

John Rilesy

Bad Policeman

The policeman who walks the alley
wishes he had a money belt coiled
around his waist to hand out coins
and bills to the alley's lonely residents.
As it is, there is little he can do but listen.
Tonight the lion has no companion.
Getting up in years and favoring his feet
as though they had been pickled,
the lion talks as usual about how much happier
he'd been when he lived at the landfill.
The policeman listens until the old lion
grows quiet, then pushes on.
The lady of the evening, who often thinks
of the snow back in Mankato, says
she'll sleep soon and dream of the nights
she wore gowns and enjoyed the hospitality
of the wealthy man who took her to restaurants
where they lounged on big pillows
while waiters pushed trolleys of recently
harvested vegetables and thinly sliced meats.
The wealthy man had offered her a ring
and she can't remember what words
she had used to tell him no.
She had slept with him freely but without
enough joy and it was this inability
to feel joy that drove her to the alley.

The orangutan once had a secret crush on the lion
and let it fester too long and now
she is bitter. Tonight she talks about germs.
She knows the lion carries them, not
to mention the diseases plaguing the string
of potential mates he brings to the alley.
It's a threat to everyone and she wants it looked into.
The paperboy uses the quarters
and nickels he collects to place bets
on a multitude of unrealistic possibilities.
He has lost wagers about the height
of his grandma's azaleas, the depth
of a farm pond, and the time it took
to walk from Lincoln to Omaha.
When he lost the last bet he had no desire

to return home and kept walking
until he reached this city with
just the right alley. He is so lonely
he asks the policeman to frisk him
but he'd been frisked the night before
and it wouldn't be wise to spoil him.
The policeman's superiors say he is lazy.
Every year they shrink his beat.
He has no choice but to leave the alley
some nights to arrest a few miscreants.
The policeman wishes he'd chosen a different profession.
When the morning sun lights all but the alley's
most shadowed corners it's time for him to leave.
Strolling down the street toward the station
the policeman wishes he called the alley home.

John Riley has published poetry and fiction in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Banyan Review*, *Connotation Press*, *Fiction Daily*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Dead Mule*, *St. Anne's Review* and numerous other anthologies and journals both online and in print. He has also written over thirty books of nonfiction for young readers and continues his work in educational publishing.