

# *Goddess* in the Wind **O**w

By Marco Etheridge

## **WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...**

*Marco Etheridge's, "Goddess in the Window," reminds me of Blaise Cendrars. A one-armed, Swiss poet, short story writer, and novelist. He lost his arm in WWI, he traveled more of world than many of us will ever even get a chance to experience, lived in one of the greatest time periods of our last century, and wrote about it all. Cendrars's goddess was the world around him, the shortcomings, the beauty, the heartache, the brutality, the poetic, the moment. Etheridge's goddess is the lady in red, in the window, struggling to get over the frame. What "Goddess in the Window" captures is a singular moment, one in which another is not only caught in a gaze but one in which has inspired beauty.*

*I love this piece for its reminiscences of modernism, Greek tragedy, and the sorrow of Literature after any given war. The main character runs their alley on one leg, tormented by the chorus (quite literally) of voices in their own head (and, like the best of all dramas, ours too). What this story begs to question is whether or not we can truly believe that there are goddesses who walk among us.*

*I, for one, think that there are.*

*This piece is not a requiem but a celebration of the muses that inspire creativity, it holds dear all that can be captured in a moment and written about. The character may be a homeless, one-legged vet that hears voices and owns his place as the king of an alleyway, but for this one moment, this one singular moment, time froze and he was able to imbue the sensation for a moment's release of his torment.*

*Etheridge captures ephemeral release, those split seconds where, what you're looking at, alters the entirety of the world. Reality will always be there, lurking behind, but those true moments keep you going.*

*It's 1 a.m. here, New Orleans time, and I write this thinking about the moments in time when I've been able to stop and take in the entirety of my world and have it make any semblance of sense: driving through traffic in Springfield, IL during a rain storm when I would've sworn to a god I don't believe in that I could see each and every rain drop at the stop light, taking mushrooms and staring at the moon, breathing deep, and tasting the pierian spring, that one time, too drunk to be any good, where the woman I loved threw a bottle at my head because I slapped her for not wanting to leave the party and we were both wasted, the other time, another woman I loved told me she could only come with a finger in her ass, and she did, when my*

*parents called to tell me about their divorce, that time taking acid and stopping the conversation because I could tell the mood of the couple in front of me because of how they were shaded in the dark and light of the table, that moment my brother had his 1<sup>st</sup> baby, my niece, and how I knew I had to be better, the moment my ladyfriend told me she was pregnant, having rolled me out of sleep, and I saw any chance of my selfishness dying by the wayside for what I then, and still now, know that I'd have to resort to any means to keep them safe, the only time I was able to cry on stage, not as a character but as a person hurt by another, seeing Man Man for the first time, walking home in eight inches of snow, only to sleep outside because the human I left had both my car keys and my house keys and was incredibly pissed at me for yelling at their friend...*

*My moments are mine, nor are they meant to paint me in any form of decent light because I know who I am and have come to terms with that, but Etheridge offers you a read in which you can tap into your own. There is a beauty to "Goddess in the Window" that reflects the tiredness of our existence and matches that exhaustion with the hope that keeps us willing to keep looking. I truly hope you enjoy this small bit of madness, tragedy, and breath of beauty.*

*Five Stars.*

**QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):**

Then she stalks into the alley on black heels, with a stride like a hunting cat, like a dancer on stage at the Apollo. You see her, see that tight red sheath stretched over an ass that would make angels turn to drink. She's a radiating flare of candy apple red, crimson sleeves to her wrists, dark hair streaming down over that dress painted taut over her body with the love of an old master or a new tagger.

Goddess in the Window

By Marco Etheridge

In ruins deserted, 'midst the rubble of  
Warfare and whispers of the dead,  
One-legged Zeke brought low by warring,  
Not long past, and out of his head,  
Kept the watch o'er his alley and madness,

Bedeviled, where first from the bricks  
The red-skirted ass of a Goddess  
Unknown came forth; A tight red sheath for a  
Girl Belovèd, a Treasure of Light: Yet he  
Lingered not in his solitude, but went  
Forth, hobbling, where Goddess  
Had wandered, model of woman, to tell  
Her his plight,  
For memory of beauty only, Of Beauty,  
Beauty only, most forgotten of sight.

