

from Juked #5, Spring 2008

KELLY SPITZER

TWENTY QUESTIONS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA SMITH

In January of 2007, Claudia Smith found out that her manuscript, *The Sky Is a Well and Other Shorts*, won the first annual Rose Metal Press short-short chapbook competition. That same month, W.W. Norton's *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond* anthology hit bookstore shelves. In it—Claudia's story "My Lawrence." Significant moments in her writing life, for sure, and definite writer's bio toppers. And though these may be the details readers latch on to, Claudia's story didn't start there. It started on the road, traveling cross-country with her family, while her father, an artist, sought work. Her family landed in Houston, Texas, where Claudia attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. *"I met children and teachers from different backgrounds, and decided that I wanted, very badly, to go to college and become a writer."*

True to her desire, she did.

Claudia received a B.A. in literature from Bard College, an M.A. from the Writing Seminars program at Johns Hopkins University, and an M.L.I.S. from the University of Texas at Austin. But her path wasn't as straight and serene as it sounds. She never stopped writing, but for a long time, her writing life was "relegated to a personal, private dream." Then, she says, "a series of unfortunate events led to something fortunate." After a car accident and a miscarriage, she began spending a lot of time online, work-shopping stories at Zoetrope Virtual Studios. From there, she found the support and encouragement she needed to achieve her dream.

To date, Claudia's stories have appeared in over fifty literary journals and zines, including *Failbetter*, *The Mississippi Review* online, *Redivider*, *elima*, *The Salt River Review*, *3:AM*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Juked*, and *Night Train*. In addition to Norton's *New Sudden Fiction*, her work has been anthologized in So New Media's *Consumed: Women on Excess*, and Cutting Block Press's *Horror Library, Volume 1*. She also has work forthcoming in the anthology *Online Writing: The Best of the First Ten Years* and Social Disease's *The Offbeat Generation*. Her fiction has made *storySouth's* Million Writers Award notable list, and has received their top ten online stories honor. She has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

If you've read Claudia's work you know the power and insight her stories contain. She's a conscious writer—thoughtful, meticulous, each sentence, each word, measured for weight. If you are just discovering her through this interview, I think you'll find her answers just as mindful, and once you read her work, your perception of what constitutes excellent flash writing will forever be changed.

In January, Rose Metal Press announced that Ron Carlson selected your manuscript, *The Sky Is a Well and Other Shorts*, as the winner of their first annual chapbook competition. How did you find out that you'd won? What was your first reaction?

I found out through an email; I think I still have it. Here it is:

Dear Claudia Smith~

How are you? I'm writing on behalf of Rose Metal Press to see if your manuscript THE SKY IS A WELL AND OTHER STORIES is still available.

Ron Carlson chose it as the winner of our short short fiction chapbook contest. Both Abby and I loved the ms as well, so

if it is still available, we'd like to publish it.

We look forward to hearing back from you!

Best,

Kathleen Rooney
Editor

I think the first thing I did was tell my husband. I can't remember if I called him or emailed him. Then, I posted the news in Hotpants, a short-shorts online workshop I've been a member of for years. Then, I allowed the news to settle. I received the news about getting into Norton's *New Sudden Fiction* anthology via email as well. That, I didn't quite believe at first. This, I believed.

In the chapbook section of your website (claudiaweb.net) there is a slideshow on the making of *The Sky Is a Well*, which is the highest quality chapbook I've ever laid eyes on. Did you visit the Museum of Printing and witness the process in person?

Oh, how I wish I could have been there! But no, I wasn't. I took a class in the history of printing years ago, when I was getting my M.L.I.S. degree, so I can appreciate the process. Abigail Beckel was kind enough to show me lots of pictures of the process. What I have on my site is just a sampling. She also sent me pictures of the collection being saddle-sewn. They had a sewing party; all the chapbooks were hand-sewn. And it is exquisite. Abby sent me a broadside of the front and back covers and I had it framed. It's hanging over my desk as I type this.

Talk a bit about how you selected the stories you entered. Is there any commonality between them? Did you in any way tailor the

stories in your submission to those you thought might fit Ron Carlson's taste?

