed, not really. Sometimes when the night was late and the door was locked, Ellie would stand in front of the mirror and pull her dark bangs back from her tanned skin, so far from Stacey's light and pale but nothing she'd ever given a second thought to before,

almost swearing that it was screaming the truth to everyone she passed. *I'm not white.* But no, no one knew better, except her. *I'm not white.*

The man was moving closer now, and Ellie felt a small smile curl her lips as she saw he was holding two glasses. He looked a few years older than her, but no more than that, deep set eyebrows and a slightly hooked nose over an otherwise classically handsome face. Ellie took three seconds to reach out and close her fingers around the offered stem as she thought, *'why not?'*

It hurt. She'd heard that it always did the first time. But there was something thrilling, addictive, in that visceral realness of the dull pain and the slick drag of skin against skin. He sat back afterwards against the chipped headboard of the filthy motel bed, pulling out a home-rolled cigarette from the pocket of his dropped pants as she lounged on her side.

"Want one?"

"Sure," she said lazily. "I'm already a spade. What's a little more shit." She spat out her first drag, almost hacking up a lung, then finished the whole roll.

They were disappointed in her, she knew even if they didn't say. No one looked at a girl the same way after something like that. But it wasn't until Hank cornered her in her room one morning that she heard about the other rumors.

"Ellie, there's been talk."

"There's always talk."

"That man, that ...lover of yours--" she sneered at the word "--he mentioned something, something that you said, about being--"

"You got a point or what?" she snapped, cutting in before he could say it. "Just, be careful, Ellie. You're not alone, you know. You're always my little sister." She waited until he left before letting out a bark of cold laughter.

It took ten months for them to send her away. Really, Ellie was surprised it wasn't two. The cover was all fine, an old friend of Stacey's whose brother needed a secretary. They said it was because they wanted something better for her, even Hank urged her to do something more and leave when he didn't, but there was always that undercurrent whispering, *'you know why, you know why they want to get rid of you.'*

She packed what she needed, not bothering with the little memories or remnants of her long-left childhood. Her false brother walked her to the station along with Jeremy, who had always seemed to think that babysitting was part of his manager duties. Then it was just a slightly stiff hug and a peck on the cheek from Hank before she was off.

Her employer, Arnold Beckett, was an amiable man, friendly if not for his tendency to treat her more like a colorful ornament than an employee. The work was acceptable, days spent as a helping hand with papers or a perky disembodied voice on the end of a phone line. Every week or so she would forward an invitation to her boss for some function or other, and after the first few he began inviting her along as his date--a convenient pretty girl to appear on his arm, if only they knew the truth.

No one called her 'Ellie' anymore. She was El, just El, twenty-one, office-girl. Mister Beckett helped her find a small apartment with her earnings, and she made do with her own cooking. There wasn't much time for herself, though she got friendly enough with some of the women from the next department and a pair of brothers in her building. It was good, she was happy. At least that's what she told herself in the chilly hours when she slipped out for a smoke.

El spent Christmas with Stacey and Hank and Second Street, but things weren't quite the same. They said she was moving up, but she knew she just didn't belong. It was her third holiday back when Hank caught her with a Winston in the alley behind the club.

"How long have you been smoking?"

"Bout three years."

"Jesus," he said.

She took a last inhale then dropped the butt to the ground and crushed it under a gaudy leather boot. "Something wrong?"

"What do you think?"

She didn't reply, reaching into her purse and pulling out the half-empty packet. "Want one?" Hank ignored her. El shrugged and lit another for herself. "I hate seeing you like this."

"Yeah, yeah," she scowled, "seeing me. Fuck everything, as long as you don't see it."

"Dammit, you know that's not what I meant. You're my sister, Ellie--"

She cut in with a scoff. "Really, Hank, I always thought you might be dim, but haven't you figured it out? Didn't you even pay attention to the broad dragging around half the States?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"They were right, those fucking years ago. Stace got herself wrapped up in a sooty, got herself fucking knocked up with a tar baby. Don't even know what my name should be, but whatever it is it isn't Chaffer." She dropped her second cigarette, only half smoked, not even bothering to stomp it out before she pushed past to get inside. "I'm not your sister, Hank. Ellie Chaffer is goddamn lie."



