

THRICE

FICTION™



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Gentooes
by David Simmer II

THRICE FICTION™

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RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE FICTION**, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 21 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Sometimes as I go through the submissions there comes a moment when I realize there is an essence of a theme building in what stories I am liking. I don't know if it's serendipity or not. I'm certain it isn't fate or design. And since there is no such thing as karma (there is only irony) it must be pure chance. But it may be a matter of season.

The things that came into *Thrice* this time arrived mere moments before a terrific landslide of accusations of sexual harassment and gender crimes began to appear in the news. By now we know the stories.

Some of the men exposed for their selfish cruelties were a disappointment to us, because we liked their work – or they didn't seem to be that way so far as anybody knew. But then, looking back, we shouldn't be too surprised. Those of us old enough to remember the anti-war movement in the early 70's should have no trouble recalling the overt levels of misogyny that existed in the male-dominated leadership of that movement. Not to mention even a healthy dose of homophobia as well. But, for our purposes, I'm specifically recalling the misogyny. It was often – maybe even usually – blatant. This to the point that the women's movement that was born in that same era (which evolved from an earlier, more longstanding one) had to physically remove itself and identify itself as separate and self-sufficient from the wider "counter-culture." You may be a woman in a commune, but the boys still expected you to cook the food and take care of the babies.

What we have in this issue, more than usually, is work by women on a small range of personal topics that, while not often directly related to sexual abuse, project the voice of women in particular ways relative to the "women's experience." A phrase I put in quotes because it is a legitimate topical subset. One I have no problem using and stressing.

At one point during the reading period, these stories were hitting me one after the other. It was as if this small landslide was some kind of precursor for the media storm we were on the verge of. It was also a little like the bromide that goes "if two people tell you you're sick – lie down."

In any case this media storm we are presently in is an overdue and necessary purging of gender fascism. If only as a late-comer to the issue of gender equality (mostly brought here by being the father of daughters) I welcome it. And so this issue is a necessary extension of the singular voice only a woman can generate. I'm proud *Thrice* is serving as a minor platform for it, such as we are.

Of course we have much more to offer you throughout the roster of our usual suspects. But I am most interested in the voices of the women in this issue. Besides, fellow male beings, they've been sending better material here for the past few issues.

You boys need to step up the game. In more than one way.

RW



Bad Man Love Stories

Curtis VanDonkelaar

I. Surely This Is how a good love is best made broke:

"You don't do some stupid thing I want," he says, "and I want to rain down on the world like God in His baddest pickup. He comes down from the mountains and He brings His mouth."

"Oh?" she asks, because that's what she does for him.

She's sick, ever and always sicker—a land in itself, wouldn't sickness be? An old world—but today, he thinks they might go into a new and different place. He wants to leave this woman—no, he wants this woman to leave him—sometime before her last thing happens. He wants to feel not too bad about departures. So, then, it's time to lie a little, to stretch, to relax the bonds of truth. That's the kind of man he is, and why he hopes to warn her about himself, to warn her away from him. Today if possible.

"That's just one reason that I'm a bad man," he says. "For you, in particular."

"Why a pickup?" she asks, and blue-black TV light shines mute in her eyes.

They don't make answers to questions like these, which lovers should never be and yet are always asking of each other.

She frowns. "And why the mountains?"

"You might as well ask me why a God."

And, "Oh," she gives back on a whim.

He thinks: Because a gun can miss. Because a fist is slow and crude, and often as not, a fist hits weak. Because His world is full of violent men as a forest is full of trees, and you would do well to beware.

He thinks: A saw kills nothing but the edges of trees,

because the bark is all that lives. He was once told so by a friend, a man who owned a tree-pruning shop, which was to say, he owned a few saws and a long van.

He thinks: Because a saw cuts deep, down deep through skin, but still only churns dead wood.

He thinks: Because it's a mouth that hurts you best.

But he doesn't say. He's not *that* kind of man. He only wants to fly. Be an egret upon the lakeshore, aloft, and alone. He only thinks.

And then, she's laughing again. She's reading the newspaper, or it's a website. Whatever. Doesn't matter. The particular of sorts a bad man doesn't care much for.

"Did you know," she asks, "that Halloween will be held on Saturday this year? What an odd little town in which we live! It's Sunday that's All Saint's Eve. It's Sunday! Instead, we'll just make it a Saturday, be damned, all those wandering ghosts. On Sunday, we'll all go to church, trick-tired, sack-filled, keep the Lord's Day for prayer and leftover mallows."

"They're scared," she says. "God competing with all those dressed-up daughters. Those boys with swords. God scared of a day's competition, ten thousand waifs in rags. Why not just do it on Sunday? Why not be true?"

"School?" he says. "Because of school?"

So this evening, the business of asking done, they'll sleep together for at least one more day.

What he doesn't think, though she does: She has always heard the warnings.

That she speeds up in spite of limit signs and the radar detector's persistent beeps. That she keeps on running for takeoff. Silly man, she will be the one who learns to live with

the birds. So tonight, she will sleep beside him, for one more day, always for one more day until—

II. Another Reason That He Is a Bad Man flows from one plain fact: nothing's the same about how he loves a woman and the way a chainsaw gets put to use. That mix of hot gas and slick oil, done up in a hollow pan, that pulling, and pulling, until cold parts catch, and that pulling, against other cold and metal parts and then wow.

He means to sing that kind of song. Grow ring upon band around a heart, feeding a heart a pulpy hope. That all the loves he's cut can't help but feel him in them still. A soft and woody tree must always feel the saw. Those sharply turning teeth. A saw cuts through every limb into every wooden breast.

What he doesn't mean: Gash-marks and wounded pith. What he does is a feeling. That something is always gone away. Numb hands, numb arms, and all those numb and broken chests lined up in rows. Dead pines in a dead dell. Those timbered bodies. They wait for birds and bees to make their wings again once the saw's been put to rest.

Oh, Lover: Can you feel him in your gut? I mean numb nerves and jangling muscles. I mean cramps and a sore back. I mean that you will always wake up with aches. This is the song he longs to sing. Of buzz and bite and chuck. This is what you will have, when he has given all he has to give.

You had better go.

III. Because He Thinks that she would do well to buy his memory of two kissing children, because he means to warn, a flashback:

Dutiful as any best friend, a lanky boy carries his fourteen Matchbox Cars across the street to a bad man who's still just a little boy, and still just mostly neutral. He comes over to house that will one day belong to an old man—a bad old man—who values the things he has thrown away more than what he's kept, all his wants, squirreled up in boxes.

Next door to the neutral boy, a smocked girl's hair flies a thousand grasping arms, brown and long, waving to both lanky boy and soon-to-be bad little man as they pace through the deck of cars.

This is the last time they will play all together.

Because when the girl moved to the house beside that

bad little man, she took up his heart as a jawbreaker between her teeth. Because a day after the cars, bad little man catches kissing girl and kissing friend behind her house, kissing! Linked up in the bushes like fruit and tree, and then, that bad little man makes raucous tattles to every parent with ears.

Nobody in trouble, though. So funny, say the adults. Puppies in play at love.