Certain images repeat throughout the collection; the elements fire and water, colors, shapes and sounds. The stories deal with birth, death, loss, change and longing. These are all things that humans experience as they pass through time. They are also about how the past informs the present, and the present informs the way we see the past. My intention is that the stories build off of one another, walking the reader in and out of childhood and adulthood. I love the way short-stories can mark the passage of time in years or in moments. What is traditionally small in a novel can loom large in a short-story. I tried for perspective shifts and I think it worked. I was especially pleased with "Angel Wings," with the child's punched out teeth and the looming, punched-out black night. When I read Robert Shapard's collection, *Motel and Other Stories*, I saw this was true of his work as well. I don't think I can measure how much his *Sudden Fiction* anthologies have influenced my work. There's such a strange and wondrous sense of proportion to his short-stories.

I didn't tailor the stories in my submission to what I thought might fit Carlson's taste. One of the reasons I entered the competition was that he was the judge; I've read and admired his work since I was a teenager. But, when I chose the stories, I looked at what I thought was strong, and what I thought held together thematically. If I thought too hard about what he'd like I'd drive myself crazy. I don't think you can anticipate what someone else will respond to, no matter how well you know his or her work. I know that when I read for *Hobart*, I often go for work I adore but know I could never write myself. I'm not always drawn to people who write what I write.

Childhood is, as you acknowledge, a big part of *The Sky Is a Well*, especially the childhood of girls. Why does this topic persist within your fiction?

“Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.”
- William Butler Yeats, “The Stolen Child”

Like many writers, I write about what haunts me. I do think that as adults, we carry the past with us, within our bodies. What happened to us, and how we perceive that, changes. Children soak up their worlds, and they are so very quick. My own son is constantly showing me the world, and it is beautiful and startling to me. I’ve learned, as we all do, how to tune a lot of that out, to look at something familiar and dismiss it. As he grows, he will sharpen his focus, and he’ll have to shut some of the world out. When I drive to the grocery store now, I don’t notice the landmarks. I’m thinking of the milk and butter I have to buy. But he, he sees it all.

I do think that *The Sky Is a Well* is about how we are the past and the present. I’m not sure about my other work, but I know that is something all those stories have in common. I am also interested in identity, how the way the world perceives us can make us see ourselves.

In an above answer, you say: “What is traditionally small in a novel can loom large in a short-short.” I think this is a particularly keen observation, and a part of what makes flash fiction so powerful. In your opinion, what are the critical elements to great flash writing?

I’ve said something before similar to what I’m about to say, when I wrote something on my site about Robert Shapard’s *Motel and Other Stories*, so I’m going to repeat myself here. I find the perspective in flash fascinating. Sometimes, reading a short-short is like meeting an old friend and falling into conversation immediately. These shorts

are intimate and familiar; short fiction, like poetry, can make the reader feel the passage of time in years or in moments. I believe flash has as much in common with poetry or long, dense novels, as it does with short stories. I came away from Shapard's collection with a sense of time as non-linear, looping around and around, defining the characters and re-defining them as the years pass.

There is no one way to write a great flash. It's a great form for stylists. Writers can be playful, and artful, experimenting with the limit constraints. I participate in an online workshop called Hotpants, because we write short-shorts, and each writer in the workshop has his/her techniques and styles. So many good flash writers come from different angles. Some shorts are flirty, some sublime. Some play with forms — a fairy tale, perhaps, or pop music. They ask the reader to take short-cuts, working off of what is already familiar. I'm thinking of the writer Kim Chinquee, whose shorts can be like a shot of espresso first thing in the morning; they cut. Utahna Faith wrote a beautiful flash that appears in Norton's *Flash Fiction Forward*, called "All Girl Band." When I first read it, I couldn't get that story out of my head. Short-shorts often invite you to read them again and again. What made that story so wonderful? It haunted me. There's a nervous beauty and mystery to that piece, so I'll always go back to it.

In a short-short, you don't have time to futz around. Maybe that's the key to a great short-short. Words and images must take your reader everywhere.

The writer Matt Briggs said that the stories in *The Sky Is a Well* are sober and deliberate, and I tend to agree with him. I like to think those stories give a sense of the larger world outside.

There is a depth to your stories that make them read like novels in miniature. How do you achieve this richness, this insight, this greatness?

Thank you. I hope my stories convey a sense of the larger world outside them. The stories in *The Sky Is a Well* in particular have a lot to do with memory, with what happens after or before the story. I think I said this once in a *SmokeLong Quarterly* interview, but I'll say it here. Sometimes, when I write, I feel as if I'm on the edge of the shallow end of a swimming pool, being pulled toward the deep end, and I can't swim. If you throw a stone in water, and watch the ripples, I think I'm often writing about those ripples.