El didn't give Beckett a chance to protest when she told him she was leaving, barely an hour off the train, dropping the keys off at her landlord's doorstep and checking into a motel with her savings. She spent the first few weeks living off the corner deli, and the next few off packet meals. When the money finally ran dry, she checked out, caught the bus to the next city, and asked around for the nearest club.

"What do you do?" the manager said, leering at her with a drag of his eyes over the length of her body. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes before answering: "I can sing."

The first time she visited home was five months after she left, three nights after her second performance and first envelope of cash. It wasn't nostalgia, she swore. No one said much, Stacey made an attempt to mix her a cocktail and Hank offered her a seat backstage. El could almost feel the words in the air. *Ape. Nigra.* Never directed at her yet, but she'd seen and heard enough slammed doors, spat out insults, stories of the lynchings that came after. It was the first time she'd been in a room full of people who knew. They were disappointed. Always disappointed.

She had a career now. Some part of her family, of Second Street, of herself even, half-expected El to be a streetwalker, or maybe landed in the pen. She was never the brightest, Hank had already finished by the time she started school and she'd dropped out in sophomore year, but she hadn't quite sunk that low. Though she was never above getting invited into a strange bed the times she couldn't quite scrape together enough for a room. El had a pace for herself, continuing, displacing, leaving behind a trail from state to state of empty glasses and soggy cigarette ends. She'd been offered the harder stuff from time to time and she'd given them a try, still took a joint if was handed to her, but she had learned to crank herself away from the fog, the haze, the shedding of reality.

She was in one of the more backwater dens one evening, passing through, one of the few places willing to pick someone up for just a few nights for a little spice. Her set was late and it was almost empty as she sat at the beer-slicked bar with a cigar thrown at her by an enthusiastic, or maybe just very drunk, crowd member. She was close to calling it a night when there was a rustle of thick clothing by her elbow. A woman sat down on the stool beside her, dressed in something that would have rather outrageously offended the sensibilities of some of the better audiences she sang to.

"Enjoyed your performance tonight," she said.

"Hm," El replied.

"Nice to see a girl on the stage with her clothes on."

"Really?"

"No, not really."

El frowned as she turned, looking up into black-lined eyes and smirking crimson lips against a heavily powdered face. "So what's your name, then?"

"Missy. Missy Lorrane."

"El Chaffer."

"Chaffer, huh. Father's or husband's?"

"Mother's."

"Oh."

El didn't let the smile flicker on the other woman's face. "What about you? Got a Mister Lorrane?"

"Nah, no man for me. Not really my thing." She leaned closer, the curve of her body against the counter emphasizing the swell of the bust that was almost bursting out from the front of her sequined dress. El paused for several seconds before, 'oh.'

"Would you like a drink?" she asked as she thought, 'why not?'

El never quite managed to stay away from Second Street. Visits weren't regular, but they happened. Sometimes she talked, sometimes they talked, and sometimes she stood on the sidewalk out front in the early hours of a morning without talking at all. There were times she stayed for a few weeks, even a few months, but then there always came the morning when they woke to find her gone again without a word. Her old room had long been given to Jeremy as an office; El took up residence in one of the backrooms, or at least the nights that she slept.

She spent a few months in New York as the mistress of a retail magnate. It wasn't the wife that made her leave, and things he said about El when he thought she wasn't listening just made her raise her eyebrows. It was the complacency, the realization that she almost had the easy life at her fingertips. She gathered up her things, all necessities and nothing personal, and disappeared across the border into Vermont, back to the motels and midnight gigs. El wasn't one for high society. Or just, society, really.

Her mother passed away in the fall of 1961, natural causes, and El felt. That was all it really could be described as. She froze up when she got the letter from Hank,

sent to a post box she kept in Atlanta that she wasn't sure how he knew about. She rented an auto and made the drive, waiting the whole eight hours before she snapped and screamed at her once-brother. She didn't cry.

Some part of her felt it could be relieved, as if her secret has somehow died too. Some part of her was relieved she had an excuse to let go all that had been mashed together and shoved under the glitter-stained blanket over the long years.