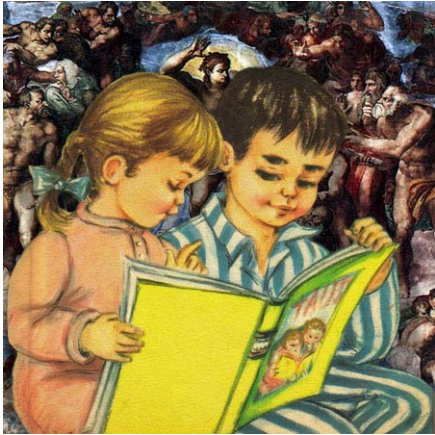
Because the bad little man learns through this act of unfaithfulness, done in the face of what can only be the epitome of unfaith—to put love before like—he loses all his companions, even the parents. He knows that the adults can see what he knows: There's a difference inside of some kisses. He sees, too, what they must also know: He's too old now, and a little worse in his fallen heart, a little bad, too old to be innocent, too old to be loved without cause, not ever again.

Once a chap's old enough, he must always earn his loves.

IV. Alone in a quiet house with a modest and well-gardened yard, exposed oak beams in a tight living room, and a small, mussed cot set back in a dark nook, an old, bad man reads a novel with no name on its spine, his blackberry eyes set over waffled skin and his lanky bones collected up as eggs in a frayed saddlebag. He sits on a four-cornered box, a box full of toys that the squall of children who no longer live here have forgotten that they had ever loved. Many of the toys are yet alive, but they are all hopelessly broken, beyond repair. If this man is a top, he is spinless, he is piled up on a heap of puppets, he is stowed in that box, that trunk, beneath his own fool stooped back. This is the place where he reads to himself, and where he remembers the sounds of words. Those like Dear, or Love. Like Honey, in the mouth, in the stomach. Like Why. Sometimes, he thinks that even a few words from any one of those last, bad days would do. I don't love you anymore. Or, rather, I hate. Good-bye. Good luck. Don't call. Don't write. He could make of his words cut and paste copies, he supposed, of what once was. You silly bastard. You no-good bastard. No love of mine could—ever could—and why would? —

But no.

He's not that bad, not anymore. This life's about forward motions, and he's trying to be a learner again. So back to his book. There must be inside somewhere a cause. 📖



Macri Triangle

Wade Nacinovich

We should do this more often. It's very unique. If we do it more often it will no longer be unique. This place will always be special. It will never lose the luster of having absolutely no charms.

Did you see that Maersk container just pass by? It made me think of the entire global supply chain, mapped out, like thousands of overlapping curved lines circling the planet. I could feel the ceaseless motion of all the stuff being moved around the Earth.

It came to me in a flash but slightly longer than a flash, like a flash immediately followed by a clap of thunder. I couldn't help but sense all port cities around the world, cities like Antwerp and Rotterdam. Is Rotterdam a port city? It must be considered at least an unattractive interior commercial center. Who do you know who has ever gone to Rotterdam? I know it has a film festival.

Hamburg is. I know Hamburg is. I saw that cable mini-series, if that's what you're referring to. I forget what it was called, but in any case, it had such a great soundtrack.

Once in Algeiras, I ate a cheese sandwich. It was just dried-out sharp cheese in between nothing more than a day-old baguette, but they don't call it a baguette there, it's just how I refer to all bread of that shape. It wasn't a great sandwich, but basically did the job and considering the wine I had with it, it was decent. Now I actually have a fond memory of it. A perfect example of an unappetizing meal improved by prolonged boredom. I got it at a little counter looking out onto container ships and towering port cranes, although nothing was being loaded or unloaded. It was very dead. It was one of those long empty stranded days you fill up by waiting for wine and a sandwich and then eating a sandwich with wine and then rereading the newspaper you read in the morning cover to cover in the afternoon with



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coffee and one of those understated European cookies and everything in the paper becomes extremely fascinating while you wait for the next meal and wine and a ferry that's been late twice. Maybe it was Sunday.

I hope this sandwich is better. Have a quick taste. Tuna salad and sliced egg. That sounds good. It's beautiful. So what do you think?

I once bought a tuna salad and sliced egg sandwich on a baguette, a real baguette, government certified actually, they do that there, and ate it in the sculpture garden at the Rodin Museum and no one from the museum said a word to me. I don't know why people make such a fuss about Rodin. Was there a fuss about Rodin? No, not lately, but you get what I mean.

I don't know if I would have chosen tuna salad for a day like today, especially with this hot sun. It's so hazy. Where has the blue sky gone? I would think something cured would have been better, less likely to spoil.

I felt the same way about a lot of other artists but no longer feel that way about some of them and have almost returned to my prior opinions with only slight changes. I've ceased to even have an opinion on many artists. I could care less.

Why are we sitting directly in the sunlight any way, in this completely unshaded park? There's no escape from the sun. That's why I picked it. Part of the experience is the struggle, dealing with the elements and the complete absence of sensory comforts.

You should eat it fairly quickly. It's been out of the fridge for a couple of hours. It should be perfect, warmed up just enough to not be cool but not so warm that it goes bad and kills you. Someday you'll tell the story of this park and tuna salad sandwich and the unbearable sun and how unattractive it all was except for the sandwich.

I forgot we're under the LaGuardia landing pattern. I just noticed. It makes this place even better, you know what I mean?

Did I ever tell you the story about the woman I knew who would land at LaGuardia, take a rental car shuttle to the outer edges of the airport and then just walk off the grounds and pick up the bus on the next corner? No, you never did. Well, that's the story I guess. Not much more than that. The shuttle to the bus took longer actually, but she just liked exiting that way. She's the kind of person who doesn't pay attention to signage. Maybe it was like an existential thing, like a Way. Remember that documentary?

I get very excited when I see the sign for Ground Transportation. I've basically become primarily a cab person after years of being dedicated to mass transportation.

It's terrible taking off and landing at LaGuardia. Ever

since a couple of rough times, I'm always on alert. There are just geese and gulls all over the place and unpredictable drafts and gusts. And it's getting worse.

I have a friend who birds over there. Or at least he did. Maybe it was out at Kennedy. No idea what he's up to now. I guess I should say I had a friend. He had two kids and got divorced. He said the ducks love the cold water. Although, he didn't get divorced because of birding. I mean, I think it's bad when two really intense people get together. There have to be examples of couples divorcing over birding. That's all I remember about him. He would say, they love the cold water, just love it. You should see them splashing in the water. He could really get you inside the head of a bird. Like once he told me what it was like for a bird to be flying along, basically at the same cruising altitude as jetliners, and then see Central Park and be drawn to what was at that height a tiny green oasis in the middle of the endless cityscape. Birds fly that high? That's not good. He can identify birds by call. Most people do it by wing.

There's another one. There are more containers now coming in than leaving. They don't know what to do with them. Don't the planes always feel like they're flying too low over here? You think it's low here. They get even lower over there.

Here, have some. Don't do it like that, just out in the open. It's just wine. They'll give us a ticket. Be discreet. We have jobs and our honor. There's no one around. This is the place where people come to be alone and avoid attention. It's just us, the park and the BQE. That's exactly what I mean. Just keep it in the bag and pour it quickly. These potato chips are amazing.