Lately, my flash has taken a different direction. I've written some I think border on surreal.

Characters matter to me. Sometimes, I daydream about a person I'm writing about. Things happen to him or her outside of what I've written. Maybe it's a bit like method acting.

I love flash stories that thrust me right into intimacy. Robert Shapard does this particularly well. Have you ever met a stranger on a bus and felt you could show them something you don't show the people you see every day? Some of my flashes are that stranger on the bus.

You have a tendency to use one word titles. In fact, twelve of the eighteen stories in your chapbook begin with one word titles. Is this intentional? Talk about how you approach the titling of your work. In your opinion, can a title make or break a story?

Oh, you are right! I just looked over the list of publications at my web site and they are mostly one-word, or two-word, titles. I think my titles started to shrink when I began writing short-shorts in earnest.

Words and titles are important in any kind of writing, but every word stands out in a short-short. I think a title often informs the way a story is interpreted. The short that originally appeared in *Juked* as "My Robot" was changed to "My Lawrence" for the *New Sudden Fiction* anthology. I do think that was the most dramatic edit of the

piece. I'm not sure which title is the better title, but that edit did change the story. Some students who have written me see it as a kind of *Pygmalion*. I'm not sure they'd see it that way if it were called "My Robot." The story itself is about loss and isolation, so, when I recently wrote a student who wanted to know if he was a robot or a living creature, I thought a long time. I wrote my friend, the writer Jim Whorton, and others. After reading what he said, and thinking about the story, one of the things I told her was that I think it is about a woman who is in mourning, and how the people she most loved are absent. Just like in real life, a person whose child and husband have died might either feel that they are still there in the house even though they aren't, or feel that they are not there, and neither is she anymore.

Sometimes, when a title comes to me, I have the feeling I've placed the last piece of the puzzle on the table. Often, that one word will be part a sentence I've shaved off. Or, in the case of my pop-song stories, I just start with the song. So far, I haven't picked songs that I love for themselves, but songs that are evocative of a certain place and time. "Galveston" began after I'd listened to Glen Campbell sing it for me on the radio. It brought back the beach, and childhood, and my feelings about Vietnam and what it meant to us back then. The story came after the title.

Yes, a title can definitely make or break a story. They can be so hard! I think my best titles are the ones that feel effortless, the ones that come to me unbidden.

"I think a title often informs the way a story is interpreted." I think you're exactly right, Claudia. What's interesting about this statement is that looking back on a few of your titles, I realize not all of them are immediately obvious as to how they fit into the story. Take "Tempo," for example. While pace does play a role in the story, it would seem, without the title, to be insignificant background. With the title, you're bringing this aspect of the piece to

the center, telling us, in a sense, to stop, pay attention to the rhythm. Talk about “Tempo,” and your decision to title it as you did.

“Tempo” wouldn’t be the story it is without its title. I began this story with its title, working around the word itself. I went to my trusty Webster, and looked up the word. Then I thought about the word for a long time, and wrote the story. Here’s the dictionary.com definition—I don’t have my Webster’s with me, I’m in a coffee shop, typing, but I think this definition will suffice.

tempo

1. Music. Relative rapidity or rate of movement, usually indicated by such terms as *adagio*, *allegro*, etc., or by reference to the metronome.
2. Characteristic rate, rhythm, or pattern of work or activity: the tempo of city life.
3. *Chess*. The gaining or losing of time and effectiveness relative to one’s continued mobility or developing position, esp. with respect to the number of moves required to gain an objective: Black gained a tempo.

When I read about tempo as it relates to chess, the story came together for me. What happens between the two characters is a kind of dance. There is also a play of darkness and light, of movement, throughout their story.

In an above answer, you mention pop-song stories, such as “Galveston.” What other pop-song stories do you have? Is music a great love of yours, or what inspired you to write stories driven by song?

“Wildfire” (also in the collection) was sparked by the Michael Martin Murphy song from the 1970s. I also have a few that are unpub-

lished at the moment.

Those are not my favorite songs. They are songs evocative of a time and place in my life, and so I worked off them. I do love music, but, actually, I think those pop-song stories are not about the music. The music becomes part of the landscape. I intended "Galveston" to be a close and personal story, a story about two sisters, their mother, and the absent father. It isn't really about the song, although, what the song represents to the mother is a part of what happens.