"Stay," Hank said, "stay home this time." But it wasn't home, hadn't been for a long time. There was no need to agonize over too-good or not-good-enough, the simple fact was that she wasn't Stacey Chaffer's little girl anymore. El told him so in a whisper, as if afraid someone might overhear, too much had changed and would never change back. It was the first real conversation they'd had in years.

She stopped at the first bar out of the city, not for a job, just to toss a few down her throat and feel the burn. She picked up a girl, a young one, but El barely noticed as she fucked her back in the unfamiliar apartment, ragged nails drawing red lines over softly bronzed back and breasts. She turned to El afterwards, lips swollen and voice languid.

"That was my first time with a woman."

"Think it's going to be your last?"

Looking over the ripped-out hairdo, smeared make-up, and almost dazed gaze, El lit a cigarette and didn't have to listen to know her reply.

Women weren't like men. They were different, and not just in the obvious. It wasn't a case of morals or decency, it was one more freedom from convention, expectation. For the love of hell, El couldn't remember the girl's name afterwards.

She ended up staying another night, going home with a man old enough to be her father. *If only.*

Time passed, things moved on, El was no youth anymore at thirty years of living. Down in Washington a man named King had a dream, and over the next few years race equality and anti-discrimination laws started popping through congress. But they were just pieces of paper. Words. They didn't really change anything, not now. In the whirlwind of bright lights and cheap liquor of El's passing years, somewhere between the last motel and the next stranger's bed, things had slowly dawned on her. It wasn't just about the spook who was her father. It was about independence--not the sort of waffle that the women's rights movement spewed--about shaping herself, making something real from a frightened mother's half-baked story.

She married a blackjack dealer in Vegas after getting herself a semi-permanent seasonal job. Not a bout of drunken stupidity, they knew each other for almost a month before falling into the chapel together. He told her his name was Steve Decker, which made her snicker the first time she heard it. El liked him, she really did. It wasn't love, not the kind they waxed about in poetry and movie-houses, but it was good. It worked. He didn't care when she disappeared for weeks on end and she

pretended not to notice the girls sneaking around their apartment, a different one every month or so.

It took until the second time she visited as El Decker for her to forget to take off her four dollar ring, only slapped on two nights before for some celebration or other at Steve's insistence. She was avoiding the front entrance, coming in from the back when Hank met her.

"You're married."

"Yeah."

"How long?"

And there it was, a flash of another scene in the same alley, last lifetime. El almost laughed as she parroted herself, "About three years."

"Any kids?"

She snorted. "What do you think?"

"El--"

"No need to start lecturing, Hank. We're good."

"Who is he?" He leaned against the doorway, cutting her off.  
"Works a casino in Vegas. Same one as me--no, not like that. On the stage. Behind the microphone."

"He good to you?"

"Jeez, what's with the interrogation?"

"Because I know you don't have to do this!" Fists clenched, a forearm pounding at the wall in frustration, years of it. "You're not a girl anymore. You can make yourself better."

"By doing what? Keep stringing along a fantasy?"

"Is that worse?"

He grabbed at her, fingers tightening painfully around El's left wrist. She let a vicious sneer curl her mouth as she spat back, "Fuck you, Hank. Think you know better? Because I can't fucking look after myself?"

There was a split-second, then Hank was letting go and stepping back, pushing her away. "No. Because I love you. Because you're my sister."

El was just returning from a trip to the coast when the news arrived. She'd finally decided she wanted to see the ocean, hubby didn't so she went anyway. The letter from the lawyer was sitting on the table.

Steve didn't come, just handed her the auto keys and pressed a kiss to her cheek, saying that he'd drop by maybe if he was ever in the area. Somehow, it was already goodbye.

The Second Street staff, new faces that had all changed and changed again over the years that she'd never bothered to familiarize herself with, told her the story. Henry Chaffer left on vacation barely two weeks after she'd stormed away from him in that alley, and never came back. Most of them, including the paper-pushers, assumed he'd been killed in some accident. El let herself entertain the thought that he'd run, maybe shocked out by something of his own, followed in her footsteps, though really that was just about the same thing.