For the love of all things holy, would you maniacs shut the hell up? No one wants to listen to your drivel; not me, not the goddess, and certainly not our guests.

Thank you.

I apologize for the interruption. It's not as if I can control those horrible magpies. Believe me, if I could, there would be a dozen muzzles strapped tightly across a dozen ugly mugs.

You hear me talking, you freaks?

Again, my apologies. Where was I before I was so rudely interrupted? You see before you my kingdom, this alley you survey, or rather what's left of it. Not an expansive realm, I know, but it is mine by virtue of no one else wanting it, and because I live here. It is a fitting abode for an old soldier, don't you think? I exist amidst a desolation of bombed-out buildings, a wasteland of rack and ruin. Thus my utter shock when a goddess materialized amongst all this ugliness. Such a singular miracle must be shared. That is why you are here: to bear witness.

Wait, what is this puzzled look that dances across your faces? Ah, I understand. I am a broken man living in a dead-end alley, so you expect a certain pattern of speech, the argot of the destitute, or perhaps the cant of the gutter. Fuck you! Fuck your condescension and your patronizing airs. And yes, there really was a goddess. I saw her with my own eyes.

Look at you standing there, whole and sound, two legs apiece. You dare to look down on me just because I'm flat on my ass. Let shrapnel blow one of your legs to ribbons, you miserable maggots. Then we'd see who puts on fine airs. And when the unseen urchins steal your prosthetic, leaving you stranded on a filthy pallet, how well do you think you'd cope?

What's that? Yes, well then, apologies accepted. You must excuse me. I become emotional at times, but I have my reasons. That damnable war took more than my leg. A portion of my own sanity has gone missing, along with some of my compassion, and most of my patience.

Look around you. What do you see? Derelict buildings, crumbling brick walls, weeds pushing up through broken pavement and trash. Windows blocked and blind. Even the graffiti is flaking and worn.

I am surrounded by the rubble I created. A wasteland wrought by all of us, truth will out. The difference between us is that you have removed yourselves, which any sane person would do given the means. I have not the means, and only one leg. So here I remain, alone and forgotten.

It was not always so. I was once strong and whole, sound of mind and body, a sergeant proud. My uniform caught the eye of more than one maiden: not uncommon in those times. Then I answered that fateful clarion call, as so many of us did. And here you see the result.

Ruin, rubble, and remorse are now my only companions. I do not include the singing Greeks or the unseen urchins that prowl the night stealing legs. They are of no account, only part and parcel of the aftermath. Phantoms, as it were, and like phantoms, they haunt me.

Your pardon, I have neglected to introduce myself. My name is Zachery Collins, Sergeant Collins that is, retired as should be obvious. You may call me Zeke. Everyone does.

Poor Zeke speaks to no one 'midst the rubble,  
Hearing only voices in his head,  
One-legged Zeke sees vision crimson,  
A wondrous Goddess to wake the dead;  
Strutting the stones of his alley and madness,  
Transforming the air into magic  
With round red-skirted ass of gladness...

Shut up, shut up, you masked madmen! Enough already. They've grasped the concept,  
I'm sure.

I ask pardon for... oh, our fine visitors have scarpered, frightened away by your incessant caterwauling. Of course they fled, you disgusting heathens. And now the cowardly chorus has vanished as well. So be it and good riddance to the lot of you. Here we are alone again, trapped in hell's alley, just me and my miserable self.

There is no one else but you, Zeke. Can you grasp that, if only for this moment? You, alone in your alley. There is no Greek chorus, no group of suited gentlemen come to investigate the appearance of the goddess.

But the Goddess is real. She was real, wasn't she? And those leg-stealing little bastards, they're real as well. I mean, where else could my leg have gone?

Your leg certainly did not walk off by itself. The unseen urchins remain unseen, but not unreal. And the Goddess was very real. Don't you remember seeing her?