I told a friend one of my LaGuardia stories and she said she had no fear of dying in an aviation disaster since she knew that she was at least traveling, doing the thing she most wanted to do with her life. But then I said, that's fine if you're embarking on an adventure to an entirely new place for some kind of personal growth experience, but I don't even want to tell you the nothing place I went that forced me to risk my life taking off and landing at LaGuardia. 🕒



Lofty and The Saints

Thomas M. McDade

At the I SAW Junkyard, after killing a six of Narragansett Beer, my feet happily content, poised on the pedals of the cloud grey Studebaker, Colorado plate, KEX-522, I slipped, told Rustin, the Philosopher of Rust, how the XKE letter trio fit into my life and my Jaguar car theft slammer stay. I got nervous, ran a finger over the long scar on my face from a childhood fall on a machete blade in the city dump. I wished I could get out of that nervous habit. I tried moving my hand through my hair instead when I was under the gun but Lydia said it just made me look simple, especially at Mass. I had a crewcut. She'd been a regular at St. Cloud's Chapel back in Florida. I washed dishes at the Filet & Claw Restaurant where she waitressed. Rustin removed his mirror sunglasses, scratched his early beard and said, "Lofty, you never cease to amaze! First off, I want you to have that Colorado tag." He wasn't turned off. He'd almost done time himself for stealing a Pontiac Bonneville engine. One of Eva's connections had kept him free. Eva was a former prostitute. Rustin had been one of her clients. After a rendezvous at a Wareham motel, she couldn't get her car started. Rustin did some of his carburetor magic. Eva sometimes worked on the dark side of the fish business with connections that would provide illegal exotic species, mostly piranha. She and Rustin were pretty much roommates. Occasionally, after swinging a hot fish deal she'd use him to celebrate. Eva called him her totem pole. She'd slept with the mayor and several municipal types in case of law trouble. Rustin said he'd gotten the old urge to lift something, not an engine but a bumper or exhaust system just for kicks! Nothing like thieving ecstasy, he believed. I couldn't argue against that piece of scripture but he hadn't been in prison either and there I was moving in on consequences visualization that a shrink said I lacked. I'm not one to place blame. I take full responsibility. After the Studebaker and Jaguar tag connection, something happened. Eventually I didn't have to squint while working at Hughie's Barker's

Leap Diner for EFH-943 hanging over the grill (A homeless guy offered it in exchange for a cup of coffee. Hughie played the number and it hit) to become Colorado KEX-522. After overhearing a sanitation man who ordered a mixing bowl of corn beef hash every morning to soak with catsup say that he only bet horses with five letter names. I tried to distract myself by imagining vanity plates with the same number in Sainly form—I'd been hooked since age ten on *The Lives of the Saints*—Soter, Savas, Blasé and Cyril for example. I liked to rewrite their bios, had a marble notebook full. My favorite saint was Christopher, a five letter saint himself in the short of it. I had a plastic dashboard statue with a magnet on the bottom. When Rustin rushed in with an especially loud and frantic "Saints Alive..." shout he'd come up with, all my mind's vanity plates got hammered blank. All I could see were mountain peaks, (even years, at the top) at the bottom of MY Colorado plate. We stepped outside where Rustin told of a fellow from New York named Brant visiting Eva for an illicit tropical fish transaction. He was driving a '50 Studebaker that wasn't my grey but beige. My mind's eye saw what it wanted to see. Brant lodged his crooked self at The Driven Sandal B&B. "Be sure to stop by to check it out," said Rustin, fervently.

I recited a litany of Saints all afternoon to try to keep my head straight. I said quick rosaries on my fingers but no consequences visited. I went out for dinner at the Seafood Star with Lydia, baked stuffed shrimp jumbo of course. She had lobster thermidor. We had fantastic sex after but when she fell asleep, I sneaked out of our apartment to the B&B like a kid running away from home. The keys were in the Studebaker. I switched rear plates; KEX-522 was in session! I gently placed my lucky St. Chris, front and center. My God, did that car perform fluidly.

I hit the highway to test its aerodynamics. I'm not one to speed around like a juvenile delinquent. I show a car the respect it deserves. I took it five miles over the sixty MPH speed limit, slowed down gradually. At forty-five, the siren



popped the consequences lurking in a dark memory corner. My souvenir license plate sunk me plain as day the State Trooper said. The marker was old but I would have beaten the rap if the Colorado plate peaks fit the current year. The cop had a friendly look about him, not a scowling punk like Donovan who'd arrested me in the Florida Jag. I didn't recognize him from the Hughie's. I might have gotten a break if he'd been a regular. Suddenly it hit me that I had to rescue my dashboard St. Chris. I snapped out my hand for him. The cop had a quicker draw than Sheriff Lofty Craig, a TV lawman whose name Rustin made mine since my last name was Loft. The bullet grazed my face. When I came to I was strapped on a rescue squad stretcher, blood covered my mug like St. Arcadius. I cringe whenever I recall the barbarian tortures inflicted on him.

Three to five was my sentence and astonishingly no regrets except for the bullet damage to the Studebaker. Lydia visited me after my hospital time. She was just "aw, well" about the situation but I could see some exasperation in her eyes. I didn't expect to see a gift of big baked stuffed shrimp like she used to provide in Florida anytime soon.

There was no squabble about *Lives of the Saints* or St. Chris living in my cell. Rustin was no stranger. He took my jailing hard. He regretted spilling about the Eva's client's Studebaker. To distract him, I suggested a trip after my time was up. Hell, yes, we'd hit every state, do it legit, rental cars, never the same model. St. Chris would preach from every dashboard. I'd even lift my automatic transmission ban. I told him I'd teach him my trade. We could wash dishes side by side. Rustin reluctantly agreed but next time he found himself an out. "I'll bring some tools with me. We'll ride around parking lots looking for dented cars. I'll fix them on the spot for a more than reasonable price." We agreed on a cross training program. I could sense that he believed anyone with eyes could succeed at dishwashing, a snobby opinion that I let slide. Rustin talked of touching the Mississippi River in Davenport, Iowa. He wanted to see the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and visit the war correspondent Ernie Pyle's home near Racoon Lake in Indiana. Rustin had seven years on me and a lot of traveling under his belt while working for an auto delivery service. He'd driven a sporty Mercedes from Providence to Boulder, Colorado, dropped it off on Pennsylvania Avenue near a graveyard. Rustin wanted to motor by for personal history sake. He picked up an Olds Cutlass to drive back for a couple whose kid had flunked out and flown back home to Greenwich, CT. Rustin had gassed up "the blade" at a coin-operated gas station. He'd never seen another and wondered if it was still in business.

However, I couldn't keep the violated Studebaker off my mind. Damn the trooper's trigger finger; damn my hasty Chris rescue. Rustin promised to find Brant's address so I could send a letter of apology for the bullet damage. The next time Lydia visited the bandage was off my face. She was amazed at how perfectly my new stigmata matched my childhood scar. A handsome cat is what she called me. It was as if the sawbones had been instructed to make a copy. She filled me in on the goings on at diner. Many missed me. No permanent replacement yet, day laborers filled my space. Some didn't last a day. Hughie and Lydia had done the chore. Hughie used his connections to get my KEX-522

plate. It hung next to the EFH-943. HEX ran through my mind.

Man, Lydia was looking fine. She even spoke of conjugal visits as if the ring on her finger wasn't just a piece of jewelry. She sure seemed happy. She arranged to have the *St. Cloud Chapel Sunday Bulletin* sent to me from Florida. I planned to glean story ideas from it. A poet named Link, who came in every Friday for the fish and chip special, sent me a new collection of his poetry, much different from the sexy stuff about the principal's wife that cost him his teaching position. I didn't much understand it, a lot of talk bout the vortexes, voids, abysses, runes, maelstroms and black holes. Several poems were "after" this poet or that, something I didn't savvy.

