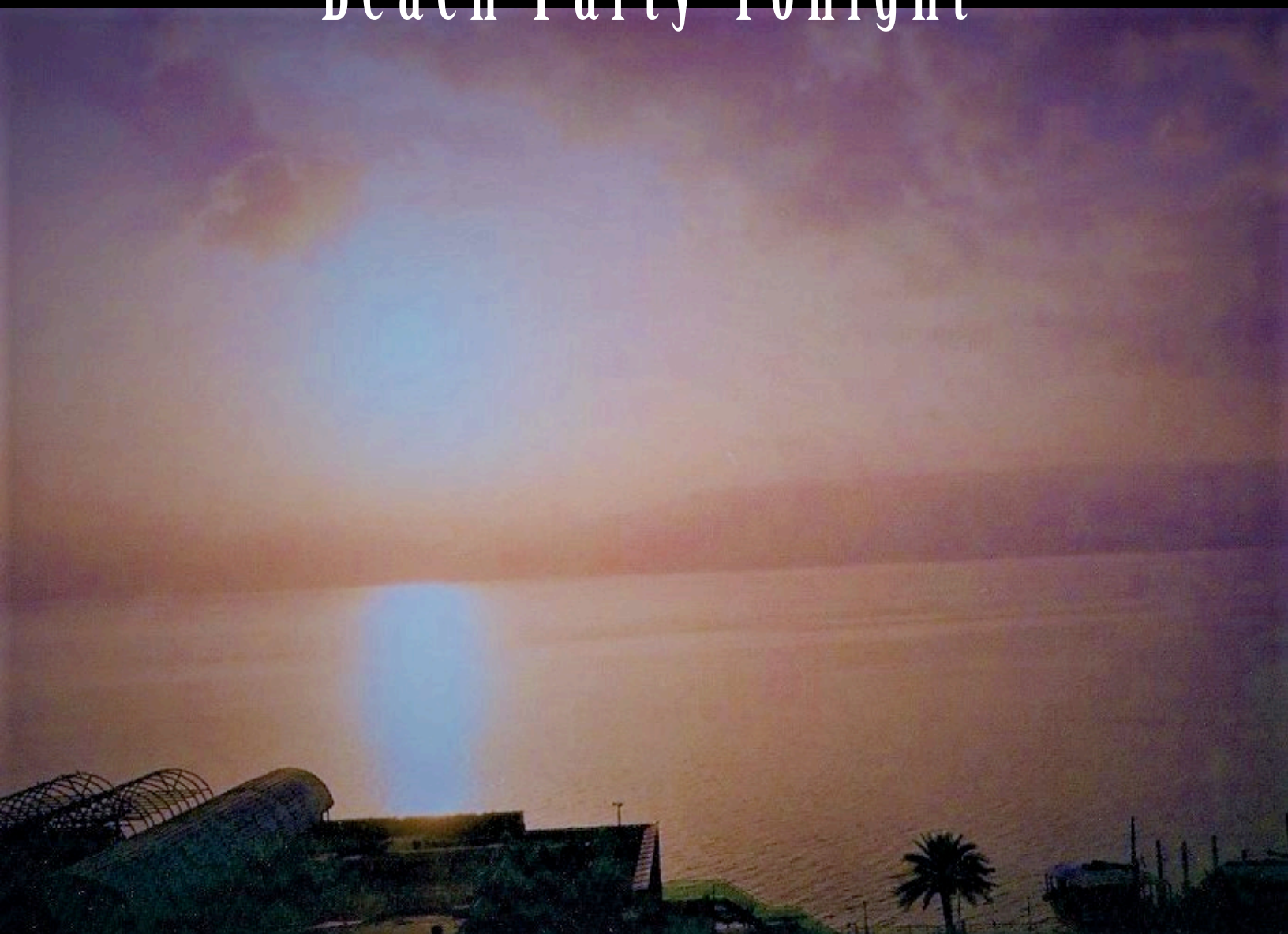


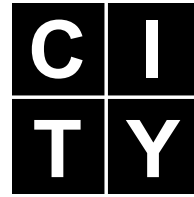
Issue 28 | Summer 2021

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Beach Party Tonight



The broken



Summer 2021 Issue 28

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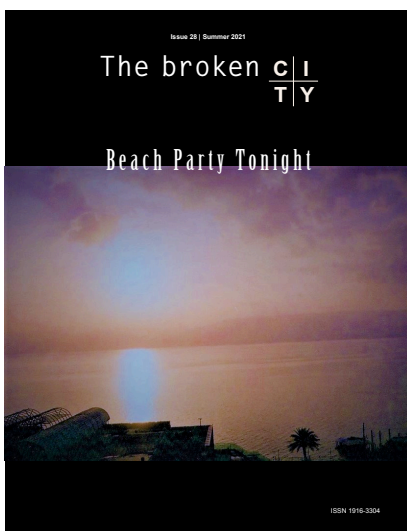
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Welcome to *The Broken City's* latest summer issue. Feel that sand between your toes... catch a wave... do people still hang ten? The party starts when the sun goes down.

Cover Photograph:

KJ Hannah Greenberg (front cover, back cover) tilts at social ills and encourages personal evolutions via poetry, prose, and visual art. Her bold, textural, colorful images have appeared in various places, including, but not limited to: *Bewildering Stories*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Les Femmes Folles*, *Mused*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Stone Coast Review*, *The Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *The Front Porch Review*, *Tuck*, and *Yellow Mama*.
www.kjhannahgreenberg.net/index.php?p=1_86

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The Broken City is currently accepting submissions for its winter 2021 edition: So this is Christmas?

It has been a while since the magazine ran a December-ish holiday issue. Snow; ice; Hanukkah; Festivus; hockey, sleigh rides; touques—if it has something to do with winter, we want to see it. We'll even read poetry about Santa Claus.

Send poetry, fiction, essays, illustrations and photography to thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com.

Deadline is: December 10, 2021. Submitters will be contacted after that date, with news of acceptance or rejection.

Rapture

Mary Beth Hines

Gold shot green unblinking eyes, I lean
into the curve and flare of a summer
sunset, flee the rollicking garden
party in my sometimes-lover's yard.

The grasshopper startles at my feet,
freezes then sweeps down the hill.
His banded wings mingle with green
salt marsh rush, bluestem grass.