Aye, I did see the goddess. But we, I mean I, certainly won't tell those magpies about her. They don't deserve it after scaring everyone away. Doesn't matter they were never here in the first place.

You were alone Zeke. Try to remember. The afternoon sun was splashing down the far wall, washing it golden. Everything was glowing: the patches of stucco, the bricks, even the graffiti. And you were over here in the shadows, safe on your pallet where no one can see you.

I remember how bright it was. I had to squint my eyes. And then I saw her, red dress and all. I did see her, didn't I?

Oh yes, you saw her Zeke. I'll tell it to you again, shall I? It will all come back to you. Very well, then.

The sunlight so bright the air shimmers like a spotlight announcing the arrival of the star performer. The goddess appears at the mouth of the alley and the sunlight coalesces around her because she's focusing the light rays. She arranges the brilliance into a shawl that fits over her red dress. She moves again only after she is satisfied with her new raiment.

Then she stalks into the alley on black heels, with a stride like a hunting cat, like a dancer on stage at the Apollo. You see her, see that tight red sheath stretched over an ass that would make angels turn to drink. She's a radiating flare of candy apple red, crimson sleeves to her wrists, dark hair streaming down over that dress painted taut over her body with the love of an old master or a new tagger.

The goddess passes in front of you, right there where the dull brick is gross and crumbling, except now even the dirtiest fragments are lustrous as mother-of-pearl.

She doesn't look at you, doesn't turn her head, doesn't break her stride. The goddess stops before a black barricaded window, that one right there, the one only she knows the secret of. At a flick of her hand, the flimsy barrier peels back on itself. She vaults to the brick sill as if gravity does not bind her to the earth.

Catlike, she balances for a moment in that gaping mouth of brick. Then she disappears into darkness. She leaves you with the vision of one long leg dangling down below the hem of that red dress stretched across the most upper reaches of her perfect thigh.

You sob as she vanishes, one choking moan in your throat. Then you are lunging for your crutches, tripodding yourself to stand on your one leg. You have no choice but to follow her, no matter the obstacles. You cannot let her go, not if there is a chance to catch one more glimpse, something precious to hold close through our long, black nights.

Such appalling beauty in the midst of desolation, in this ruin where no beauty exists. The rubble around you holds no vision, no comfort, no joy. Everything has been stolen from you, even your leg. This moment of light and magic will not be stolen from you. You swing your crutches, propel your good leg forward in clumsy hops. The shadow fades behind you and you are blinded by sunlight and promise.

You are at the brink of the window, but unlike the goddess, gravity holds you to the earth. Poor one-legged wretch, you cannot climb, and you cannot spring like a cat. The barrier yields to a prying crutch and you duck under it, chest pressed to the brick, peering into the gloom.

Dust lies thick on the floor and in the film of it you see the triangle-and-point footprints that mark her passage. Your crutches hit the floor in an aluminum and plastic clatter. You throw yourself after them, jackknifing over the brick sill until gravity takes control and your mangled body falls to the dusty floor.

You scabble about like an over-turned beetle, bits of plaster clinging to your filthy coat and dust griming your hands. It is a struggle to raise yourself, but you manage it because you must. The goddess has vanished into the bowels of the building and you must follow her.

Thumping and hopping, you lurch across the room and into a wide hallway hung with shadows and cobwebs. The trail of the goddess leads down the corridor. The rubber crutch tips beat a syncopation in time with your single boot sole—plock, thump, plock, thump.

Yes, I remember now, the darkness stretched out in front of me, and her footprints led away in the dust. I followed them. There was a light and that's where the trail led.

That's right. I knew it would come back to your poor, addled brain.

You see a warm glow of light that grows stronger as you hobble down the passageway. You step into a great open space like a ballroom. High above you, parts of the roof are open to the afternoon sky. Broken beams and cracked slate litter the floor. The footprints of the goddess thread a passage through the rubble and you follow.

It is hard going with only one leg and the floor covered in ruin. Do you remember? One crutch slips on a loose slate and you lose your balance. You're falling backwards, arms flailing, but you don't crash to the floor.