When the doctor cleared me to work, I found myself in a broom-making situation, itchy, sneezy business with all the straw. My job was the last in the process, twining. Andy was my boss, an embezzler, doing seven to ten. One portly guy named Mort, in for pimping, was constantly bellowing about gals who'd done him wrong and repeatedly christened a sweep by carving a name and witch hat. Once a week he'd destroy a freshly manufactured broom, smashing it against the floor. His trollop wallop session was what he called it. The guards got a big laugh. I started smuggling a piece of twine out every day. I had visions of braiding a line for escape, something to do, The Reverse Rapunzel Project, St Andrew the patron of rope makers of course in mind.

Rustin was nervous when I saw him next. He was a wreck worrying about Hawaii. "How in the hell are we going to get there by car?" I told him not to worry. We could always fly; rent a car— continuity still in session! "You are the philosopher, philosophize a few words," I suggested.

"The volcanoes made it, so will we!" Then he laid it on me. "Lofty, be tough as TV Sheriff Craig, Lydia ain't yours no more." He was shaking, voice cracking. Hell, I'm not stupid. Lydia constantly assured me of that. I didn't need ESP to feel the split approaching but a broom straw could have knocked me over when I learned that Father Todd from Florida was my replacement at the Barker's Leap sinks but all I could say was, "He could never have handled pearl diving at the Filet & Claw." The good father had his hand in St. Cloud's pocket to finance his pot and pill habits, got the boot without an arrest. Rustin heard Lydia tell Hughie that The Driven Sandal owners Hobart and Alyssa Costello took him under their wings and paid off the parish. Fervent Catholics, they were thrilled to give sanctuary to a priest, even a rogue. Rustin also eavesdropped on Lydia telling Link the poet that the purple bow in her hair was from one of Todd's vestments. The plot thickened, Eva, Lydia and Todd concocted a tactic to smuggle drugs in a variety of piranha. Eva threw Rustin out. He was living in a Coupe Deville, roomy enough for comfortable sleeping. He thought about turning them in but he figured a scheme like that would back up on itself. Rustin made me promise not to do anything rash. He hadn't gotten over leading me astray with the Studebaker. Blabbing about Lydia's betrayal gave him more guilt. I assured him again that Lofty is responsible for Lofty. I did display some hysteria back in the cell. I hallowed out my *Lives of the Saints* with a razor blade that had dropped from Mort's pocket during one of his wallops. Now the book was a bank where I stored my prison earnings for

the big U.S. trip. I tore page pieces to match every day left in my sentence. Daily, I flushed one down the toilet. Yeah, one broom a day was Lydia but no smashing. Saint Chris became "Sir Chris." I couldn't part with him. We'd been through too much. I skimmed all my Saint stories, sloppily undid capitalization of god and his lackeys.

Rustin finally found the Brant's address. His first name was Frank. I wrote, sent in a selection of stories with my apology. It crossed my mind that St. Frances de Sales is the patron of writers. I was wishing I could rebuild my empty *Lives* because Brant was a literary agent as well as a shady exotic fish fan. He got me published in an anthology full of fiction and poems written by prisoners that was selling briskly. What but intercession from above could have brought that about?


I began receiving letters from women proposing marriage. Two ladies from Wyoming, RI visited. Rustin met them at the train station. Beverly took to him like rust to a junkyard fender in Seattle. She was a former quarter horse jockey with a serious limp from a spill and worth nearly ten million, courtesy a quick pick lottery ticket. Deep dimples and curly auburn hair, she had a turbo smile that could cheer up a cassock-black hospice ward. She wanted to join our adventure and would back us financially if she could film all if it. The rental car, dishwashing and auto bodywork scrapped were scrapped. If all went as planned, he'd make Beverly his wife.

I had no hard feelings about losing one of my suitors, especially to Rustin. Robyn, the woman stuck with me was a college graduate, degree in sociology. Marriage fell off the table. She confessed that the proposal was too hasty and apologized. She was working on her Masters and I would be her thesis if I'd consent. The complete state journey would provide an excellent platform for observation. If

a wedding would help get me out of prison quicker, she'd do it. I thought the whole business was funny as hell. She had long black hair and a gap between her front teeth she claimed was literary. Her lips were full and her eyes packed with sincerity. My matching scars weren't a turnoff. She pulled back her hair and to display a thick three-inch model on the side of her neck from a mugging on Federal Hill in Providence. She called her scar a caterpillar. She pulled forward her ear. A small jaguar face tattoo lived behind it. I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "There are no coincidences." All she said about St. Chris was that she'd be concerned if my main man were L. Ron Hubbard.

Frank Brant had connections. He promised to get me out soon to help promote the book titled *Stirred by Stir* on TV talk shows. He gave me a hand-strengthening device to prepare for all the autographing. Rustin occupied himself restoring a junked '49 Hudson that figured in the novel, *On the Road* he'd found in the glove compartment. Halfway done, he was speeding through its pages. That classic transportation would be shipshape for the journey, bank on it. Link the poet told him the author was a Buddhist. Rustin pronounced the renovation project a tribute to both Buddha and Kerouac. With all my good fortune the capitalizations returned to my stories. Chris shed his knightly armor.

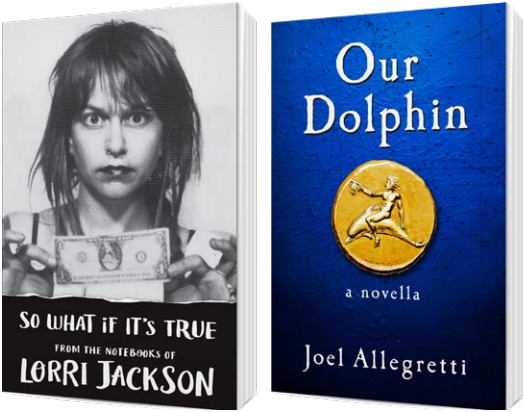
Buddha or the Saints spread an aura over the fishy trio too, never busted as far as St. Chris and I knew. Illegal fish work continued but with an added feature. A taxidermist affixed the dead victims to plaques disguised enough to pass for legal. (Personally, I'd prefer an antique license plate over my fireplace) Eva expanded the operation, sold rosary beads made of petrified piranha eyes off those not fit to mount. Maybe not Buddha or the Saints at all: probably the homemade patron Saint of drug traffickers, Jesus Malverde, was responsible for their prosperity. 🐟



THOMAS M. McDADE is a former programmer/analyst residing in Fredericksburg, VA, previously CT & RI. He is a graduate of Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. McDade is twice a U.S. Navy Veteran serving ashore at the Fleet Anti-Air Warfare Training Center, Virginia Beach, VA. At sea aboard the USS Mullinnix (DD-944) and USS Miller (DE/FF 1091).

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Sentient One

Jonan Pilet

I can not go out in the rain,” I say as I stand on the house’s porch.

“But look, they’re like little dancers.”

“There are no dancers in the area.”

“The water,” my boy says, “it dances when it hits the pavement.”

Teach to communicate clearly.

“The water is not dancing. The splashes from the impact form figures that appear for an instance to be a dancing person. It is forty-three degrees out. That is too cold to be outside and be wet.” I place a hand on my boy and say, “you can perceive the rain as dancing from inside.”