The only constant was Jeremy, still loyal as ever, now grayed at the temples with twice the lines on his face as when El had left. He let her into her old room when she asked, not even sure herself why. The bed was gone, of course. Almost everything had been replaced. The only thing familiar was the small wooden chest of drawers which had served as her bedside, shunted off into a corner and covered with twice as much dust as the rest.

The first drawer was filled with papers, shoved in every which way. The second had a small pile of junk, from around the room apparently, buttons and pins and the like. El levered out the third draw, and, 'oh.'

It was almost empty. The cheap pine was completely bare except for a single strip of faded violet, the ribbon she'd thought thrown out with the trash long ago. She picked it up, held it, and for the first time in over a decade, she let herself cry. For a past long gone, and a brother she loved despite everything for trying to keep alive a girl who no longer existed.


"You know, they say purple goes well with dark skin."

She broke off, forcing herself to look up through wet-beaded lashes.

"I knew, Ellie," Jeremy continued softly. "Stacey, she- I've always known."

And that was really all that needed to be said.

"You'll stay. Won't you, El?"



El took a moment to dry her eyes, then reached down and tied the ribbon around her skinny arm like a bracelet, too tightly to ever easily take off. They both knew the answer.

It seemed they still hadn't learned after that first time. Much like her errant mother's, El's name was never taken off the club's deed. The legalities took a few months, change of ownership, and divorce. She finally did the due and passed the club fully to Jeremy, giving him the title he'd deserved so many times over. Moving into Hank's old room took almost as long.

When the last of the paperwork was signed and sealed, one of lawyers pulled out a packet of smokes and held it out to her, "to celebrate." She stared at them for several seconds before replying, "I'm good for now, thanks."

The first night El performed at Second Street was like finishing a long-neglected puzzle, pieces falling not into place but to make a new picture, hidden behind the one on the box. And there, it didn't matter. Because when she sang to an audience that had waited for her for fourteen years, it wasn't about what face she put up. It was music, art, pure expression, and it was real.

She didn't regret, not really, because she'd done it. Shaped herself. Even if it wasn't beautiful, it was what made her. She was El Chaffer, ribbon around her wrist not out of sorrow but as a guide, a marker, a reminder. Maybe it wasn't home, but before the lights she knew and tables she'd served and crowd that was hers, it was the closest she would ever get.

Maša Ribič

## Heavy Heart

I'll come to you with a heavy heart. I will be brave but I will also be scared to death. You'll make me laugh and never even know that in my mind I know I'll be laughing with you for the last time. I'll sit you down and tell you we need to talk. You'll get that scared look in your eyes. And for a moment I will hesitate and try to convince myself that things aren't so bad between us. And then I'll remember everything all over again.

My voice will be calm and collective and my mind will be a mess. I will slowly tell you everything that is on my mind, everything that hurts me, everything that I thought we were and everything I hoped we would become. And then you'll tell me that I'm crazy and imagining things. And I will remember thinking that at some point I knew you would say that. I will stop you and ask you to let me finish. You'll make a face and roll your eyes at me. I will continue opening my heart to you, trying to give you another chance to mend it. But you were never the person to look for hidden meanings.

You will listen to me, light a cigarette and barely contain yourself. And then you'll explode. You'll call me every possible name you will come up with. I will be everything, but a human being. From your point of view I will be crazy, irrational, emotional and too sensitive. After all, almost everything that happened was a joke to you. But I knew that it wasn't. I know you too well. Your eyes always tell me if you're kidding or being serious. And all the times you said you were kidding, your eyes told me your only purpose of talking to me was to hurt me. I will look at the floor because you will make me feel so insignificant, so small. And you will feel victorious. Because that is how you feed yourself, by humiliating other people. I will be quiet for a moment and then I will look you in the eyes. You will get a chill up and down your spine because you have never before seen me pierce you with my eyes like that. I will talk with a calm voice, surprising myself how calm I can be. I will tell you that maybe I am all those things you called me and still I am nothing compared to you. Because I at least have the guts to recognize my mistakes and accept the fact I was wrong. But you will always be this narcissistic human being with no desire to look at yourself for a moment and see yourself for who you truly are – an immature, selfish, ignorant little person. You will look at me with your mouth open and I will ask you if those words were too big for you. You'll narrow your eyes and tell me I'm just like my father, knowing that that is the worst thing you can ever say to me.