A great splintered beam is behind you and you land on it like you have fallen to a bench meant to catch you. Your crutches rattle to the floor and the echoes rebound across the empty space. You raise your eyes to follow the echoes and that is when you see it.

One entire wall is covered in a vast mural. You have to turn your head to take it all in and you do, again and again. It is a vision from the heart of Delacroix but painted on the fantastic scale of Rivera. The surface has been soiled by feral pigeons and stained by dripping water, yet the pigments glow in the syrupy light that flows down through the holes in the roof. The sight of it fills your eyes and your brain.

The goddess dominates the foreground, her leonine body rendered twenty feet tall and glorious. She wears a red evening gown and over it a burnished breastplate. One bare arm is held

aloft, a burning sword clenched in her hand. Her shining face is fierce, head turned to look over her shoulder, sable hair streaming. Her other arm beckons forward the halting throng that follows, their numbers stretching to either end of the sprawling mural.

Her followers are not a valiant army intent on victory, and she is not liberty leading the people. She is the goddess of remembrance guiding the forgotten. They stagger after her on shattered limbs, hold out stumps of arms stripped of hands. Broken, battered, and bandaged, these are the remnants of battle, forsaken and nameless, shot through and shot down.

They make their way beneath her upraised sword, lurching, carried by their fellows or crawling, the detritus of battle demanding to be remembered.

Yes! And I was there. I saw myself in the painting. Didn't I see myself?

You did, Zeke, you saw yourself because you were there.

Your eyes sweep over the wounded multitude and in it you see your own face, again and again. You weep for them, and for yourself, until the tears blind you and you look to the rubble-strewn floor. There, amongst the discarded tins of paint and castoff brushes, you see where the footfalls of the goddess thread a path that disappears into the enormous painting.

Yes, that is what happened. I sat there for a very long time. I sat very still, until the light faded to darkness. I could hear the pigeons fluttering in the roof, and the rats skittering in the shadows. There were other sounds as well, voices from the painting: moans and shrieks, shouts and curses. And now we are here, alone in the alley. Tell me, do you think I will see the goddess again?

How am I to know, Zeke? Perhaps one day, if we wait long enough. And you? Do you believe she will reappear?

I am only an old soldier, but I have to believe even when I know I should not. If I keep the faith and keep the watch, who knows what could happen. The sunlight will wash into this forsaken alley, where hope is wounded but not yet dead. I will look up and she will be standing there, a goddess bathed in light. She will be wearing the red dress, and in her arms she will be holding my leg.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *My story "Goddess in the Window" took seed from a photo prompt sent to me by a friend. The photo shows a buxom young woman in a red dress climbing into the window of a decrepit building. The foreground of the photograph is a very seedy alley. Looking at the photo from an observer's point of view, I tried to imagine what sort of person would be witnessing this scene. The answer seemed obvious to me: a homeless guy who lived in the alley. It wasn't much of a leap from a homeless guy to a homeless veteran, and from there to a homeless vet who hears voices in his head, including a Greek chorus.*

*This poor guy became my main character and the voices in his head became a sort of narrator. The unseen urchins that have stolen his prosthetic leg are the Fates. The ruined alley and the derelict buildings are all the result of the same war that took Zeke's leg.*

*Zeke sees the goddess and is compelled to follow her, missing leg or no. I wanted him to have a sort of vision or redemption and that took the form of the enormous mural that he finds inside the building. Hopefully Zeke draws some comfort or closure from the discovery of the mural, but that is for the reader to decide.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has been featured in many reviews and journals in Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. Notable recent credits include: Underwood Magazine, Prime Number Magazine, Smokey Blue Literary & Arts, Coffin Bell, In Parentheses, The Thieving Magpie, Ligeia Magazine, The First Line, After Happy Hour Review, Dream Noir, The Opiate Magazine, Cobalt Press, Literally Stories, and Blue Moon Review, amongst many others. His non-fiction work has been featured at Jonah Magazine, The Metaworker, and Route 7. Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is available at fine online booksellers.

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