

Winners, come pick up your

**\$64.12**

# CONTEST WINNERS

Due to space limitations, we are unable to print the Honourable Mentions in the fiction category. They are, however, Kate Reider-Collins and Michael Redhill. Again.

## Fiction Winner: Deborah V. Tihanyi

# STILL WATER

She is sitting at the kitchen table, directly opposite the open window that blows a cool wind, scattering loose ashes from the tip of her burning cigarette. She watches the smoke as it curls in all directions, and occasionally picks an ash from her blouse. It is past one in the morning. No one else is awake. She is afraid to make any noise and be discovered, yet she wishes that someone—anyone—will hear her and come down the stairs to ask her why she can't sleep.

It has been two days. And three hours. Twenty minutes and fourteen seconds. Fifteen. Sixteen. She counts three, six, ten, twenty-two: anything to break the chain she has so obsessively been monitoring. Because time now seems relevant. Two days three hours twenty-one minutes. One second. Two. Three . . .

She lights another cigarette with the one still burning in her hand. She has been told that the real advantage of chain smoking is the ability to do away with the costly burden of matches and lighters. And here she is: the Chainsmoker with her endless cigarette; her trick candle that will never stop burning. Although she isn't sure if even magic candles burn forever.

She thinks about her day. She has gotten dressed. And she has wandered the lower levels of the house, always making sure she picked up things which didn't seem to be quite in their proper place. Once in her hand, she turned them over and over again, in air heavy with smoke, and, not knowing what else to do, returned them to their foreign territories.

It is almost two o'clock. Two days ago . . . no three. Three days ago she was in bed. The sheets were warm and she felt as if she were sinking into the mattress; disappearing amidst covers and foam and down . . . The body next to her was rigid - arms placed carefully, one resting across the abdomen, the other settled next to the torso. It smelled of soap. The wet hair fell flat against the pillow, and brushed her cheek as she rolled over to kiss the still, dry lips . . .

But now it is later than it was then. She knows this because she has been watching the clock in the bedroom, and now in the kitchen. She is certain that the clock stops for no one - Emery was wrong. She wants to tell him that. She wants to tell him that time is a given, it lives, and breathes, and even eats and maybe makes love . . .

She knows she is tired because her thoughts are returning to Emery. Maybe if she puts her head down on the table next to the ashtray she will fall asleep. But sleep is not reality. Only Emery is real - no matter how little she believes in him anymore. His dark hair and deep-set eyes brood over her as she lights yet another cigarette - this time with a disposable lighter. Damn you, Emery, she thinks, as the flame crackles close to her face. It is only after she replaces the lighter on top of the package that she realizes she has said this aloud.

She and Emery are making love. It is total darkness. She can only see the shadows of black as her pupils dilate, straining to make out a familiar image. He is on top of her, pushing his way into her body and then being forced back out. She does not take at face value the intricacies of the sex act. She does not believe that the friction causes the pleasure leading up to the physical release. More likely it seems to her that the pleasure leading up to the physical release causes the friction.

Friction . . . inwards and outwards . . . polarity and magnetic negatives and positives . . . She is certain that Emery does not question these things. She is also certain that he does not appreciate her questioning of them.

It is soon over. Her eyes have adjusted to the night and she can make out the shape of his body as it moves to one side of her. She watches the chest heaving with breath, and counts the motion in two's: up and down - two - up and down - four - up and down - six . . .

Emery is silent. As always after he has made love to her. She longs to speak the thoughts that race across her mind - but dares not break the silence. Her voice would shatter glass. People who live in glass houses . . .

Emery is speaking to her about cars. She can hardly make sense of the words he throws at her. He explains over and over again about fuel injection and standard shift and power steering. Yes, he wants to buy her a car: a token, a trinket, a new toy to occupy her time. He takes her blank look as his cue to begin writing numbers on a pad of paper in front of him. She is lost in the facts and figures with which he is so clearly absorbed. His gifts to her lose something in the translation.

She slides over into the chair next to him, and knows he can feel her beyond his calculations. He is distracted - for a moment - as he continues to add, subtract, multiply, divide . . . Ultimately, the pen is put down, neatly following the parallel lines on the page. He pulls her onto his lap and unbuttons her blouse. Now all can be still again. As long as there is motion between them, things can be still.

She shifts into second gear as she makes her way along the dirt road to the cabin. She has not been there since she was thirteen - awkward and clumsy as she climbed from the main highway with her parents, carrying her share of the luggage. There had been no road then - only a trail of dirt and rocks through the trees, where insects and God knew what else lay in wait to light upon her bare skin. The gravel road certainly seems an improvement, although, even now, in her escape, she wonders about the damage that might be caused to the car - and Emery's displeasure. However, she realizes she need not worry about displeasing Emery. For one thing, the car is hers; and, for another, she no longer belongs to him.

The first thing she notices as she crosses the threshold is the smell of ancient insect repellent and moth balls. Her mother had insisted on these protective devices. Her mother had never been one to tolerate pests. She wonders now if the thin cylinders hanging from the ceiling are still effective. What is the life-span of bug killer? But she knows this is a moot point; she hasn't any to replace those left behind. She half-whispers an apology to her mother, now buried among the pests she had dodged for so many years.

She walks along the narrow corridor that leads from the main room to a group of tiny bedrooms at the far end of the house. She chooses the one that had belonged to her sister, Mara. She knows that at the very least she will be able to avoid her own room: the one she had been assigned because she was the youngest and had the least demands. The one without the window.