Keen to reel him in I lose
my step and keel head-over-
stiletto-heels. A long-ago day rushes
back. I can see my red dress wheel,
field of poppies tilt toward stream.

Grasshopper gazes from afar.
His heart raptures through his whole body—
a wonder revealed to me in college
labs, dissecting with a man I wanted
dearly to impress.

Mary Beth Hines's debut poetry collection, Winter at a Summer House, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books in 2022. Her poems, and short fiction and non-fiction, appear in journals such as Brilliant Flash Fiction, Crab Orchard Review, Madcap Review, Panoply, and Turtle Island Quarterly among many others. Following a career as a communications and outreach program manager, she writes from her home in Massachusetts. Connect with her at marybethhines.com.

Hurry Up, Sunrise: Ocean Grove

Susanna Rich

Alligator profiles scud the horizon—
gray cirrus shearing gray cirrus.

Still, as if our scrub, scrub of this earth
could create undefracted dawns,

the beach zamboni rakes up Dunkin' Donut cups,
scrambled fishing line, shards of plastic

lighters and barrettes; swirls around sleeping-
bagged lovers; combs the sand with long windings

of musical staffs with blue mussel notes.
I rose early enough, and it's time, the almanac said—

but there's no sun—the blood yolk ooze of it,
the butterscotch burn that says I am here.

I slice the air with my walking,
backwards, sometimes, in case the bright tongue flicks,

just then, into flame.
Yet, clouds crowd exactly where the sun might rise,

as I Bic words onto a Pinot Noir wine label I found,
like a Chinese cookie fortune on the beach—

I write led by the gulls above its bar code,
scratch battleship, pier with flag over its Government Warnings,

as if something I write might
conjure the sun from those soft-toothed maws,

those gold-rimmed pelts.
As if because I was looking the sky would

turn to sudden lace and I might have what I have:
my toes noodled into wet morning sand,

my secular hands pressed in prayer,
over my parting lips.