I will get up and leave without a sound. Knowing that you loved me, just never the way that I loved you. You will try to hide behind your pride and I'll know that it's killing you inside. You'll insult me and call me names and tell me you never in your life want to see me again. And with every word, your heart will break a little more. Because deep down, in your most sacred and fragile place, you will know that you'll never find someone quite like me.

## Step On A Crack

Every day Mr. Gardner's withered ass wore off a little more corduroy from the seat of his favourite easy chair. He spent the majority of each day perched in front of his living room window peering through a part between the panels of his dusty turquoise curtains. Mr. Gardner's wartime house was small and cluttered. It smelled dank and musty with age and neglect and from windows and doors kept shut and closed off from the world. His wife Gracie, God rest her soul, had been dead for several years now. They had been a childless couple. Mr. Gardner had no family to speak of or, at any rate, any he chose to speak to, and he liked it that way. Just as he liked his house cordoned off from the street and sounds of the living. Their noise interfered with his thoughts and intruded upon his reveries. Yet, he knew everything that went on in the neighbourhood. Everything, that is, visible from his window. Although he'd never admit it deep inside Mr. Gardner felt it was him against a world he rejected.

Mr. Gardner kept tabs on a man who rode the 7:18 to work during the week. He'd wait until he saw him walking north from Hastings onto Elmwood Avenue then watch as the man stopped to smoke a cigarette, as was his habit, crushing it beneath his heel as the bus slowed to a stop. Mr. Gardner also noticed the man missed many Friday evenings and was absent many a Monday morning. Mr. Gardner suspected he was a drinker. "He's got the face," Gardner would smirk to himself self-righteously, "a drinkers face. It's as red as a beet and his suits look like Bargain Shop specials. I bet he spends all his money on booze! He's probably a salesman, they all drink!" Mr. Gardner hated salesmen. "Always trying to push people into buying something they don't need, don't want or can't afford," he'd sneer aloud. "If I need something I just go get it! I don't need no fast talking, snake-oil pushing salesman trying to change my mind. Salesmen ain't nothin' but a waste of skin."

Mr. Gardner would shake his head in disgust while lamenting loudly and at length about the decline of morality in modern society. He longed for the good old days when life was respectable and simple. When people knew their place and were the happier for it. When men were men and women were women and they all prayed to the same goddamned God! "Now everything has gone nuts!" he'd shout out loudly to an empty room.

He also followed the activities of a young blue-jeaned, single mother struggling to raise two small kids. She made frequent forays to Harper's Grocery on the corner of Bismarck and Bennington. "That kid's a spoiled brat!" he'd rant, "always got something with him ...candy, toys, you name it he's got it, and just look at that little girl's stroller ...musta cost a fortune, bettcha the welfare bought it for that useless little hippy strumpet, and why isn't that girl of hers walking anyway, she's gotta be two by now! By gawd when I was two I was working in the garden picking stones for my mama beneath a hot sun!"



Mr Gardner also raged over the recent activities of his long time neighbour, Mrs. Francis. She had been widowed for the last five years but recently met a man at church who put pink roses on her previously pale and grief-lined lonely cheeks. This infuriated Mr. Gardener and he'd snort "cheap hussy!" under his breath every time he saw her.

And so it went on ...day after day, week after week, month after month, year after bitter year. Mr Gardner's tirades were without boundaries. His self righteousness without end. Secure in his self-made, sanctimonious cocoon he remained stubbornly ignorant of the world beyond his window. Mr. Gardner had arranged that his groceries were delivered, his pension cheques automatically deposited into his bank account and often employed the paperboy who lived down the street to run errands and do odd jobs for him, grumbling bitterly over the little pittance he paid the poor lad.