She lays down on top of Mara's bed. It creaks as she shifts her weight trying to find a comfortable position. The sounds remind her of weekend afternoons when her parents would send her up from the beach to nap while they stayed there with the boys. It was on these afternoons that Mara - fifteen, sixteen, seventeen - would return to the house with one blond, sun-tanned boy or another and quietly close the door to her bedroom behind them. After that, only whispers and the creaking of the bed . . . It is in this way she remembers falling asleep: a sleep induced by someone's else's rhythmic rocking and breathing. Only now, both these sounds are her own, and strangely out of place coming from her body . . .

She wakes up and does not know how long she has been asleep. She rolls over and checks the clock on the bureau. Six-fifteen. She does not know whether this is dawn or dusk - the heavy cloud cover outside the window obscures her perception of night and day. But she does not mind. She is accustomed to rooms from which she cannot see the outside.

She gets up off the bed. Dust covers the room's tabletops and drawer-handles; bookshelves with their worn summer beach reading; knick-knacks and - as she trips over the area rug and rides it towards the desk - the floor as well. From somewhere inside her rises an urge to scrub it all clean. Remove every trace of dirt from use and disuse. She wants to, but knows she won't.

So she leaves Mara's bedroom behind. She returns to the main room where her belongings still lie in a heap on the floor, and turns on the radio. A man is talking about his morning coffee, and the best-ever one-hundred varieties of donuts, muffins, croissants, cinnamon buns . . . Hungry. The food supply she has brought with her is rather thin: some fruit, some vegetables, tuna in cans, bread, and milk - skimmed, and probably rancid by now. The thought sickens her, but she pulls from the box a bag of Wonder 100% whole wheat, and takes out one slice, two, three, four . . . The bread softens and dissolves in her mouth before sliding down her throat. She eats piece after piece until all that is left in the bag are two slivers of crust.

She has slept everywhere in the house. The kitchen floor, where she now lies, is the last frontier. Even her windowless room is no longer an obstacle. She stares at the undersides of the countertops and cabinets, and is only mildly repulsed by the layers of filth over filth. She turns onto her back and watches the ceiling.

If she goes back. To Emery. The thought washes over her like a hot flash. She has been here six days. Nothing has changed. Nothing has moved. She has not been pulled in any particular direction.

If she goes back. Back to cold breakfasts and lukewarm frozen dinners. Back to gin in a soda glass with icecubes shaped like hearts. Back to television and VCR and compact disc player. Back to mundane novelty.

If she goes back. Emery will be there. He will not be angry. He will not even be upset. Not the slightest trace of uneasiness will be visible in the jagged facial features and terse body.

If she goes back. Emery will be moved and unmoved. He will take her in his arms. He will not ask questions. He will

carry her into the apartment, somewhere, anywhere, and make love to her. Heal her wounds in the groping darkness. And then . . .

The ceiling of the kitchen is grey. Maybe it was white at one time - or maybe it was painted that way because painted white ceilings never stay white for long. She stands up. There is nothing to keep her here. And there is nothing, in particular, to lead her there. To Emery. However, she knows that she can be nowhere but one place or the other. And, besides, she has run out of food, and the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach tells her to pick up her things and drive.

They have bought a house. Or rather, a townhouse that is joined to six others, with a courtyard in the middle. Glossy black metal fence encloses their home. The inside is nondescript: furniture, prints hanging from the walls, and lamps hanging from the ceilings. Wall to wall plush carpeting in which the sound of her footsteps is muffled into oblivion.

The arrangements for the purchase have gone smoothly. She does not know the details, exactly, as Emery does, but trusts his judgement. Making deals, after all, is his specialty. She knows only that this is the place she leaves in the morning, and comes home to every night.

She sits in the living room and takes a puff of her third cigarette. Emery is in the bathroom, showering. The sound of running water makes her sleepy. She puts out the cigarette - carefully, so as not to damage the remaining half, which she will smoke later, or tomorrow.

She goes up the stairs and into the bedroom. The water is still running. She undresses slowly, and places each separate piece of clothing where it belongs. She opens drawers, closets, laundry hamper. She is standing naked in the middle of the room. The air-conditioning sends a chill up her spine. Quickly, she is under the covers and curled into herself.

She is awakened by running water. It is three o'clock - four hours later than when she first came up the stairs. She is disoriented, but she gets up, and, stumbling across the hallway, knocks on the bathroom door. Once. Twice. Three times . . . Water is her only answer.

She stands forward and places her hand on the doorknob. It almost turns by itself as she pushes the door open. Steam rushes out at her, and she is walking through fog until she reaches Emery slumped in the shower stall and turns off the taps - hot first, then cold.

He is heavy. She has never felt his weight this way. She pulls him onto the bathmat. Carefully, meticulously, she dries off his body: arms, neck, face, shoulders, chest, back, buttocks, genitals, legs, feet, toes. She lightly towel-dries her hair and brushes it back with the tips of her fingers, watchful of the length and sharpness of her nails. She goes across the hall and deposits the wet towels in the hamper. She returns and begins her struggle to lift him to his feet - his arms over her shoulders, grabbing tightly at his wrists as she balances him evenly upon her back. She is afraid to pull too hard on the arms for fear they might loosen and leave their sockets. It is like a bad dream, leaving her with his hollow limbs resting on her breasts, his body slumped at her heels.

It has been three days. To the minute. To the second. Now three days and one second. Two. Three . . . She lights her last cigarette. The kitchen is completely dark except for the spark of the flame. The house is quiet. Still she is awake - she is surprised at her stamina. Even the dead must sleep . . .