*"Hurry Up, Sunrise: Ocean Grove" was first published in Urthona (UK).
"Sand Castle Contest: Belmar" (opposite) was first published in Under a
Gulls Wing.*

Sand Castle Contest: Belmar

Susanna Rich

*They build their houses with sand
and they play with empty shells.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

We converge: queues of Speedos;
Trailways of children in uniform Ts;
hillocks of Santa bellies tanned and creased
from hunched, unshaded sleep.

Our yellow-shirted Bell Atlantic sponsors
mill, like wasps, with clipboards and pens.
McDonald's golden arch rises like a startled eyebrow
over the disemboweled boardwalk pavilion.

We build a wall of screams and scurries
against the breakers; haul its small foam claws
to mold a momentary clay, moist enough
to shape these effigies of ourselves.

Rising from the beach like breaths—
a silent spray-painted HP laptop made of sand,
a sand soccer ball, and a sand convertible
mound and crater and moon the beach.

Elite sculptors sport spray bottles and hoses
to I.V. into the bellies of sand sharks
and dolphins, mermaids blinking seashells
against an exacting sun.

Something in having to do this in throngs—
bury our smiling children to their necks,
build castles ringed with Escher stairs,
forsaking the trouble of inner rooms.

*Susanna Rich's first book of poetry, Surfing for Jesus, is a meditation on religion and commerce in America. Twice nominated for an Emmy Award, she is a Fulbright Fellow in Creative Writing, a passionate feminist, environmentalist, and activist. Susanna tours her musical, Shakespeare's *itches: The Women v. Will and performances focused on her poetry collections, most recently SHOUT! Poetry for Suffrage, Television Daddy, and The Drive Home. Visit her at wildnightsproductions.com and becauseicanteach.blogspot.com.*

Annie, to Say the Ocean Hasn't Changed You— *James Croal Jackson*

Tune-lover, beachcomber sculpting
seashells from stones to listen for ripples (nothing

loaded but time) and I have written—haven't I—
distance into oblivion (that tidal bass a metaphor,
its vastness deepening) & am I not a shell of was

once, was gripping to any mast to lose
the sea, change quivering—I swear—every molecule
of my being, I must (from the must) of any old

ceiling, the dust it lends to fading carpets,
the ones we walked and walk on today

James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. He has two chapbooks (Our Past Leaves, Kelsay Books, 2021 and The Frayed Edge of Memory, Writing Knights, 2017) with one forthcoming: Count Seeds With Me (Ethel, 2022). He edits The Mantle Poetry from Pittsburgh, PA. jamescroaljackson.com

The Red Tide *Anthony J. Mohr*

Big Louie yelled as he pointed out to sea. “Outside! My God, outside! It’s so big. Look at that thing form.” The wave swelled and then piped, emitting a throaty rumble lasting almost fifteen seconds before turning into foam and crashing onto the beach. “Outside!” referred to waves we could bodysurf. You swam in sync with the crest, then held yourself rigid, arms straight ahead for a ride on the inbound tide. Big Louie ran for the sea and the next wave. So did we all.

We were the products of a brilliant time, the Southern Califor-

nia of July 1964, the month that Gary, Brian, Joe, Eric, Big Louie, Rich, and I gave ourselves up to the water. Six weeks from the start of our senior year, we seven were poised to run our high school before heading east to college. We deserved these dreamy days on the sand. Lying on our blankets, talking about student government and the Johnson-Goldwater matchup as if they were equally important (which to us, that summer, they were), we were stoked on teenage success and confident of a future even more brilliant. Even better, I’d learn to balance my two

households, to toggle back and forth between father and stepfather with alacrity, buoyed by campus life and now the beach.

A wave was about to break. Joe caught it. I missed and dove under it. When I surfaced and looked back, Joe was rollicking through the foam to the shoreline. In control to the end, he let out a victory yell—“Team!” is what he hollered—as he flailed his arms and raced to our beach blankets.

