

One Story Above the Boy in an Old Car

by John Riley

Near dusk today a car backfired on the street beneath my office window, where the traffic lines up north to south in a stoplight queue. The unexpected noise woke me from my working slumber. I sit with my back to the street and, turning away from my work, I rose and walked to the window. Below, an old car shuddered. The driver, a young woman with a beige winter sweater collar pillowing her neck, clung to the steering wheel. The vehicle seemed determined to escape her control and leap away, and with each out-of-sync crankshaft turn smoke swelled into a thick cloud that rose from beneath the rust-red car. On the backseat a boy, around four, or perhaps five-years-old, knelt, his nose pressed against the rear door window. From behind my locked window I could see that the boy was entranced by the blue smoke. I could see how his eyes rolled up and down with each engine lope, as though he alone had the power to pull into existence the ragged blue clouds. Caught below me in a worn out car, seemingly convinced of his new power to drag vapor into being and fling it toward the sky, the boy worked steadily. Enclosed in his tiny space, he could not see the orange horizon to the west beyond the city roofs fading through gold to gray, or that the smoke dissipated a few feet above his head. I watched and while I watched I tried to think of nothing but him, to ignore the horizon, the mother, my work, the clock, until the queue broke and the old car lurched forward, hesitated, rushed onward through the light.

