

THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 9 • SUMMER 2016

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The heat is on, but the poets in this issue keep their cool. Deftly. New poetry from: Ann Lettick, Richard James Allen, KB Ballentine, and Jennifer Rieger. Cary Tennis brings us a Cultural Commentary that sets off sparks between words and their meanings, and the artwork in this issue by Florentine-turned-Pisan Elena Secci is rich with summer light and compositional harmony.

In March we launched Ampersand, our new interview series, with best-selling author Laura Fraser. Keep an eye out for our next interview with Lee Foust, whose life bridges two worlds with real bridges you all know: the Ponte Vecchio and the Golden Gate.

The Sigh Press enjoyed a great turnout for another Poetry Night in April with special guest musician Derek Mattuchio who filled the room with original sound and heartfelt lyrics. More recently, our collaboration with Florence Writers on “Publishing Day” was a huge success thanks to help from Lori Hetherington and the fabulous visiting guests: writer Nuala O’Connor, literary agents Kimberley Cameron and Andrea Cirillo, and HarperCollins editor Martha Ashby.

The Summer Issue marks the second-year anniversary of The Sigh Press. We’d like to express our gratitude to our contributors, the extremely talented writers and artists connected to Tuscany who make this journal a quality one. Our goal is to bring their work to readers everywhere. And we’d like to thank those readers: without you, the words and images would just hover unseen on the page.

Please visit thesighpress.com for our Autumn Issue theme and deadline and check our Facebook page for frequent posts.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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A CHIARO DELLA NOTTE

ELENA SECCI



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QUARRY AT WEST CORINTH

ANN LETTICK

not undaunted
by branches
prickles
shoots
and what was in
the air
we arrived at the quarry

the sun
an oceanographer side-
tracked by this
shiftless jade
deadpan
pool
was jotting things down
on the rock-slats

as we changed

and lowered ourselves
sun-stippled
tingling
into the water

,

HOW LIFE TURNED OUT

RICHARD JAMES ALLEN

I think maybe you thought your life was going to be a wall-sized narrative painting, executed in oils by a maestro with his army of assistants, the kind of magnificent old master achievement that draws in crowds for a summer blockbuster exhibition,

but somehow it turned out to be a quietly reflective line drawing, a pen and ink study, or, to be unvarnished, something even more modest, the sketch of a moment dashed off on the back of a napkin by some student of life,

tapping out his impatience with his second-hand designer shoes, as he waited for an assignation that was never to be,

and then left on a corner table in a perky little inner city café, peeking almost provocatively out from under a coffee cup like an obscene doodle, yet failing to penetrate the ipod-headed mind-shuffle of the waitstaff,

but miraculously snatched from the garbage silk road to oblivion by a bored barista, who pinned this lifelikeness up on the communal bulletin board,

amusing himself for the smallest possible unit of a moment with the inner chuckle that this was a visual tip from a bohemian artist, escaping briefly from his choice of normal, recycling, or green waste bins,

and there it hung, in all its glory, this miniature piece of your life, for at least a day, perhaps even a little more, before gradually being encroached upon

by a patchwork of missives from others in the shifting tribe of restless café dwellers, each in their own way unashamed to broadcast their need for, or unabashed offer of,

somewhere to live,
someone to love,
someplace to work,
or somebody to walk the dog,

oh yes, don't expect to escape the dog.

,

A STORY TRAVELS IN ONE DIRECTION ONLY

KB BALLENTINE

He always knew he'd leave her,
like green leaching from September's trees,
hydrangea-blue webbed with brown veins.
Helicopter seeds eclipse the last gasp of roses,
dogwoods bruised with blood-red berries.
Long, slow summer, shielded with shade,
his hands trace whispers across her skin.
But dusk nips and hay spills from barns,
sheep bleating. Rain hazes the horizon.

Folded in dreams, night thrives,
stars cushioned in darkness,
ravens veiled by branches, shadow.
When she wakes, her flesh will tingle
in the still-stirring air.



DESERTO

,

WHEN YOUR FRIEND IS NEWLY WIDOWED,
YOU DRINK THE BOXED WINE

JENNIFER RIEGER

After hairpin turns on small country roads
almost striking wayward roosters
daring to cross our path,
we sat there.