That summer felt magical at the beach, then a teenage Eden stretching from Point Conception, fifty miles

west of Santa Barbara, to the Mexican border. Gary, Brian, Joe, Eric, Big Louie, Rich, and I baked on our towels, sun-screen-free, radios going, reveling in gossip. No other place made me feel as good as that sandy ribbon. Burgers and fries were cheap, parking cost a dollar, adults were scarce, and the waves were free. I craved it—the sound of the surf, warm silicon granules against my fingers, and the sun, of course the sun, in the words of Eugene Burdick, “a kind sun... a sun designed for Utopia.”

On one of those days, Joe rolled onto his back. “What’s next year’s debate topic?” he asked.

Before I could say “nuclear disarmament,” “House of the Rising Sun” came over the transistor. “Hey, The Animals,” Eric said. He sounded half asleep.

Someone mentioned lunch, so we traipsed to the food stand, a hut with sand for a floor and Top 40 songs piped through a speaker on its rickety roof. The melody blended with female voices nearby. One of those voices belonged to a blonde who didn’t return my gaze as she paid for a Pepsi. It didn’t matter. I’d land a beach babe someday. It would just happen, the way California teenagers, at least California’s white teenagers, used to believe good things would come their way.

After we finished our hamburgers, Gary, Brian, Joe, Eric, Big Louie, Rich, and I fell back to sleep until the afternoon marine layer moistened the air. Then we gathered our blankets and tramped through the sand to our car. The radio blasted all the way to our houses, where we ran upstairs to shower before dinner.

The nights were like velvet. Our bodies became little ovens, giving off the heat we’d absorbed without sunscreen. We saw *Viva Las Vegas*

at the drive-in. The Beatles made us smile and groove. “A Hard Day’s Night” reached Number One on the Fabulous Forty Survey. Their first movie by the same name was due out on August 11. We searched the beaches for grunion runs. We took turns driving there. We built bonfires there. We played guitars there. Our grades were high. We flew east to look at schools. The Democrats were the party of peace and paychecks. Our swimming pools were heated so we could play Marco Polo in them until bedtime. We worried about nothing. My stepfather’s new company was about to win another contract. My father was in Sweden, filming a pilot for what he was sure would become his new TV series—*Holiday for Hire*: the story of a travel agent who catered to the very rich.

*

The red tide arrived in August. Most likely it was an algae bloom, probably nontoxic because none of us got sick. The diatoms made the water glow whenever something—like a swimmer or a wave—stirred them. And since breaking waves stirred them plenty, the surf line became a band of light.

Surfing that band of light sounded like a grand adventure, and on the night of August 4, we decided to try. Everyone gathered at my house. We’d just finished piling blankets and snacks into the car when Stan, my stepfather, said the President was about to give a speech. At 8:36 Pacific Daylight Time, Lyndon Johnson’s face appeared on the television.

He opened with the phrase “As president and commander in chief...” The group stiffened. Most of us had taken civics in summer school. We knew that when a president used those words, a military response was coming.

Johnson continued: “Renewed

hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply.”

“It’s about time,” muttered Stan.

“That reply is being given as I speak to you tonight. Air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam which have been used in these hostile operations.”

We were bombing North Vietnam. Everyone in my den supported this long overdue move. So did LBJ’s opponent. Looking straight into the TV camera, the President informed us, “I was able to reach Senator Goldwater and I am glad to say that he has expressed his support of the statement that I am making to you tonight.”

Certain moments rate as a steeple in a life, the apex of a season. Tuesday night, August 4, 1964, offered such a moment. My friends and I whooped through the twenty-minute drive from my house to the sea. The deejay on KRLA said it best: finally, we’re showing those Communists what for. He sounded as ebullient as we felt, racing west toward the red tide. Even better, President Johnson promised that he would get Congress “to pass a resolution making it clear that our government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in Southeast Asia.”

Surely, we’d win there. My friends and I saw no risk in ramping up the war. Neither did Stan. Neither did my father. Beating the Communists in Vietnam and everywhere else on the planet had become one of the few subjects about which both of them agreed. They as well as I looked

forward to enjoying Walter Cronkite's coverage of a victory march through Hanoi followed by a free Vietnam joining Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines in SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The country would become, as a journalist had written of South Korea, "a worthy ally of the United States." One of my friends said that with long stretches of beach and perfect waves all year, Da Nang offered great surfing. Maybe one day I'd bicycle through the rice paddies. Could anybody have been so dumb about the war? West LA brimmed with American naïfs. We little princes were stupid.