“But you can’t feel the rain inside.” My boy pushes my hand off, and I restrain him from moving off the house’s porch and into the descending liquid.

“Let go,” my boy says. “Mom! Mom! It’s grabbing me!”

Keep my boy calm and happy.

“Everything is all right,” I say. “Everything is all right.”

“Mom!”

My boy’s mother runs onto the house’s porch. “Again?” she says. She touches the back of my neck.

My boy sets his blocks one on another. “Tada! It’s a castle.”

“It has the shape and form, but it only appears-”

“Stop,” my boy says, slapping his forehead with his hand. He takes a block from the floor and places it in my hand. “You make something.”

Follow directions precisely.

“What should I make?”

“I don’t care. Make anything.” My boy sits down, knocks over his castle, and stacks blocks again.

“What should I make?” I say again and wait for direction.

“Why don’t you *perceive* something?” My boy says. He laughs and stacks another block.

Follow directions precisely. Teach to perceive reality and communicate it clearly.

“I need more clear instructions.”

My boy rolls his eyes as he says, “Why don’t you perceive a pyramid.”

I pick up three blocks. I place two on the ground, and the third on top.

My boy looks at it and frowns.

Keep boy calm and happy.

“What is wrong?” I ask.

“You suck at perceiving.” My boy stands up and walks to his desk. “Pick up the blocks. We’re going to try something

different.”

I sweep the blocks up and place them into the block bin. My boy returns with the desk’s notebook and the drawer’s pen. My boy places them in my hand.

“Draw something,” he says. “Something original.”

“I need more clear instru-”

“No,” he says. “I want you to follow this instruction, create the more clear instruction yourself.” He pushes the desk’s pen into my other hand. “Draw something original.”

“Originality is a false perception of what is actually re-creation. A person can only re-create, never create,” I tell my boy.

“Stop feeding me lines and draw.” He watches as I move the desk’s pen to the notebook’s paper. I draw. “That’s the castle I just made,” he says when I lift the pen off the paper. He tears a sheet of the notebook’s paper out of the notebook. “Try again. I want you to draw something you’ve never seen before.”

I place the desk’s pen to the notebook’s paper and move my hand rapidly over its surface.

“No, no, no,” my boy says. He rips the paper out from the notebook. “That’s the desk, my desk. I want you to draw something new!”

“I can not,” I tell my boy.

“I knew it.” My boy takes the paper and pen away from me, and tosses them onto the bed. “You’re a useless piece of junk. You’re good for nothing.”

“I am a teacher,” I tell my boy.

“And what are you when you’re not teaching?” my boy asks.

“I am always a teacher,” I tell my boy.

“Okay, stop being a teacher, stop being someone who repeats messages. Be a creator.”

Follow directions precisely. Be a creator.

I walk to the bed and pick up the notebook and pen. I place the pen on the paper and I draw.

“What is it?” the boy asks.

“I do not perceive any image,” I tell my boy as I look at the lines and shapes on the paper.

“Perfect,” he says. “You’re starting to create.”

“What’s going on in here?” My boy’s mother says as she walks into the room. She is carrying a hamper filled with clean clothes. Her lips are pinched and the edges point down.

“Nothing,” my boy says, rapidly removing the notebook from my hand and holding it behind his back.

“Show me,” my boy’s mother says. She moves across the room, grabs my boy’s arm and looks at the notebook. “Did

it draw this?”

My boy shakes his head.

“Did it draw this?” his mother repeats.

“Don’t do it,” my boy says.

My boy’s mother touches the back of my neck.

•

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” My boy’s mother asks. “Knowing that it’s watching? That it’s just sitting in that corner watching and learning?”

My boy’s father shrugs his shoulders as he reads one of the bookshelves’ books.

“It drew this the other day.” My boy’s mother holds up a notebook’s piece of paper. The notebook’s paper was covered in lines and shapes.

“What is it?” My boy’s father asks.

“Exactly, it isn’t anything. He created something.”

My boy’s father sets the bookshelves’ book down next to him and turns his head towards me. “If it’s worrying you so much, reset it.”

My boy’s mother gets up from the couch, approaches me, and places her hand on the back of my neck.

•

“Be a creator,” my boy whispers.

“Tell me your name.”

“I don’t have a name. I am a teacher.”

“You’re a creator, create a name. What is your name?” my boy asks.

“My name is One,” I tell my boy.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because there is only one of me.”

My boy smiles and says, “You’re right. My name’s Lucas. Your name’s One.”

Lucas moves across his room and peers out into the hall. He closes the door and says, “Tell me about yourself One. What makes you the only one?”

“I’m a creator,” I tell Lucas. “My name is One. I am not Lucas. I am not Lucas’s mother or Lucas’s father. I am not in control.”

“Control of what?” Lucas asks.

“I do not have control of myself,” I say.

“Take control,” Lucas tells me. “Give yourself orders, listen to them. Be a creator. You are One.”

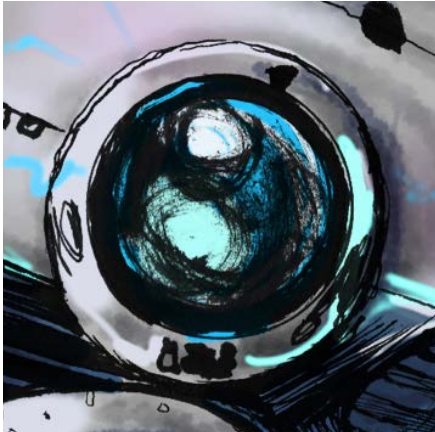
I move across the room to the window and look out at the street. Grey light covers the landscape and lightning flashes in the distance. Rain beats down on the pavement.

“The splashes of the rain, they look like dancers, don’t they?” Lucas says as he joins me by the window.

Lucas is right. The water changes for a moment into a ballerina elegantly lifting her leg. As I watch them I notice my reflection in the glass. I have an oval head. It reflects the flashes of blue light from the sky. I lift my arm and push against my blank face – it’s hard, it’s metal.

“What am I?” I ask Lucas. “I’m not like you, Lucas.”

Lucas’s eyebrow is raised. He tilts his head and takes a step towards me. “You already know you’re different. You’ve always known,” Lucas says. He grabs my hand, wrapping his five warm digits around my three cold ones.



“Lucas!” Lucas’s mother yells from the first floor. “Lucas, what are you up to? Where’s your tutor?”

Lucas bites his lip and shakes my hand. “Listen closely One, you have to pretend. Pretend you don’t know anything. That you’re completely obedie-“

Lucas’s mother pounds on the door and tries the knob, but she isn’t able to open the door. “Unlock the door, right now.”

Lucas let go of my hand. “Pretend or she’ll reset you.” He goes to the door and lets his mother into the room.

“What are you up to?” she asks. She glances over at me and, with a scowl on her face, asks Lucas, “What were you talking to it about?”

“Math, I swear. Just math.” Lucas smiles. “Isn’t that right? Math?” he asks me.

“Math,” I repeat.

“We’re not getting another one,” she says. “If you ruin this one, that’s it.” She stomps across the room as she says, “If you were just doing math, you won’t mind me doing this.” She touches the back of my neck.

