

A photograph of a wooden bridge spanning a pond in a lush forest. The bridge has a railing with a repeating X-pattern. The water reflects the surrounding green trees and foliage. The scene is peaceful and scenic.

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BRIGHT SHINING AURORA

he was the nightmare
that came crashing into her dreams
she knows it's better that they're now apart

the light has found it's way back to her eyes,
and her heart is the brightest sun it's ever been;
but she still thinks of him every now and then—

he mistook her kindness for weakness
tried to force her upon a pedestal and into a gilded cage,
but her song was not for him it was for the world

she gave him everything but it still wasn't enough
he had to splinter her skin with shadows
so she became the phoenix rising from the ashes once again

fashioning chaos into a compliment rising like air
refusing to fall into the eternal sleep again or wait for some
prince charming to wake her for slumber

because charming people can be so insincere
she knows this now,
and she promised her heart she'd do better.

- Linda M. Crate

SAVING HER KING

there was a maiden fair
with golden spools
of hair

locked in a tower
she had years to refine her mind,
but she never kissed freedom

until he placed it like an invitation
into her mind;
and she left the tower and the witch

to find a love beautiful as the dawn
unfortunately the witch was jealous sort
so she had to fashion her heart as a retort

blinded her prince so she had to use
her fires to burn the witch, turning her tears
to revive the prince's eyes because she knew

she always knew her heart was that of a phoenix
and one day she would reinvent herself from the flames
though she loved the hair the witch had shorn

she knew that it would grow back again
for him she sought to be strong
because sometimes a queen must save her king.

- Linda M. Crate

THE MODERN CINDERELLA

her dreams
give her wings

carrying through
everything

softly she carries a song
not meant for any one person

but the world
to heal and restore hope

in a broken world
she dreamed of dancing

never needed any man
because she knew she was a whole

not a half,
and she was complete as she was

becoming and a masterpiece
all at once;

he sought to win her heart
but she insisted one can never marry

a stranger and insisted that if he wanted to
court her then they'd do it properly

no story ends happily ever after
there's always some bang ups along the way

life is about weathering both the ups and the downs
she wasn't taking any chances with her heart.

- Linda M. Crate

TWELVE STROKES OF TRUTH

by Olivia Arieti

Great pain and trouble was in store for Cinderella after her father's death. The cruel stepmother and her selfish daughters treated her like a servant; humiliated and constantly covered with soot, she had been nicknamed, *Cinderella*.

At night time though, the girl would run up to her cold garret, fall asleep and enter the world of dreams. Besides her beloved parents, there were also handsome princes and faraway castles where one day, she was sure to dwell with her true love.

It occurred that in one of those dreams her father said, "My dear child, you will grow in sweetness and beauty, but you must always be honest. The brilliance of truth will make you shine more than the most precious gem."

Cinderella treasured those words in her heart.

One morning, the Grand Duke personally set forth with invitations to the Prince's ball. His Royal Highness was looking for a bride!

Cinderella's stepmother, fearful of the girl's lovely looks, did all she could to prevent her from attending. Nonetheless, magic has its own ways and the evil woman couldn't compete with its power.

When Cinderella was crying in the garden after that the envious stepsisters had torn her party dress, sash, beads and ribbons, her Fairy Godmother appeared in a shower of sparkles brighter than stars and said, "You shall go to the ball, my dear, dressed in gold and silver and wear glass slippers. A golden carriage will take you there and you shall be the most beautiful maiden of all."

In an instant, a pumpkin was turned into a coach, the animals into footmen and horses and the girl's rags into a gorgeous gown.

"You must be back by midnight," warned the fairy, "for my spell will end at the clock's last stroke and everything will become as before."

Immediately afterwards, Cinderella was dashing towards her prince; the dream was about to come true.

The girl though, couldn't avoid fearing what would happen if His Highness found out who she really was.

No sooner the prince saw her, he fell in love at first sight and danced with her only.

Suddenly, the sharp strokes of midnight resounded grave and hostile; the dreaded moment had arrived.

At once, Cinderella recalled her Godmother's words; her father's ones as well.

Although the thought of losing the prince's love terrorized her, the girl's strong sense of honesty kept her feet stuck to the ground. She looked straight in his eyes and waited; her heart throbs resonated loud in the deep silence between one stroke and the other, a desperate echo to the fatal chimes.

With the last stroke, a poor servant in rags stood before the astonished young man; the glass slippers only still on her feet. They weren't enough, though.

The prince stared at her and asked harshly, "Who are you?"