I thought "Wildfire" was cheesy when I was a girl. But, it was a song that appealed to many a 12 year-old girl in 1982 and my best friend was one of them. She also loved horses. I later read that Michael Martin Murphy first heard the story about a ghost horse from his grandfather. He dreamed of something similar one night as an adult and wrote "Wildfire" the next day. I like the idea of a man growing up in the suburbs and writing down a story heard from his grandfather, turning it into a 70s cowboy ballad. I think I read he grew up in the 'burbs, I could be mistaken. I like the idea of a man waking up and having the wistful desire to return to the cowboys his grandfather knew, or the cowboys he wanted to imagine his grandfather knew.

Memory fascinates me. It interests me because we don't experience it the way we experience the moment. In a way, that moment lives on and on, every time we turn it around in our heads and look at it again. In one of my stories, a Lite Brite and its little pricks of light take on a significance because they are part of a little girl's fear of the dark. I recently wrote a story that appears in the *Mississippi Review* online involving dolls that were popular in the 1970s. The dolls are sort of creepy, not campy, and very important to the child in the story. I think the dolls themselves take on more life than the people in the story, because of their significance to the girl.

My hope is that the stories themselves have a timeless, sometimes fairy-tale feel to them. Pop songs and toy marketing were a big part of my childhood and they shaped the stories I told, the games I

played. When I write about childhood they creep into my stories sometimes and shape them.

You've mentioned Robert Shapard numerous times. Has he had a profound influence over your work? How?

Well, I read the first *Sudden Fiction* anthology when I was in high school and loved it. Everyone in our honors English class had to do a senior project; mine was *Sudden Fiction*. I wrote a few sudden fiction stories; I remember one involved a witch who baked bread without washing her hands. It might have been awful, I'll never know because I've lost the story. But I suspect it was influenced by *100 Years of Solitude*, another book I fell in love with that year.

I read like a fiend in high school, and what I read then probably surfaces in my work all the time. I read Shapard's *Motel and Other Stories* recently; I read them after I wrote the stories in *The Sky Is a Well*, and I was struck by how, structurally, they are similar to my own short-shorts.

You read *Sudden Fiction* in high school? Wow. What I would have given to attend a school where such things were even heard of. Tell us more about your high school—the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. Were creative writing classes taught there? How were you introduced to the short-short?

I was in the media arts department; it was dissolved the year after I left, and that's too bad. I studied photography, poetry, and fiction. The school was located around the Museum District in Houston, close to colleges and universities. Students were bused there from all over the city, and even the outskirts of the city. There was a delicate, beautiful man who taught us poetry; half the girls had crushes on him, and probably some of the boys did too. Some of the teachers were graduate students at the University of Houston. My

two favorites were a burly poet with a red beard, and a fiction teacher named Kathleen White, who wore boots and close-cropped hair. We read Carver and talked about writing, and workshopped our stories.

The first time I really considered short-shorts as a form, was during my senior project. I read the *Sudden Fiction* anthology, wrote a paper, read from the anthology to the class, and wrote my own sudden fictions. I don't have them anymore, but one was the witch story I mentioned above, another was about a lonely waitress, and one about a child alone on the beach. I was smart enough to see that they were sophomoric, so I ended up tearing most of them up. I wrote a lot of poetry then. I think I filled a notebook with villanelles. My English teacher died of an aneurysm before she graded our papers. And, speaking of death—last year, I had the urge to contact my big burly red-bearded poetry teacher. I Googled his name and found a poet, with his name, who looked sort of like him. He taught somewhere—I think I've blocked out the place—in the Midwest. And I read that just a few months before I searched online, he had killed himself. I think it was him; it was the same name. I don't know what happened to Kathleen White. I'd like to know where she is. She was a wonderful teacher.

Much of your fiction has been published online. Is this the medium that you prefer? What are the benefits, and conversely, the downfalls, of publishing on the web?