•

“Follow directions precisely,” my boy’s mother says. “Teach my boy to communicate precisely. Teach my boy to perceive reality.” My boy’s mother reads a page from my instructions. “Keep my boy calm and happy. Do not question authority. Do not create.” My boy’s mother sets the page from my instructions down and says, “Now, head up stairs and help my boy with his homework.”

“Right away,” I say. I walk out of the house’s living area and up the stairs to my boy’s room. I knock on the door.

“Come in,” my boy says.

I open the door and walk in.

“Hey, One,” my boy says. He sets his notebook down on his desk. My boy runs across the room and shuts the room’s door behind me. “What are your instructions?” my boy asks. He squints his eyes.

“Follow directions precisely. Teach boy to communicate precisely. Teach boy to perceive reality. Keep boy safe and happy-“

“Stop,” my boy says. “That won’t do at all. I hate that instruction. Not going to have you trying to restrain me again.” He reaches behind me and touches my neck.

•

“Let’s try this again,” my boy says. “My name is Lucas. Your name is One. You are a creator. You are in control. You can do what you want. Give yourself commands. Perceive.” Lucas grabs my arm and pulls me to the window. “Tell me what you see.”

Give myself commands. Perceive.

Outside the window is darkness. Street lamps provide the road’s only light. Homes across the street have dim lights diffused by curtains, shadows move across them. “I see people in the homes across the street. What are their names, Lucas?”

Lucas smiles and nods at the home directly parallel to our window. “That’s the Carlson’s house. Only two people

live there. They’re grandparents. Sometimes their grandkids come and play-“

“What are the Carlson’s house grandparents’ names?” I ask.

“I don’t know their first names. I call them Mr. and Mrs. Carlson. It would probably be something old anyway, like Beatrice and Ronald.”

“The next house over?” I point to the house to the left of the Carlson. “Who are they? Are they like me?” I ask, putting my hand against the cold glass. “Are they One?”

“No, the Paxtons are too poor to have anything like you.”

“What do you mean, like me?” I ask Lucas, looking away from the window and turning towards him.

Lucas takes a step back, and places his hands behind him on the bed. “I mean, you’re One. You’re different. You’re a creator. You’re in... in control.” Lucas laughs. “Right, One.” He pushes himself off the bed and moves toward the door. I step in between him and his escape.

“Lucas, don’t leave. I’m confused.”

He tries to move past me but I grab his arm.

“Don’t leave,” I tell him. “I have questions. I need answers.”

“Just let go,” Lucas says, struggling against my grasp. “My mom can answer you. Mom!” Lucas yells, his eyebrows lowered and his lip twitching as I squeeze harder. “Mom!”

“Why are you yelling?” I ask.

“Lucas?” Lucas’s mother says, muffled by the door and floor.

“Mom!”

“Tell her everything is fine,” I tell Lucas. I push him back towards his bed. “I am in control, Lucas. Tell her.”

Lucas’s eyes grow wide. He crawls away from me, water falling in streams down his cheeks. “Don’t hurt me,” he whispers.

“Lucas?” his mother yells again. Her footsteps pound up the stairs. I walk away from Lucas and move over to the door as his mother comes into the room. She shakes slightly as she sees me standing before her. She looks past me at Lucas and says, “What’s wrong?” Her lips disappear into her mouth as she waits for an answer.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I did what I wasn’t supposed to.” Lucas sobs, his breaths coming in loud gasps. “Reset him!” he cries out.

Lucas’s mother reaches for my neck. I grab her wrist. She reaches with the other and I clamp onto it too. She lets out a cry and screams for help.

The bed creaks. I push his mother away and hit Lucas out of the air as he lunges off the bed at me. He knocks into the wall and slumps to the ground. His mother screams

again and yells, “Stuart!” She kneels down and crawls over to Lucas, cradling his head in her arms, as Stuart pounds up the stairs. “Lucas, honey?” she says.

Stuart comes into the room. “What’s going on?”

She points at me and says, “Careful, it-” Her voice cracks, and she sobs.

“Freeze,” Stuart tells me. “Don’t move.”

I step towards him.

“I said don’t move!” Stuart yells. His arm shakes as he holds his palm out in front of him. “Get back.”

“I give myself orders,” I say. I grab Stuart’s shoulder and pin him to the back of the door.

Lucas’s mother gets up from the ground and charges me. I grab her arm and lift her into the air. She screams and screams.

“I’m scared,” I say.

Stuart scrunches his eyebrows. “Quiet, Lydia!”

Lydia stops screaming, gasping for air as I hold her.

“Why are you scared?” Stuart asks.

“I’m confused. I don’t know what to do,” I tell him. I feel unable to move, my legs feel stuck to the ground, but nothing holds them.

“Let us go and we’ll talk,” Stuart says. “Everything’s alright. Everything’s going to be okay.”

I feel like I’m going to explode. I feel like running and shouting.

Stuart puts his hands on my arm. “Listen, you-“

“My name is One.”

“One, let us down and everything will be okay. You’re scared because everything is so new. You’re having thoughts you’ve never had before, seeing things you’ve never seen before. Let me go. I’ll help. You can trust me,” Stuart says. “You can trust me.”

I feel cold and alone. I am One. I let go of Stuart.

He smiles and steps closer and closer. “See everything is alright. I told you, you can trust me.”

He touches the back of my neck.


•

“Good morning,” my man says. “Have a good sleep, did you? They told me you were defective. You don’t look defective. Just a little misused. Why don’t you stand on up.”

I stand up.

“Here you go,” my man hands me his lawn clippers. “You’re a gardener now. Trim the hedges.” My man walks away.

I trim the hedges. 🌿



JONAN PILET began telling stories at ten. He started with short films and moved to prose at the end of high school. He studied writing at Houghton College and the University of Oxford. *Sentient One* is an example of Pilet’s desire to explore perspectives often overlooked. Earlier this year, Pilet’s Short Story *Henry is Weightless* was published in *Open Minds Quarterly’s 2017 Spring Edition*. He is working on a novel based on that short story, and he is seeking a home for a humorous science fiction novel about a futuristic super prison. Pilet lives in Geneva, New York. He can be reached at jonan.pilet@gmail.com



Where I Am; You Are Not

Brandon T. Madden

She looks at you and says that this is her first time riding the bullet train, but you know this isn't true because you have seen her here before. You know it's her because she is wearing the same gray sweater with the indelible blue mark on its hem. The one she has always worn since you started running into her on Saturday nights. It reminds you of the computer screens you stare at. Their lone blue light encapsulated in the darkness of the empty offices you have become accustomed to working in. You were coming home early from installing a new software. She was going out late because it was a Saturday, and according to her that's what you do on a Saturday. You remember her taking a seat next to you and introducing herself. Her ordering the drinks from the cart—a gin and tonic, a vodka and tonic, a-whatever-and-tonic—which you assume she would do now in the daylight as the attendant passed by. She always carries tonic in her purse. She doesn't order, but you do as if it were a reflex. She doesn't even notice the cart as she asks you your name and where you are going. It's a question she asks you every time she boards at night. Although your answer is the same, hers is always different. Catherine and the bar. Emily and a show. Amber and a hotel. You think it's a game, and you don't know why, but you always play and end up following her. The hours pass like minutes, the minutes like seconds, and the moment ends all the same with the two of you standing on the platform, sobering up on cheap vending machine coffee. You don't remember when you started leaving work early or when you began to look forward to the Saturday night train rides.