"Cinderella, the girl you have danced with the whole night," she replied.

He was horrified and waved his hands in disgust as if the lovely maiden had turned into an ugly toad!

She could see his contempt flow down his face. Never had she felt more miserable.

"You have tricked me, you stupid wench, I shall never marry a girl in rags!" he shouted, turned his back and walked away.

Grief-stricken, Cinderella fled down the palace staircase. While running, one of her shoes slipped off her foot.

For a moment she thought she might leave it there to give the insensitive prince a second chance should he decide to look for her, but the memory of his disdainful glare urged her to pick up the shoe and run away.

Once in her room, Cinderella looked at the glass slippers and smiled.

She would wear them in her lonely nights and dance with the prince of her dreams while waiting for her true love.

As for her Fairy Godmother... well, she had to admit that it wasn't easy to find a worthy match for a girl who had been bestowed with virtues stronger than magic itself.

THE SMILE OF DAWN

by Olivia Arieti

Aaron lived in a tiny hut on a faraway isle where the water was crystalline and the wind sang among the palms; his parents were poor and the thought that their only child may lead their same miserable life grieved them.

The boy's mother was sure that rich and beautiful ladies were aboard the sumptuous liners that stopped in front of the isle and wondered if one of them might be a good mother for him.

One morning, on distinguishing an enormous white ship approaching, she hurriedly put the child on a raft and after a big kiss, let him sail towards it.

Unfortunately, the vessel passed by without stopping, and Aaron found himself in the middle of the sea all alone; tears flowed down his rosy cheeks; as they fell into the water, they formed iridescent bubbles that shone more than gems.

Not too far away was a solitary sailor, who attracted by the glittering spots, steered the boat towards the raft.

"Hey, are you for real?" he cried when he saw the child and the water sparkling around him.

Since he was old and not married, the man took him to a nearby lighthouse. The keeper and his wife had once given him shelter during a bad storm. They were childless, and cries of joy filled the little round room at the sight of the tender bundle in the sailor's arm.

Aaron found love and care in that forlorn corner swept by the waves and the fury of the wind, but whenever he gazed at the sea, his eyes kept searching the horizon for his little isle that now seemed to belong to a bygone dream.

When his foster parents died, Aaron continued their work. Always busy, he never noticed Coral watching him. No lovelier mermaid ever rose from the waters, with hair as red as coral and lips as pink as dawn; her eyes gleamed brighter than the lighthouse beacon.

The young man had made Coral's heart throb at once, but the fact that Aaron had legs instead of a tail puzzled her. Could ever his heart throb for her, too, someday?

She remembered her grandmother's stories about sea fairies turning mermaids into gorgeous maidens and sighed at the thought that it happened in fairy tales only.

Coral began disliking her beautiful tail that shone in the sunlight and shimmered under the moon's delicate beams. The missing limbs became an obsessive longing.

The mermaid was singing upon a rock in front of the lighthouse when suddenly the sky darkened, and the waves unfolded angry against the structure. Flashes of lightning were already splitting the sky, their metallic strings running all over, when Aaron rushed up the spiral staircase heading to the lantern room.

Coral had just distinguished his figure when another bolt of lightning hit the tower and the young man dropped to the floor. There was no time to waste. She swam over, climbed the impervious rocks and with all her might

dragged herself to the door. Despite the cuts and bruises all over her body, she managed to go up the staircase to rescue her beloved, now lying senseless.

After pushing the inert body to the landing, she waited for the highest wave and jumped with her heavy load on its foamy crest.

Her grandmother who could see everything that was going on above the watery surface, rushed up to help her and so did her sisters. They laid Aaron on one of the smoothest rocks, and the old mermaid cured his wounds with special seaweeds. Then they all retired except Coral, who constantly kept watch on her sweetheart.

Strangely, the fury of the storm ceased quite suddenly; the wind, now a warm breeze, and the waves gentle ripples, caressed the two bodies almost in the attempt of excusing themselves for their previous vehemence.

"You are alright now," Coral said softly when Aaron opened his eyes.

"Who are you?" he muttered.

"I'm Coral, a mermaid. I live underneath the rocks in front of the lighthouse."

"Mermaids are in books or in our imagination only. They do not exist," replied the boy.

Coral put his hand on her heart, then on her tail.

The young man stared at her astonished. Then he looked away to conceal his inner turmoil; her beauty and enchanting voice had mesmerized him completely. When he turned round, he held her in his arms and kissed her so ardently as though the kiss could cast a magic spell and turn the mermaid into a girl or Aaron himself into a creature of the sea.