I've had a few students write to me over the years; the majority of them, though, wrote me after the Norton anthology came out. That's a good example of how print and online can work off one another. This is conjecture on my part, but I think that the Internet has made writers accessible to readers— young readers, in particular—in a way that they weren't when I was young. I loved to read, and I read more when I was in high school than I do now. I'd read anthologies,

and find a story I loved. I didn't recognize authors until I'd read their work a few times. Today, if I were a student, I might find a story I love and see the author's website in her bio. The Norton's bio has my site's URL in it. A student might go to the site, and see a list of forty stories I've published. Most are free, because they are online. So it gives them a chance to see a body of work that, without the online world, they might never have found. Especially from someone obscure, like me. Also, my site has my first name—it's even called claudiaweb. So I can see how that might make it seem more casual than it did way back when. Oh, and my email address is posted right there. If I were super famous, that would be a big pain. But I'm not, so I like getting emails from readers.

I think online magazines are like the journals you find in a bookstore, on a shelf, in that there are great journals, mediocre journals, and bad journals both online and in print. A good online journal has a great editor with a clear vision. Things go out of print and online stories go away, get lost to the ether; I think some of my stories online will stay out there for years to come, and some won't. Some are already gone. Things seem to happen faster online, but I am speaking from my own experience. Also, online journals tend to update their sites frequently, and tend to give me quicker responses than print journals.

My story that began as "My Robot" and ended as "My Lawrence" was originally published online in *Juked*. I think that was the first year Shapard and Thomas considered online publications for the anthology. I am not a teacher, but I know from my friends who teach that more and more colleges are taking online writing seriously when considering tenure. Also, I'm pretty sure that the Pushcart anthologies now consider online publications. They've been around for a while now, and more people take them seriously.

You've been a contributing editor at *Hobart* for a while now. Who are some of the writers you and your co-editors have published?

What skills have you acquired since joining the editing team?

Hobart is a beautiful magazine, and I think that is mostly because Aaron Burch loves *Hobart* and has stuck with *Hobart*, the way John Wang sticks with *Juked*. The magazine has a strong personality — *Hobart* loves baseball, *Hobart* is quirky, *Hobart* loves a good story.

I've learned a lot from working with Jensen, Savannah, and Aaron. We take turns reading for each month, and I believe this gives each online issue its own distinct feel. We are very different writers, and I think this works well for us as editors. Aaron still reads for the baseball issue every year, that's his baby. And Aaron used to do most of the photography and art for the site, but Sean Carman does it now. The last issue I read for, we published a weirdly wonderful story by Shane Jones called "I Will Unfold You With My Hairy Arms" and the picture Sean Carmen chose for it was sublime — it turned out to be a painting on the fuselage of a B-24 bomber Sean saw this summer in Fort Collins, Colorado.

We've published a lot of talented writers; some are writers we've read before, some are lovely surprises. We read everything that comes to us. If I pick one writer, I'll start to think of all the excellent stories and writers I haven't mentioned. We published a short by Jeff Landon a few months ago that lingers, a story I'll never forget, called "Proofreader." I highly recommend that story.

I guest edited an issue for *Hobart* before I signed on as part of the *Hobart* team. I obsessed over that issue, because it was the first time I'd ever edited. I believe I read every piece submitted at least three times. I was very concerned with the theme I chose, and how the stories would fit together. Now, I trust my instincts more. Working as an editor, I've learned that it is an art. You have to be bold in your decisions, and be honest with yourself if you see a piece that you like but don't love. I appreciate editors' suggestions more now that I've done some editing myself. Coop Renner of *elima*, for example, is a talented editor. He chops up my shorts and shows me something

clean and beautiful. What he does with them, another good editor might not do, but he makes them better and that's what matters. The best magazines have editors with a strong vision and style.

You participated in a flash fiction panel at this year's AWP conference held in Atlanta. What did the panel encompass? Will you attend the 2008 conference?

It was a beautiful time. I presented with the writers Kim Chinquee, Darlin' Neal, Kathy Fish, Girija Tropp, Liesl Jobson, and Jeff Landon. We are all part of Hotpants; we call ourselves hotpanthers. Pia Ehrhardt, Utahna Faith, and Tiff Holland, also members of our little writing collective, were in the audience cheering us on; Utahna brought her baby, Nolan, and held him in his sling. He was wide-eyed the whole time. The room was packed; we talked about the years we'd workshopped with one another, how we found one another. We talked about the short-short form, and read work that originated in the room. We often use word prompts; Kim Chinquee provides us with a list of words, and we write around the words. This exercise works especially well for me when I'm writing short-shorts.