Then one cold day a little girl passed by his window. He had never seen her in the neighbourhood before but soon he noticed she was walking by his window almost everyday. Something about the girl disturbed him. She was a strange looking little thing; skinny and sad-looking with fine, almost colourless ash blond hair, that hung to the middle of her back. He imagined that her eyes were green, but for the life of him could not explain why. They were large and hollowed looking, tilting up at each corner and filled a small, pinched and decidedly pale face. Mr. Gardner was irked by the way she walked. Nervously glancing over her shoulder as if someone, or something, was lurking behind her. If she wasn't peering over her shoulder she was staring at the ground. In his mind Mr. Gardner would hear ..."step on a crack, break yer mamma's back, step on a crack break yer mamma's back." He always heard it twice.

Unsurprisingly Mr. Gardner didn't like this girl. She irritated him; reminded him of someone or something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Maybe it was the sadness that cloaked her like a shroud, although why such uncharacteristically fanciful words came to mind he hadn't a clue. Perhaps it was because she had a haunted look making her appear vulnerable and unprotected. He wasn't sure what the reason was but he knew this... she upset his tidy little world. His comfortable routine was going awry and he found himself thinking about her at night and would toss restlessly in his bed. This had never, ever happened before. Mr. Gardner did not like things that had never, ever happened before. Change was another nuisance he could live without.

The small industrial city where Mr. Gardner lived for over 75 years was prettier than most factory towns but had a depressing air of reserve that had prevented it from ever being cozy. It was a place where the credo "pride goeth before a fall" held a lot more credence than "love thy neighbour". But now things were changing. An influx of workers were filling positions being vacated by an aging population at, in Mr. Gardner's opinion, an alarming rate. They were young families looking for jobs

and they were changing the fabric of the old conservative town he knew and relied on. Yes, "the times they were a-changing..." and not in a good way in his mind, no not in a good way at all.

"Why there are even foreigners here now!" Gardner would fret. Restaurants with names he never heard of were advertising foods in the local newspaper that he couldn't even pronounce. He was beside himself. "Where will it end!" he yelled. Mr Gardner's once familiar town was becoming both bewildering and totally alien to him.

One evening while waiting for "that girl" as he began to call her, Mr. Gardner suddenly remembered an emaciated half grown cat that yowled around his door one cold winter. Mr Gardner was surprised he remembered it at all. He tried everything he could think of to shut the wretched thing up and in the process littered his backyard with old pots, and pans, empty cans and worn out boots and shoes. Nothing worked and the mess in the yard pissed him off even more, so one night in a fit of rage, Mr. Gardener brought out his old service revolver. The damn thing still worked but what surprised him even more was how he dropped that squalling little nuisance with one shot! He still had the touch! Mr. Gardener congratulated himself on his marksmanship, despite not having shot a gun in years. What rankled him however was how much it cost to have the yard cleaned up. Oh, and the visit by the local police department which was an outrageous waste of taxpayers money. He told them so after explaining me merely had been cleaning the gun and had not realized it had been loaded. They confiscated both the revolver and bullets after giving him a lecture on gun safety and a firm warning about the law in regard to firing weapons within the city limits. "Fascists! he raged after they left. But he really didn't need the gun anymore anyway so, "what the hell, let the bastards have it!" he shouted to no one in particular, "just let them take the damn thing from a defenceless old man, I don't give a rat's ass what those buggers do!"

Mr. Gardner was jerked out of his reverie by the appearance of the girl. "She's skin and bone!" he ranted. His angry words shattering the silence of the dark and dusty empty room. Her thinness offended him. "Why the hell doesn't she eat! Then he noticed her bare feet and it made him so mad he felt dizzy " Why won't she stand up straight for God's sake? What in the world is wrong with that stupid little bitch anyway?" His anger echoed randomly throughout his cheerless house. Spittle coating his thin and disapproving lips. A flood of self-righteous anger stirred the sluggish blood that pooled in his narrow clogged veins making his heart thump loudly in his ears. Suddenly a memory came to mind. He could see the paperboy cleaning up his yard the day after he shot the cat. he remembered how the boy cried while tenderly gathering up it's lifeless little body, gently placing it in a cardboard box. "Fuck it!" Gardner exploded, scowling. His glaring eyes followed the girl as she made her way toward the corner and just before she turned out of sight he saw her look over her shoulder and could have sworn her parting glance was directed at the slit in the curtains. His cheeks reddened and feeling slightly sick and out of breath he got up

and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The girl bothered him so much his hatred felt like a physical illness.

