

HENRY HART

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*Winter of Discontent, England 1978-79*

It all seems stupid now. Maybe it was true—  
my ex-wife's story about snorting Ritalin,  
her mother swearing on her death bed:  
*Never be faithful to any man.*

I stared at bubbles the size of lice  
shinnying up my beer, a candle  
sooting a can of ox-tail soup. Lights  
blackened out at six. The stove died, too.

A homeless man nicknamed Marx  
stood on a keg beside the Harp and Plow,  
shouting about the latest strike—  
gravediggers refusing to dig new graves.

That night I hiked to the dead canal  
where Alexandra moored her houseboat,  
wept when her beeswax candles  
stung my eyes with smoke.

For a good half-hour, she interrogated  
shadows on the ceiling about my future,  
pressed my cold hands to a planchette  
on her Ouija board to spell out answers.

With a Mona Lisa smile, she whispered:  
“You're lucky you're not the Hanged Man.  
You've got to pull the auric thorn from your neck,  
channel your chakras like a light bulb.”

I paid her, not knowing what she meant.  
Days got longer, nights shorter. One dawn  
when I jogged along the towpath by her boat,  
a nightgown waved from splintered ice.

I called the police from the nearest pay phone,  
told them everything I knew—how Alexandra  
had a blue tattoo of James Dean above her navel,  
how she talked to the dead about my future.

All I heard was wind through cracks  
in the phone booth, ice thump wood gates  
on the canal lock. Finally a woman's voice  
told me to repeat everything I'd said.

On the way home, I ran past trains rusting  
on rusted tracks, pigeons panhandling  
for crumbs by a pub's locked door,  
undertakers stacking coffins in an unlit gym.

I ran until I thought I heard Alexandra  
chatting to shadows beneath a street light  
on an unknown street, chakras humming  
through power lines to keep the light bulbs lit.