Have I ever seen her face free of makeup?
Her hair not combed?
She looked even younger, somehow.
In dirt-trimmed slippers,
she retrieved three glasses and
poured the boxed red blend.

We listened about the last day—
the moments of fog and lucidity,
the moments of morphine and sleep.
She played the right songs,
relayed the right words.
Did everything perfect,

and we drank.

We knew of the headaches awaiting,
knew we shouldn't drive,
but we turned and curved,
the sun only peeking
blushed pinks and oranges,
no roosters in sight.

We didn't speak.

We knew each other's thoughts,
knew the homes that awaited—
the mess in the kitchen,
football blaring.

And still

we would curl into our men,
we would not complain of headaches,
we would not be too drunk,
we would not be too tired.

We'd cling.



LESSONS FROM THE DIVINE COMEDY

RICHARD JAMES ALLEN

If time still exists and we are still subject to it,
perhaps it is not too late for us to fall
into that swoon we call love?

But even if I do, if you do,
is it too late for our intertwining
to retune the dissonance of the world?

How can we set the tiny sparks of our entanglement
against whatever is the latest theory for the winding down,
drifting further and further apart, and dimming of the universe?

Unless Dante's guides were right,
in leading him towards the intuition
that "love...moves the sun and the other stars"?

If love is the binding force that animates the universe,
might not ours make a difference? With it,

could we not restart the great wheel of entrainment?

Reillumine its pathway through time? Set once again
into harmony the music of the spheres,
with these, our instruments?



DESERTO 2

an excerpt from
THE BURNING FAGGOTS BAKERY
CARY TENNIS

From the window of the small study in our top-floor apartment in the *centro storico* of Castiglion Fiorentino, I often watch the narrow stone street below. There is a bakery there that I did not know was a bakery for a long time because it has no sign.

My wife and I were talking one day in the kitchen and she told me about this bakery with no name, how it was the best one and how everyone said you have to go there but the woman who runs it is a little strange, they say. How? I say. I don't know, my wife says. They just say she is strange.

I see they must be trimming their trees out back, I say.

What? she says. They must be trimming their trees. They keep leaving these bundles of sticks by the steps to be picked up.

No, she says, those are for the oven.

Eh?

Those bundles of sticks are fuel. They burn them in the oven. Those are faggots.

I raise an eyebrow. She says, That's where "faggots" comes from, isn't it? Because they were burned?

There is so much we take for the truth that is not the truth, because it satisfies something or is, as my wife would say, "true in that that's how it feels." So I look it up. It's not really true. I mean, it's true that gay people were burned, especially in Venice, horror of horrors, but it's not true that that's where the American usage of "faggot" came from.

Me, the stickler, the fussbudget, *pignolo*. The history of the word is not true but the story is true and the story is a metaphor, another kind of doorway into what the past feels like, what the knowledge-that-is-not-knowledge feels like, how it is a belief, a what-we-must-believe-because-it-seems-true belief. Besides, don't you think, because it seems true it is true, in a way, isn't it, because it is in the hearts of people, because it makes us feel how cruel the world is, and that is a kind of knowledge, too, underneath which is how we look at history, how our stories assuage our guilt even as they stoke it, how we resist hard knowledge even as we seek it, how we embrace easy knowledge even knowing it's cheap and thin and will never last, and how the fear that all of us know but most of us, thank God, simply acknowledge and live with, drives the worst of us to beat faggots with stones and burn faggots with cigarettes and drag them behind pickup trucks and leave them on the sides of roads in desolate western states?

?

ESPRESSO

RICHARD JAMES ALLEN

There is no such thing as an innocent cup of coffee.

CONTRIBUTORS

BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: *Tell The Sigh Press about a situation when the heat was on but you kept your cool.*

*

ELENA SECCI was born in Florence where she attended the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno. She currently lives in the countryside between Pisa and Livorno. Her paintings can be found in many private collections in Italy, Germany, and United States.

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/ELENA-SECCI-ARTIST-112393708830610/

THE HEAT WAS ON when The Sigh Press asked this very question. Presently, I am in the middle of grading papers, writing student reports, and holding parent-teacher conferences, but I have to keep my cool and grin.