One overcast evening, hovering on the cusp of twilight, he sat at his usual spot waiting for her. That's all he did lately... wait and watch for her. As time passed his agitation grew. A crack of lightning almost made him jump out of his skin. Clutching his chest he felt his heart thumping in accompaniment to the subsequent roll of thunder. "Why I'm as jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof!" he whispered. The ensuing downpour was immediate and heavy.

That night the shadows in the old house seemed darker somehow...heavier. A subtle change in the atmosphere tugged at his conscience to niggle at the back of his mind. He felt edgy and bothered. The house felt damper, mustier and hotter than usual ... uncomfortably so. There was a sense of foreboding that weighed down upon him, almost smothering him. Mr Gardener couldn't get that girl out of his mind. With every beat of his heart his head throbbed. Mr. Gardener rarely ever got a headache but he sure the hell had one now. Finally he saw her. She was walking her peculiar walk, barefoot, head down, soaked to the skin. "Step on a crack break yer mommas back, step on a crack break yer mommas back"... a towering rage consumed him swelling his heart like a tidal wave. "That damn girl looks like a cat in the rain!" he shrieked. Mr. Gardener hated cats.

When she was directly in front of his window she stopped. Standing stock still for a moment, she turned to face the window. For a split second his heart froze then beat painfully against his ribcage. Incredibly the girl walked straight toward that slit in the curtains. Perspiring he drew back but could not help watching as she pressed her face closer to the window. He'd been right, her eyes were green. Up close the girl seemed weirdly familiar in an indescribable, eerie and somehow alien way. As she pressed even closer to the window she stared straight into his astonished, rheumy, baby blues and said "Meow!" Mr. Gardner 's body stiffened and dropped to the floor, deader than a door knob.

Špela Šalamun

## The Loss

It was raining. Not a proper downpour, but enough that my hair was starting to drip. Still, I stood unmoving, staring at the gold letters chiseled into the marble.

It's hard, losing someone. It doesn't matter that he was old, frail, sickly. It doesn't matter that he was living in a nursing home for the past two years. It's irrelevant that he spent his last month in a hospital. Even the fact that he has passed on to a better place is not of any help. He was my grandfather, the person who ferried me to kindergarten, always had a candy in his pocket, bought me my first cell phone.

I ran my fingers over the letters, then the numbers. I closed my eyes, refusing the tears their release. He wouldn't want that.

He used to sit me in front of the TV, putting on Cartoon Network, while he was cooking. He is the reason I learned English. When there was no interesting cartoon on, he gave me a book to leaf through. Never a novel, always an encyclopedia, lexicon, tourist guide. I had thousands of questions, and he answered every one of them. What he didn't know, he told me to look up in the book. If it wasn't in that book, he got another.

I dropped my hand from the tombstone and bowed my head. It's been a month, you'd think it would get easier. It didn't. It still hurt seeing his name written above a sea of candles.

When I was in 7th grade, he bought me my first corn field. It always made me smile. Still does, but now the smile is slightly off, brittle, weak. It was nice to remember those times, but it hurts. It drives the bitter reality of his passing deeper. But I need to remember the good times, so I can get through the bad. I need to remember how he was in life, not how death took him. I needed the memories to carry me through my life.

I opened my purse and rummaged through to find a lighter. I kneeled down carefully, avoiding the dried wax and the burning candles.

Four years ago, when I got my driver's license, he insisted on giving me a safety lesson before letting me borrow his car. I thought it was utterly ridiculous of him. I rolled my eyes through his lesson and nodded at the appropriate moments. From that day on, I got a shortened version of the lesson every time I borrowed his car. It used to drive me insane, but now I kind of miss his lectures.

I made room in front of the tombstone for one more candle. I put the burned out ones on the side to take to the trash when I leave.

Funny, I can't remember going to the cemetery once with my grandpa.

I lit the candle and placed it on the ground. I gathered the burned out candles and stood up. Taking one last look at his name, I said goodbye, turned around, and left.