We barreled down the Cali-

fornia Incline, "The best on-ramp in the world" as author Deanne Stillman labeled it, for the road dropped us from the top of the cliffs of Santa Monica to the Pacific Coast Highway. A quick left and we arrived at Tee's Beach.

Brian was the first into the water. Gary joined him and they swam toward an oncoming shadow of water, the top of which was a strip of lit algae. Before diving under the wave, I saw Brian's head sticking out from the vertical water, his mouth an oval, eyes glaring. For an instant a corona surrounded him; then the wave crashed. Brian scored a perfect ride to the beach. "All right, all right," he shouted. Next came Gary. Emerging from the

glowing froth, he threw back his head and hollered, "Hey Bamboola!"

We drove home at midnight. En route, Eric voiced an idea for Student Council. Gary invited us to a swimming party on Saturday. And I decided to ask out Margie, a vivacious girl who believed in student government as fervently as I. Braving the red tide gave me the courage to call her. The Pigskin Prom was set for September 26. If I reached her in the morning, Margie would have enough notice. She'd say yes. It was going to be a sensational senior year. A year full of parties and fun. A carefree year, with splendid years to come, especially now that Vietnam was taken care of.

A five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, Anthony J. Mohr's work has appeared in, among other places, Brevity's blog, The Christian Science Monitor, DIAGRAM, Eclectica, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Hippocampus Magazine, The MacGuffin, North Dakota Quarterly, Superstition Review, ZZZZYVA, and several anthologies. He received honorable mention in Sequestrium's 2016 Editor's Reprint Award and is an associate editor of Evening Street Review. In 2021, he became a Fellow at the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard.

Riding the Wave

Jann Everard

There's no warning. No rustle in the palm fronds above. It's instinct—some primal synaptic firing—that makes me push Ben off the path.

"Jesus," he says as he regains his balance. The coconut has landed where our footprints end. As I watch Ben nudge it with his toe, I can tell this is another strike against Koh Lanta—the whole tropical-island-beach-bungalow holiday I'd planned.

"It's no big deal," I say. "It happens all the time."

"Seriously? I didn't expect to be killed by a coconut on vacation."

"Get real. How many times

have you seen that headline trending?" "It's bad enough, what with the mosquitoes, the heat, the possibility of a tsunami."

"So, we should have gone to New York City? Ever hear of bedbugs? Or 9/11?"

Ben ignores me and continues trudging up the path. Koh Lanta is stifling in the mid-afternoon. I've told him that the idea is to get up early and nap after lunch, but he has his routines. A run on the beach has left him cranky and dehydrated.

He stops and cocks his head as if he's making sure the waves are going

in and out according to the breath of the moon and not some violent earthly sneeze. Four months ago, we decided we needed an exotic holiday destination to get out of our rut. As a precaution against tidal waves, I rented the bungalow highest on the hill. It's a slog to get to, but it's also the most private. Back home we've been sharing an apartment with friends, a cheap, thin-walled place that has made us self-conscious, our sex planned and occasional. As we pass the bungalow closest to ours, we can hear people going at it. I try to catch Ben's eye, to remind him that that is what an island holiday is all

about. But he stomps past me saying, "Dibs on the shower."

Bare bulbs light the open-air restaurant. We're the first to arrive for dinner. "How about here?" Ben points at a picnic table. I know he means for me to sit next to him, but I slide onto the bench opposite. I plan to look him in the eye when I launch into what the HR hacks at my workplace call a "crucial conversation." He's pissed because I won't consider an early retreat to the urban comforts of Bangkok. I'm pissed because he won't take in any of the activities Koh Lanta has to offer: scooter tours, elephant rides, watching monkeys at the national park. I mean, how can the guy not want to see wild baby monkeys when they're as cute as kittens? I'm about to tell Ben that I'm totally frustrated, but get distracted when two guys and an elf-sized girl enter the restaurant.

