

Peter Barlow

Pay the Dancer

Spend evenings along Eight Mile, because. Go to that stretch with all the strip clubs, where the lights are pretty and distract from the general misery of the area. Go every evening but pay special attention to the rainy ones, long after dark, when the lights hitting the puddles give the pavement a day-glo sheen. The ghosts come out then, from the residential zone a block away, arriving in cars, on bikes, on foot. The ones in cars scurry to the front doors of the strip clubs like rats to food, pretending a superiority to those on foot, most of whom look haggard and worn, like ladies taking their clothes off should be the last thing on their minds. The ghosts, though, know where the good spots are, where the pretty ones are, where the best steaks and beer for the lowest price are, as if their primary reason for going is the food. Watch them. Watch them all. Wonder what they do when they're not here. Are they lawyers, construction workers, the general unemployed or disabled? Make things up to fill in the gaps in their stories.

After a while, go home because. Go home and watch television. Read the news. Surf the Internet. Maintain a sense of superiority over all the ghosts, thinking that whatever they do in the rest of their days, while you are home safe they are not. Or go in. One night, any night, a random night, go into the strip clubs where the most ghosts go. Have a steak and a beer, and take plenty of singles—twenty, fifty, a hundred singles—to pay the dancer. And then go home. Either way, be prepared to live with the consequences.

Repeat daily nightly, because.

Peter Barlow's work has appeared in *Rosebud*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Louisiana Review*, *Underground Voices*, *Per Contra*, and *Bryant Literary Review*. A former Pushcart Prize nominee, he received his MFA Creative Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He is an adjunct professor of English at University of Detroit-Mercy.