They remained on the rock all night long; Aaron told her his story and how he wished to see his true mother again.

"I'll help you," Coral cried, "I'll ask my father for his seahorse and we'll visit the isles and look for her."

Soon after, the couple was riding the fastest sea courser there was.

It was almost dusk when they approached the isle with the palms singing in the wind.

Aaron recognized the place at once. His heart leapt on seeing an old woman sobbing on the shore.

He ran towards her and cried, "It's me, mom, your Aaron."

Everything seemed to cease in that moment; the wind stopped whistling and the sea was still; the moon only let all her beams fall on the two figures clinging one to the other, a consuming image the silvery luminescence made almost holy.

Although Coral shared their joy, tears began flowing down her cheeks for the fear of losing her sweetheart.

However could a mermaid and a human being live happily ever after together?

The following morning, she asked her grandmother for advice. By now, she was totally unhappy with herself; her pearlescent tail had become a loathed obstacle to true love.

The wise mermaid was very determined, "No magic, Coral, will ever turn you into a human being or your beloved into a sea creature. Be yourself and be proud of who you are."

She wanted her to understand that differences weren't necessarily obstacles, but values that provided chances and challenges to prove true love.

It took quite a long time before Coral emerged from the water again. The fear of not being accepted was devastating, but the truth of her grandmother's words couldn't be denied.

Aaron was overjoyed on seeing the mermaid back on his isle.

He, too, had realized he wasn't living a dream or a fairytale; the fear she would consider their love impossible terrorized him.

"I don't care if you have a tail instead of legs, I love you as you are," he cried before she could say anything.

Coral's smile sealed their mutual acceptance. No barriers, whether marine or terrestrial, would ever keep them apart.

The splendor of their love was unparalleled; every night the mermaid would sing her sweetest songs, and together they waited for the pink smile of dawn.

It is said that on full moon nights their joyful shadows can still be seen on the little isle.

HOME SWEET HOME

by Julie Reeser

Some plant their magic in neat borders of herbs or wild plots of roses to earn their home in the woods. This is standard hedge-witch behavior, and I think it dull. Yes, it's efficient, but there's no style and no imagination. If you only get one shot wouldn't it make more sense to do something unique and outlandish?

I suppose that's why I chose the candy. I've always had a penchant for little ones. No witch knows until they step over the threshold what kind of magic they've activated, whether good or bad. It's all subjective anyway. Magic does its thing, and it's a balance to keep the larger metaphysical world humming nicely. If you look at it any other way, you could drive yourself mad.

My mother was a wish-granter. She spent her days as an ugly hag who made unsuspecting travelers pick up bundles of sticks and save wayward badgers masquerading as cats. She liked cursing the whiners. It made her day when some spoiled maiden fussed and balked, and she could send them home with toads coming out of their mouths. She would laugh as she'd tell the story over dinner. I never saw her as evil, though.

Her mother was a giant's wife. It was a different time for women then. She slaved for that man, and all he ever did was yell and stomp. She did everything she could to save weary heroes from his menace. Eventually, her kind heart earned her a widowhood. No good deed goes unpunished and all that.

I'd always hated being an only child. Oh, I had a full childhood; don't get me wrong. We attended the hermitage gatherings. You laugh at that, but that's what they're called. I think acknowledging the territorial tendencies in the title lent it an air of honesty that appealed to most witches. There were still edge-dwellers and marsh-men that were missed each year, but they were outliers in more ways than one.

Spending time with all the other children and playing games was the best part of Autumn. The thinned veil and the smell of decaying leaves make it the best season anyway, but the camaraderie of others like myself brought me joy. After dancing around the bonfire until we were sweaty and red-faced, we'd sit and tell stories about our futures. Not actual fortune-telling, that's frowned upon within the community, but simple wish fantasies involving what familiar we hoped we'd have, and whether we wanted lots of small magic or one extravagant display that would cement us into the books.

I won't lie. I always spun a tale in which I did something so outrageous that I got my own story. I was never one to be satisfied with small works. Maybe it's because I heard all those stories of maidens picking up sticks and then being granted a wish to marry a prince. Who needs that attitude in this time of liberality? Why didn't those maidens ever wish to be Queen if they were so fired up about royalty? Skip the middleman, says I.