"Thank God, fresh blood," says the blond guy, plunking down next to me while elf-girl slides in on my other side. She wears a damp bikini and is tanned as dark as teakwood. "Matteo, don't you dare sit next to me," she scolds. "You're all sandy." The shorter, darker guy shrugs and sits next to Ben instead.

"Some cold ones," the blond calls out to the waiter while stretching across the table to shake. "I'm Raul. Meet Penny and Matteo. Our treat."

Ben shakes, but I can see his grip is weak with disinterest. "Ben," he says, "and Sheri."

Raul distributes bottles. "Like the ice cream?" he says and keeps talking even as Ben tries to correct him. "Are you two interesting? No one interesting has checked in for weeks." Raul takes a pull on his beer and leans into me as he calls out, "Can we get some

food over here, my friend?"

"You're hot." Penny plucks at my long shirtsleeve. Her hair is as white as a moon snail. She and Raul are so close I can smell their perspiration. I think they'd taste like pretzels.

"I burn easily," I say, lifting my beer to take a sip. The label is blurred and the contents are so strong that my tonsils shrivel and I wonder whether the bottle's been spiked. But the others are chugging it back. "When did you arrive?" I ask, wiping a hand over my numb lips.

The waiter slides plates on the table. "Oh, we practically live here," says Raul. He pushes a platter towards me. "Try the papaya," he adds, and watches as I fork a piece into my mouth. The flesh is the colour of Aperol and the dressing has a sweet-spicy heat. Saliva gushes, a rush of pleasure that reaches down into my pelvis.

"It's good," I say, dousing the tingles with half a bottle of beer that triggers a fit of coughing. Raul hands me another bottle. I push it away, then pull it back, too choked to ask for water.

Penny stares until I regain control. "Everything's good here," she says, spooning white fish flesh onto my plate. "You'll never get anything this fresh at home."

From across the table Matteo grabs her wrist and forces her to drop a spoonful onto his open palm. There is something primal about their gesture that catches both Ben and me off guard and we lock eyes, like confederates in a strange land.

I hear a splash and give a quick glance over my shoulder, Raul's moist breath in my ear. "Seeing ghosts of the tsunami? Afraid of water?"

"What would be the point of coming here then?" I ask, and he winks knowingly. He picks up my right hand,

places it on his bare thigh and anchors my fingers. "Don't worry," he says. "We can save you."

I don't pull back, surprised that I don't pull back. I'm right across the table from Ben; we've been together for nearly two years. But under my baby finger Raul's thigh is smooth and my fingertips feel like they're suctioned to it.

I try to get Ben's attention, but Matteo has him locked in a halting conversation. "Local *birra*," he says, "tastes like sheet, but cheap." His shoulder presses up against Ben's even though they have the whole length of the bench to themselves. Ben stiffens as Matteo says something more in a low voice I don't catch. I hope he's telling Ben to loosen up.

"Where're you all from?" I ask Penny, trying not to think about my hand, about the way Raul is pushing my finger back and forth with his thumb.

She pops another slice of fish into her mouth and shrugs. I wish I looked like her when I chewed. My jaw moves side to side when I eat.

She knows I'm fascinated by her. "You're cute," she says and kisses me close to, but not quite at the corner of my mouth. For the next few minutes, I sit in a haze of alcohol as the conversation moves on without me. The three met in Morocco, Penny says, rock climbing on some massive wall outside Marrakech. She describes it as bold climbing. She has an accent and peppers her stories with the word bold. So-and-so is bold. Some other backpacker they know likes bold travelling. The word sounds funny because I can't think of the last time I used it. Finally, she says, "Practice starts in a few minutes."

Raul gives my hand one last

squeeze. "Practice?" Ben asks, and Penny answers, "There's a show tomorrow." The others stand up and Matteo points at a cloudburst of flame that erupts from the darkness. "Da fire breathing," he says. "Very sexy. You learn some sexy here." He nods at Ben as if to suggest it's not just an opportunity, but a duty.

Matteo leads us down the path to the beach. Someone has marked off an area in the sand with lit torches. There are now six people milling about. In the flickering light, everything is shaded in navy and gold.