I wasn't prepared for how overwhelming the whole conference was for me. I'd been writing and reading with some of the editors and writers there for years, and it was my first time meeting many of them. It was jolting, and emotional; in the beginning, meeting one another in front of the hotel bar, we hotpanthers all sort of stood there, looking at one another. Some of us cried, some of us were laughing. It was disconcerting, to stand in front of people I'd talked to everyday but never seen up close. After the presentation, I tried to organize a reading for us at a local bookstore. It was raining, and nobody came. But we ended up reading to one another, and that felt just right.

I plan to be at the 2008 conference; I'm not on any panels this year, but I should be reading with Kathy Fish, Elizabeth Ellen, and Amy Clark for Rose Metal Press.

What other appearances have you made? Readings for *The Sky Is a Well*, perhaps?

I had a reading at BookWoman in Austin in September; I read with the poet Tiff Holland. I read from *The Sky Is a Well* and she read from her chapbook, *Bone in a Tin Funnel*. It was very small but lovely. We had wine, cheese, and the faces there were familiar and warm.

Sometimes, I read at coffee shops with Utahna Faith and Tiff Holland. But I'll be leaving Austin soon. We're moving to San Antonio. I'll have to introduce myself to the writers, bookstores, and coffee shops there.

From 1995-1996, you taught composition in China. What moved you to take this position? Tell us about the experience.

I was young, and wanted adventure. One of my best friends was there; she taught, and she was fluent in Chinese. I'd never been to another country. Well, Canada. But, other than that, I'd never been out of the USA.

We lived on campus, in a little concrete building with faded yellow wallpaper. I taught hundreds of students; I think I taught about twenty-five hours a week. My friend was young and newly married, and I was young and newly married, and our lives stretched out in front of us in a way that for me was exciting but a little scary. So this Cyndi Lauper song lyric just popped into my head: "when adventures like cars we would ride, and the years lied ahead still untried." I think I experienced something that a lot of people probably experience when they live in a country foreign to the one they

grew up in; I felt I had a different, clearer perspective of the country I'd left. I found myself writing and dreaming about Texas.

You wrote your first novel at age nine. How long was it? What was it about?

The novel was about a girl living in castle filled with books, on a moor populated by butterflies and bluebirds. The rest of the story involved black plague, lots of fire, burning at the stake, lustful guards, daring knights, and a dramatic rescue. Oh and an old crone and a black cat, and a big journey. Oh, and it was called "Through the Foggy Times." When I read it to my brother, he told me it was the greatest story ever told. Years later, I found the novel, a red folder wrapped in burlap that I'd singed to make it appear old. The last few pages are filled with spelling mistakes and the handwriting is frantic; the girl writing those words couldn't wait to get them out. I stopped numbering the pages at pg. 16, I believe, but I think it's about sixty pages front and back, on blue-lined notebook paper in a nine-year-old's messy cursive.

Any novels lurking on your hard drive right now?

Yes. There's a novel I wrote when I was in my twenties. My other stories eat parts of it, sometimes.

What's next for Claudia Smith?

My small family is moving to San Antonio, Texas. We should be there by the time this interview gets read. We aren't leaving Austin by choice, but I'm thinking San Antonio is okay. It's a beautiful old city, and when I'm there I kind of feel like I stepped into a Bob Wills song. After we're there for awhile I'll know the city, and that feeling

will wear off, but right now when I think about living there, I see sepia-toned roses and chapels and missions.

Also, I'm writing a novel called *Crumb Island*. Wish me luck.

Good luck, Claudia! And thank you for your insight and honesty during this interview. Before we end, however, give us a hint as to what we will find in *Crumb Island*.

The novel springs from a short originally published online in *Juked*; it's about a girl, her mother, and her uncle. I have a lot of research to do on adoptions in the 1940s and 50s. I'm also reading a lot about moon lore and butterflies. Much of the novel concerns the same themes that have preoccupied my stories for years, but it is, right now, mainly character driven. Uncle Trip is the heart of it; he's the main character's sort-of-father, sort-of-brother figure, a man who collects, reads, and instructs my heroine but never quite gets it right. It is about love, how fierce it can be, and what people will do for it. What I like about working on a novel is how I can inhabit the characters for months at a time. I'm in love with Trip right now. Some of the book cannibalizes that book I mentioned to you before, the one I wrote when I was in my twenties. I can't wait to write it all down.