,

ANN LETTICK is from Connecticut but has spent most of her life in Italy with stints in France and Mexico. She is a long-time lecturer of English language and American culture at the University of Florence. A writer of short stories and poetry, Lettick's poems are largely based on her autistic brother. Her work appeared in the US in *Exquisite Corpse*.

THE HEAT WAS ON years back when I walked into a classroom of about 50 immigrants in a Los Angeles night school to teach them English as a second language. Had never taught such a big group before, felt like I was up on stage... Turned out to be my best job, with dedicated, grateful students. A point of pride was that I learned all their names.

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RICHARD JAMES ALLEN'S ten books of poetry, fiction and performance texts include *Fixing the Broken Nightingale* (Flying Island Books), *The Kamikaze Mind* (Brandl & Schlesinger) and *Thursday's Fictions* (Five Islands Press), shortlisted for the *Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry*. Australian-born Allen won the *Chancellor's Award* for most outstanding PhD thesis at the University of Technology, Sydney. Widely published in anthologies, journals and online for over thirty years, Allen has been the recipient of numerous awards, nominations, and grants, and has enjoyed unique opportunities during his international career as an acclaimed writer, director, choreographer, and performer.

WWW.PHYSICALTV.COM.AU

WWW.FIXINGTHEBROKENNIGHTINGALE.COM

WWW.POETRYLIBRARY.EDU.AU/POETS/ALLEN-RICHARD-JAMES

THE "HEAT IS ON" for anyone trying to live the life of an artist in the 21st century. Competing claims argue for your time and attention, challenge your sense of value and the worthwhileness of what you have dedicated your life to, fight to pull the development of your work off its coherent

trajectory. I keep my “cool” through the practice of yoga, which clears the pathways of the mind and body and allows the chaos of the world’s demands for attention to become a pattern, a dance of being, from which I write.

—

KB BALLENTINE’S work appears in *River of Earth and Sky: Poems for the Twenty-first Century* (2015), *Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume VI: Tennessee* (2013) and *Southern Light: Twelve Contemporary Southern Poets* (2011). Her third collection, *What Comes of Waiting*, won the 2013 Blue Light Press Book Award.

WWW.KBBALLENTINE.COM

I TEACH HIGH SCHOOL THEATRE and we had our first dress rehearsal for *Peter Pan*. I run it just like the show, without interrupting or helping. During the set changes, it was taking them too long to move. I sat (im)patiently during the first two scenes, sweating them out, and finally helped move set pieces without saying anything. It was not a good rehearsal, but it was an excellent production (finally).

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JENNIFER RIEGER is a writer and teacher in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She holds a BA in English, an MA in Literature, and is currently finishing her MFA with a concentration in poetry and creative nonfiction. When not revising, grading, or chaperoning high school events, Jennifer enjoys loving the hell out of the beautiful people in her life.

A BLANK PAGE is daunting. It's the writer's crux of hope and anxiety. We analyze, we ponder, we stare at blank walls, and open countless bottles of wine—anything to invoke the muse that saves us from ourselves. But in the end, my advanced degree in procrastination pulls through, and I'm whole again.

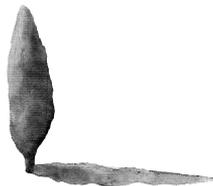
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CARY TENNIS, prior to his role as advice columnist for Salon.com's "Since You Asked," was a journalist, spoken-word performer, and musician. He studied English Literature at the University of Miami and Creative Writing at San Francisco State. With his wife, Norma, he now lives 90 kilometers south of Florence in Castiglion Fiorentino where he writes, in addition to holding writing workshops around the world. Tennis' book, *Finishing School: The Happy Ending to that Writing Project You Can't Seem to Get Done*, co-written with Danelle Morton, will be published later this year by Penguin/Tarcher.

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/CARY.TENNIS

WWW.CARYTENNIS.COM

WHEN I WAS A LONGHAIRED HIPPIE in Florida, I was driving across the state in my Volkswagen bug. I had some marijuana in the pocket of a jacket in the back seat. When a Highway Patrol dude pulled me over and asked if he could search the car, I said OK, as I knew he would anyway. As he leaned in to the back seat, I casually picked up my jacket, as if to reveal what was underneath, when the real prize was in the pocket. Escaped getting busted. Kept my cool. Stayed out of jail.



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