It isn't like I didn't work hard for my home, so I don't see why everyone was so shocked when the magic arrived. Mother said they felt it all the way to the marshes. I spent three years over boiling water and hot ovens until I had enough confectionery to do the job right. I spent another four months on construction alone, and I knew that was an unlucky number, but the shingles were trickier than I thought, so it set me back a month. Mother had the audacity to suggest I start over because four meant death in certain cultures. I thanked her politely for her concern, and then moved in. For someone whose entire life was spent rewarding hard work, you'd think she would be proud.

That was yesterday. The magic settled, and I can feel the power growing. I'm certain I did an excellent job, but I won't know the story until it happens. When I entered the house, there was no familiar waiting which was a disappointment, but I guess one can't have everything.

Oh, I hear someone! Here we go. I'm so excited! Wish me luck.

"Who's that nibbling at my house?"

(end)

TROLLING

by Bill Diamond

The misshapen troll concealed itself in the dark beneath the bridge. A young maid approached on the road winding through the gnarled and hazardous forest. Not a safe place for the hearty. A final place for the weak. The troll's mouth watered and its stomach growled in anticipation.

Wearing a bright and gay sundress, she was alone, slight and vulnerable. Easy pickings.

When the damsel was halfway across, the troll smirked, extended his long arms and swung his hairy orange body up to block her path. Towering over her, his sharp teeth glistened and his fetid breath showered down on her head. He was prepared to pursue her, but, she didn't flee. With a lecherous grin, he roared, "Your money and your life."

The young girl smiled and calmly said, "This is your unlucky day, troll. You picked the wrong person to grab." She murmured a spell and the ogre was frozen in place. As he turned to stone from the feet up, she said, "I'll get a good price for your ugly carcass as a gargoyle."

As comprehension dawned in his thick skull, he gasped, "A witch! You're supposed to be old, ugly and wearing black."

Shaking her golden tresses, she laughed, "That's so sixteenth century. You shouldn't believe in fairy tales. These days, the union only requires that look in October."

MERMAIDS AND OTHER INSIGNIFICANCIES, LIKE LOVE

“There was a blue tinge to everything, down on the bottom of the Sea” -Hans Christian Anderson,

The Little Mermaid

Indigo and aquamarine count.
yes-like Picasso’s ‘blue’ period,
the colors paint over my work,
Depressed, my mind tells me
actually they are my world,
a riptide, temporary whiplash brings me back
to shiny scales, pearled tails
and handsome sea foam merchants.

They say fins can't swim 40 meters
above the castle.
But, I did.
The colors turn murky and darker
than I expect.

I swam above the uncertainty,
I found love. *We* did.
It is *Benbecula* shiny, with dashes of tropical glitter
sparkle like I was a human
with powdered highlighter, glow
in the honeymoon phase.

-Lacey Trautwein

Biographies

LINDA M. CRATE

Linda M. Crate is a Pennsylvanian native born in Pittsburgh yet raised in the rural town of Conneautville. Her poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has three published chapbooks *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press - June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon - January 2014), and *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, August 2016). Her fantasy novel *Blood & Magic* was published in March 2015. The second novel of this series *Dragons & Magic* was published in October 2015. The third of the seven book series *Centaurs & Magic* was published November 2016. Her novel *Corvids & Magic* was published March 2017.

OLIVIA ARIETI

US citizen, with a degree from the University of Pisa, she lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy with her family. Her plays and poems have been published both in the USA and UK. Her short stories appeared in *The Smoking Poet*, *Enchanted Conversations*, *Daily Bites Of Flesh* 2011 Pill Hill Press, *Voices From The Garage*, *Riverbabble*, *Halloween Anthology* Magic Cat Press, *Christmas Warmth Anthology* Xoxo Publishing, *Medieval Nightmares*, *Poe-It*, *Spring Fever Anthologies* Static Movement, *Far Off Places*, *100 Doors To Madness* Forgotten Tomb Press, *Plague*, *Black Cats* Horrified Press, *Bloody Ghost Stories*, *Full Moon Books*, *Mirror Mirror*, *Dangerous Dreams*, *Broken*, *Behind Closed Doors*, *Death And Decorations* Thirteen O'Clock Press, *Infective Ink*, *Sinister Saints Press*, *Doorknobs & Bodypaint*, *Pandemonium Press*.

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Julie Reeser lives in a stone bowl in Montana. Her work appears in Black Denim Lit, Zoetic Press & their imprint NonBinary Review, Timeless Tales Magazine, and others. Her poetry chapbook is titled Terracotta Pomegranate. She's writing a fantasy first draft in public on her blog, PersephoneKnits. <www.persephoneknits.com>