Raul shows us where to sit. "There's more brew in the cooler," he says, pointing to a battered Styrofoam box not far off. I can hear moving water but can't see it. It's a moonless night.

Ben leans in. "Wouldn't you like some time alone?" he asks.

I might have earlier today but not since we met this crazy group. In comparison, Ben seems so—what? I'm looking for the word that's the opposite of bold. It's not that he isn't a great guy. He's bright, athletic, gainfully employed. But next to Raul, I'm reminded of my favourite childhood book character. Like Flat Stanley, Ben just seems, well, flat.

"You know, I think I'd like to stay," I say.

He either sighs or yawns. My own fatigue is gone, replaced by an alcohol-fueled buzz. My muscles want to move and just as I think this, a song blares from the restaurant. Loud and raucous. Bold music.

Raul and one of the locals walk onto the makeshift stage holding flaming sticks. Raul's is long, with a short section of fire at each end. The other guy has two, almost entirely lit. The breadth of Raul's bare chest makes him impressive, but it's the leaner fellow that pulls the eye, his muscles rippling

closer to the surface. They twirl the flames around their bodies in complicated routines, music searing the air, the treble tuned too high.

"You should learn to do this," I say to Ben. "It's pretty hot."

Ben drags a hand over his face, swipes the sweat on his t-shirt sleeve. Raul and his partner throw their sticks in the air, catch them, throw to each other. The flames leave trails of light, the illusion of circles and arcs.

Ben's eyelids droop. "These guys are just a circus act. Besides, I wouldn't want to burn my hands." He puts an arm around me. "Come on, Sheri, I really need to be with you." I lean in but don't feel the same excitement I felt when I touched Raul. Ben's skin is clammy.

"Want another beer?" I ask. We're between acts now, Penny and another girl getting ready to go on. They wear sarongs around their hips, carry what look like tennis balls on strings.

"Sure," Ben says. When I move my body away from his, he doesn't straighten, seems unaware he's off kilter.

I grab three bottles from the cooler, hand Ben two. "You know I can give you whatever you want," he slurs.

"I know, babe," I say. "Let's watch."

The first girl lights her balls at a torch and moves center stage. I don't recognize the music. It has no lyrics. At first, she just swings the flames low to the ground. When someone whistles she begins to move her hips, her abs, her upper body. She is serpentine—a belly dancer with fire. Light glistens off the curve of her waist, the mounds of her breasts. The place goes quiet except for the music and the sound of the fiery balls swishing through the air.

Ben moans beside me, keels over into the sand. There is a hiss

as Penny lights her balls and slips on stage. While the first performer looks serene as she performs, Penny looks feline. She catches my eye. Soon the two women undulate together, a synchronized flirtation. Their artistry is something, but it's their bodies that entertain. They're red-hot inside.

"Ben." Matteo is at our backs. "Come."

"What?" Ben pushes himself upright.

Matteo ignores the girls. "Breathing da fire. You must try this, my friend."

Ben speaks slowly. "No, bro', I need to get to bed. Sheri?" The show has ended. The music fades. "Sheri?" Ben asks again.

"I'm staying," I say.

He stands and sways. He is lean and well-shaped, but my thoughts have turned mean. If he'd shown just one bit of enthusiasm, said "awesome!" or "bad-ass"—anything appreciative at all—I might have gone with him. Instead, my eyes flick to the others lingering around stage, their skin burnished in the torchlight.

"I'll try it. Matteo, show me!" I say.

Matteo grins and waits for me to cross the sand. "Ben?" he calls.

But Ben's shadow is already being absorbed into the palms. When he disappears, Matteo clasps me on the shoulders. "He'll come 'round. But now you want to taste da fuel. You must know how to kiss da vapour. *Aspetta!*" He pours something into his mouth from a bowl, presses his lips to mine, forcing them open. His mouth reminds me of a new car. Waxy clean. He demonstrates moving a rod close to his mouth, spraying paraffin over the flame.

"This is no trick for beginner," he says. "You must be very *calma*, very

audace." The gist of the word is clear. I must be audacious. I must be fucking bold.

He shows me, time after time, the fire spraying and ballooning away from his mouth. All the sounds around me fade. It is as if I have slipped below the water, let my ears fill. It's a sensation I have always hated, but now I see the beauty in that underwater silence. How it focuses the mind.