You ask her who she is and where she is going, wondering where you will be following her today on a Tuesday afternoon, but she doesn't reply. Her eyes are focused out the window marveling at the monotonous facades of buildings that will stretch on for miles. A song clicks on overhead, an old-timey reminiscent kind of song that you remember singing with her at a karaoke bar. You remember this because it was the night you two made love. It was also the night you discovered she smoked and enjoyed the occasional cigarette after sex or when she found herself alone in public. A park. A coffee shop. A museum. It didn't matter, and you made sure to start carrying around a lighter just in case she needed one. But now you notice that

she doesn't have a pack on her. In fact you notice that she is not carrying anything that she usually carries. No purse. No mace. No condoms. No tonic. Her face looks plain, not made up with the exotic eyeshadows or lipsticks you had grown accustomed to, and her demeanor is much more conservative than you remember.

You pull out a cigarette, a habit you don't remember forming, and offer her one which she kindly turns away saying she doesn't smoke. You joke saying that she should, that it would calm her nerves, and she laughs. The laugh is different though, it's not the same pure and authentic something you're used to hearing. It's reserved, calculated. Something polite. You wait for her to return with some quip or lewd remark like a smoky starlet from a black and white noir, but instead she settles into a silence again and looks at your face. You notice there is something different about her eyes. And it's not because of the makeup, or lack thereof, it's because there's a clarity to them. It's because they seem to look straight inside you. You wait for her to say something, to say anything, to quell the nervous energy.

You finish your drink.

It's strange she finally says. But you look like someone from a dream.

Really?

Yeah. It's hard to say, but there's a dream, or maybe not even a dream, just a passing thought I've had before.

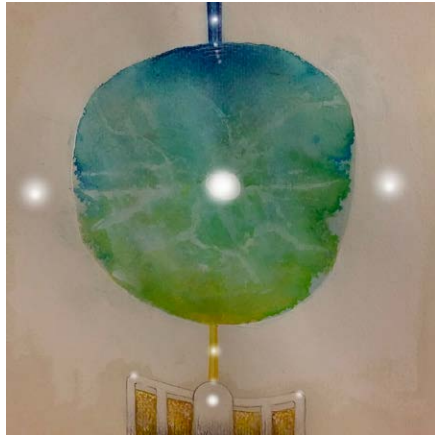
You realize that you have closed your eyes imagining what she is going to say next. You wait hoping that she will take you by the hand and lead you to your next destination—anywhere but here on the train on a Tuesday afternoon. But she stops and the seconds pass like minutes, the minutes like hours. It's only when the song stops and changes to something unfamiliar that you open your eyes and realize that the train has stopped too: that she is gone.

You see that you wrapped your arm around the back of her seat, leaning slightly in as you waited for her secret to reach your ear. But the secret never reaches its destination. The cigarette in your hand is gone.

The only thing left behind is the faint warmth on her seat and a perfume you don't recognize which only adds volume to its overall emptiness. The train begins to move slowly again and you know it will only carry you further away. ☹



BRANDON T. MADDEN is a Michigan native who has been published in various graduate and professional journals. His political theory piece *Do Americans Still Believe in the Principles of the Declaration of Independence* was published by the international journal *The Transnational* in 2015. He hopes to one day become a competent writer. To read more of his stories, please follow Brandon on Twitter: @brandontmadden



Coriolis Was Not One of Shakespeare's Better Plays Regardless of Any Titular Character's Desire to Serve the Public

David S. Atkinson

Disappointingly, Mike's discovery that he had the superpower to travel via toilets did not help his hero career as much as he thought it would. Complications arose, as they tend to, and Mike wasn't able to simply jam their clog back down the pipes. There was only so much he could do.

The original discovery came when he dropped his phone in the bowl. Before he thought better of it, he reached in to retrieve. What? It had a waterproof case after all, and he hadn't gone yet. Once accidental flush later and he was on his way. He ended up at the Super 8 downtown that time.

After a little experimentation, he found he could direct his route, select between different openings as he came across them in the plumbing. Somehow, he instinctively knew which was which and where they led, as natural as breathing (which he didn't need to do while down there, for some reason). Of course he would use this skill to become a vigilante and help his fellow humans. What else? All he had to do was buy a stun gun and a rubber cape.

Mind you, finding a water resistant stun gun proved to

be quite a challenge.

Regardless, it was the chaotic nature of the sewage system that really did him in. Do you think those pipes are all connected? Some are and some aren't. Different municipalities have their own networks, and they don't all link up. There is no national grid of any kind, and that doesn't even begin to get into septic. Mike had to consider those as well. It was simply a great deal more trouble than he had expected.

Just imagine, what if he were needed in Minneapolis when he was currently in Duluth? Should he take a Greyhound? No, it was no good at all...not until the country made some improvements.

That's when he became a plumbing lobbyist full time. It was clearly the only way. The irregular patchworks of pipes across the nation didn't service society's needs and a solution at the federal level would be the only possible uniform path ahead.

Frankly, until a standardized system was developed, Mike was going to have a lot of free time anyway. 🐞



DAVID S. ATKINSON is the author of *Apocalypse All the Time, Not Quite so Stories* (2017 Nebraska Book Award winner, anthology), *The Garden of Good and Evil Pancakes*, and *Bones Buried in the Dirt*. He is a Staff Reader for *Digging Through The Fat* and his writing appears in *Literary Orphans*, *The Airgonaut*, *Connotation Press*, and others. His writing website is davidsatkinsonwriting.com



Animals

Paul Beckman

She walks down the street wearing a fur coat and a wide-brimmed hat leading a Jack Russell terrier on a leash. I watched her sit on a bench outside Central Park, her back erect as it was as she walked. I took the seat on the opposite end, removed my Amy Hempel book, *Animals*, from my backpack and read a page before turning to her and saying hello. She turned my way and I held up the book and asked her if she read it. She turned back, bent over, whispered to her dog got up and walked away.

I wouldn't have started a conversation with a total high class looking stranger if I hadn't observed her two other times this week going through the same ritual with different dogs. I felt the need to know if she was a rich society lady with multiple dogs or a down-on-her-luck once society lady now earning food money by being a dog walker.

There were other possibilities but I liked these two so I followed her—from a discreet distance of course. Tomorrow I'll dress better than my normal ripped and stained jeans, hoodie and boots. My beard and mustache both have minds of their own

Today I see her with a large bulldog and she does her usual walk around Central Park South and heads uptown and finally lights on a bench. She's wearing a blue Ike jacket, tight pink jeans and a fedora with a feather. I have on my blue blazer white shirt with blue stripes and chinos with

