

The Man in the Mangroves Counts to Sleep

By Donna Marie Decker

The whiskey quart dims the light.

 The blue tarp stretches over me
 For another infinite night of lying back in headphones
And old paperback crimes.

 Between my dozens of cigarette boxes and clear bottles,
 And some other dirt bag's and his old lady's,
 I'm hidden in a valley of trash.

Would take me only three shopping cart trips
 Through the parking lot to clean mine out.
 But the jumble is familiar as home.

My long-talking and quick-drinking boat friend
 Who uses the trees as a dinghy dock
 (over a year and I don't know his name),
Brought by the cleanest girl tonight.

I could tell she was spotless inside and fat-rich out.
 Like an angel from my old mathematician days,
 When everything fit together.

Straight-backed and poker-faced,
 She's skimming this night swamp for what?
 She wants to observe through glass,
 Scratches at the thought of lice,
 Wants to be this world's stranger.
But sits on the edge of my permanent blanket anyway –
 What I can extend –
 And asks me real questions.
 Like my name.

I almost forget how to answer in structures.

I call her

Lady.

No woman has had me in years.

In another life, I was a Christmas baby on the Pacific coast.

Grew up to figure on chalkboards and ride formulas to the sky.

Newton, Koeppler knew the secret of angles spreading to curves.

I got close to the Pythagorean magic.

But it was too painful a ride.

For years I wanted to skew the numbers so nothing added up,

Like the family's and country's creed.

No accident there. Numbers are forgiving.

Or did my fine shoes walk me out into one choice

After another,

Getting muddier, dustier, wafer-thin.

Getting me here.

Day comes and goes quieter under these trees that root

Through water to sand, learning how to live without ground.

Now I understand how it makes perfect numerical sense.

Like the music of the spheres.

I've slept on hot highways, under trees in storms,

On icy storefront steps,

North east west south and all permutations of this country

And this mangrove swamp right now

Is what it all equals up to.

A warm sure place. A finite place. The only place.

Key West's finest usually shake the bushes on Friday mornings
When we know to disappear.

Got two easy jobs to keep me in bottles and cans.

More money than I can spend. The V.A. for my coughs.

And drinking slow and constant makes my bed soft.

My sharp blue eyes still startle in the morning

When I look in Kenny Roger's men's room mirror

And wash away the mangrove night.

My elliptical face will not relinquish its handsomeness,

Even though it's hazed and climbing the lift downward.

Every dusk, I watch the dark descent until I'm part of it.

The black water bordering me matches the sky.

I ride the boat and can't get up no matter who whistles

Or calls *Hey Buddy* or wants to steal my time

For something other than the journey to the place

Where it all blanks out.

When I surrender to the numbness of numbers.

Enter the city of denial, where everything's a negative,

And I sleep with small fear of waking in the big mooned night.

Light will you still sum me up?

How far will you go before you're unwilling

To stop me from slipping to the other side of zero?