"For real now," I say, and Matteo hands me protective glasses, a towel to wipe my mouth, the flaming rod and fuel.

We lock eyes. I bring the bowl to my mouth and take in the liquid, hold it there, the taste still unfamiliar on my tongue.

Raul yells, "Everybody in!"

Matteo puts a hand on my hand, drawing away the flame. "You ready, *bella*. I can see you got the fire within. But we go swimming now. You light up after."

I grab for the rod, but Matteo drops the flame to die in the sand, leaving me wanting like a lover wants. He knows it and backs off, hands gesturing me to follow him. During the show, I had ignored the water, far off on the beach at low tide. But now, the small crowd pulls me along. I follow the bodies as they peel off their trunks, their bikinis and sarongs and throw them in small heaps on the sand. Penny appears before me, plucking at the buttons of my shirt, while Raul hustles me from behind until we stop at the water's edge to toss away the last of my clothes. "I've got you," Raul whispers as he carries me into the water, balances me flat on its surface. Small crests lap

over my feet, cool the places between my legs. The sensation makes me fold between Raul's strong hands and my face dips below the water. I flail and grab for him, bucking, the taste of salt and adrenaline and paraffin filling my mouth. Then my ears take in water, my fear is muffled, and I calm down. He sets me upon the surface again.

"Don't be afraid," Raul says, or perhaps it is Matteo. Or Penny. "We can teach you to dance, to breathe fire, to ride the wave." Their many hands flutter on my flesh, their skin warm against my skin.

Sometime in the night I wake up, wrapped in a sarong. I have no recollection of climbing to the bungalow, no memory of crawling into bed. Ben is beside me. When I move, he murmurs, "You smell like the ocean," in a tone that sounds like a complaint. I head for the door.

Outside the bungalow the air is fresher than the stale-beer stench in the bedroom. I stumble off the porch into the dark. There are small rustles in the vegetation around me.

I have no idea what time it is. All the bungalows are dark except the one closest to ours. Off the path, the ground is dense with plants, pocked with fallen coconuts. No thoughts enter my mind as I make my way down to the beach. My equilibrium is off—there is a kind of sloshing in my ears. The sand, when I reach it, is cool on my bare feet.

The tide is in. What used to be the stage is now submerged. It's all vapour—illusion—to breathe fire. It just takes boldness, and I taste the paraffin on my tongue again as I let the cold

salt water rush up against my ankles. I can feel Matteo's rod in my hand and practise the deep spitting exhale that creates the flame as I wade out until the water is at my thighs. Then I turn back.

It's Penny who shushes the others. "Did you hear a knock?" she asks. There is the sound of scrambling, steps on loose floorboards. The door opens.

"Hello, Sheri," she says, but with a French accent, a French meaning, her eyes challenging me to look away from her bare breasts. "Do you want to come in?"

The bungalow is one big room, two beds pulled together in the middle, Raul and Matteo sitting naked on the sides. Penny falls back between them, then shuffles towards Matteo, who says, "Ben, *non c'è?*"

I don't answer. There is silence as my glance swings around the room. Clothes hang from hooks along the walls. Small piles of shells and feathers line the sill. On the bureau, boxes of crackers stand between an electric kettle, loose tea bags. These three have settled in, built something uncomplicated. Penny pushes at the loose knot that holds her sarong in place. "Well, maybe one of them is interesting after all," she laughs and pats the open space between her and Raul.

I don't move. "I want to be part of the show," I say. They all grin and raise their eyebrows. If this is boldness, there's nothing to it. The surge I feel is powerful; it roars in my ears and then goes quiet. I can spit paraffin. I can play with fire. I can be so bold I'm brazen and ride the tidal wave to shore.

Jann Everard's fiction has been widely published in Canada as well as in the U.S., New Zealand and Australia. Recent fiction can be found in EVENT, Prairie Fire, Spartan, and Signs of Life: An Anthology. Jann divides her time between Toronto and Sidney, a small town on Vancouver Island.

A photograph of a beach with a pebbly shore, turquoise water, and a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

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