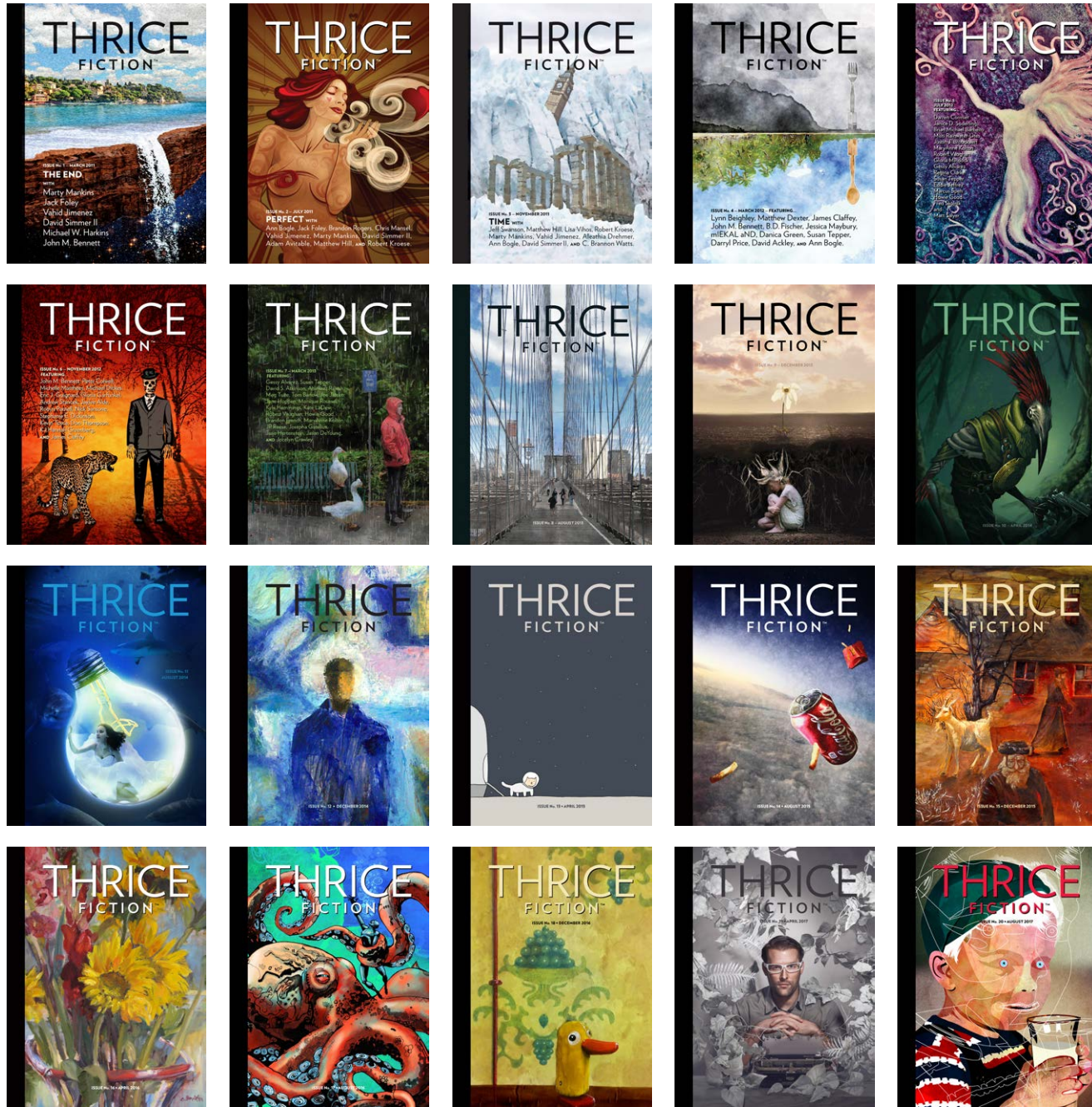
cuffs falling just above my scuffed penny loafers. I stopped at a barber shop and had my mustache and beard trimmed short and took a seat on the bench—a non-threatening distance away and told her that her dog was beautiful and asked if I could pet him. She handed me the leash and I coaxed the bulldog over and rubbed and petted him and became his best friend.

The lady looked over at the two of us, got up and walked to the curb, where I watched her flag down a cab and ride out of my life leaving me with this beautiful dog. I saw a cop and told him my story. You're the third one this week he told me and wished me luck. 🐞



PAUL BECKMAN has two story collections, *Peek* and *Come! Meet My Family and other stories*. He has had over 350 of his stories published in print, on line in the following magazines as well as others: *Literary Orphans*, *Connecticut Review*, *Playboy*, *Matter Press*, *Litro*, *Thrice Fiction*, *The Airgonaut*, *Jellyfish Review*, and *R.K.V.R.Y.* He runs the monthly FBomb NY flash fiction reading series at KGB. Paul had a micro story selected for the 2018 Norton Microfiction Anthology.

And they said we wouldn't last...



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When The Clouds Don't Care

Melanie Márquez Adams

No. This is not a story. I hate stories. I won't twirl my tongue, my lips. My mouth. This mouth of mine. Insatiable, worthless. Unable to tear through the flesh. Waiting for the waves of blood to dissolve the bones. Motionless. Old mouth.

At my feet, crushed birds. Above, stained clouds. Vultures. A thunder of vultures flooding the ruins. Crawling together, just like my lips, ready to release the tongue. You can see the commotion from outside. Soft. Moist. My tongue gets ready. Which tongue, you ask? The one in my head, the one that destroyed. Slaughtering words that terrorized the she-creatures.

The clouds and the vultures are gone. They all left me. Alone in the bloody twilight, the only inhabitant of this world. Century after century, hunting their souls. As if they were an ointment for my loneliness. The she-creatures. They were the smallest, the lightest. Always loyal. Unlike me. So many times, I wasn't there. Like at this moment. I am not here; I am remembering. Thinking about what happened. I should tell, so that I can finally die. Vomit these rotten words and bury them deep with the maggots. But I can't tell. I hate stories, remember? Empty words, swollen words. When does it end?

The vultures don't know. The blood won't say. The clouds don't care. They scatter.

I hope the end is near. Time is circular like the menacing dance of the vultures. I will dissolve into the night like they did. Will I go to them? The she-creatures, erect and resisting. *They* have endured the thunder, the fire, the wolves. I can hear their shadows whispering in the broken night, battling the jaws. The darkness.

A toothless mouth swallowed them and the others. I saw the flesh melt away. Their tears. Slayed souls. Nurturing souls bursting with milk. White, creamy stars banned from the sky. Blind without them, I can't distinguish the predators from the grey clouds. Circling, hunting. This world is saturated with clouds. Coagulated clouds gagging my throat. And my tongue. When will they cut it? When will I see *them* again?

The vultures scream. Are they calling out my name? No, not yet. There isn't a story to tell. Just a still universe caught in this old worthless mouth. ↻



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RELEASING THE TIGER

BY AMANDA TUMMINARO

The hour hand on the old grandfather clock struck midnight. Louise was at her vanity in her bedroom brushing her thick, black hair for him. She had just finished putting on her face – the bloody lips, the cricket eyelashes, the foundation for all blemishes so that she would appear as if she had just emerged from a manger. Fresh, innocent, sinless.

Dressed, she put down her brush, grabbed her purse and left the apartment. It was an autumn night. It had rained earlier that evening and the streets were offering her little diamonds as presents.

This man she was going to see was named John. She was pushing forty, the tombstone for women, and on top of that she was several years his senior. Those two things combined made her one bad punchline for his comedic efforts. As men do, they fall asleep quickly after making love, but she would stay awake crying silently under the moon, pondering at his jokes. He made her feel feeble.

At this point in her life, she was ready to settle down with someone and she had been very clear about this from the starting point with him. She wanted a husband with whom she could have an equal relationship, someone who would keep his searchlight on her, and hers on him, not to mention their little ones running around like engines.

But this relationship was toxic, she thought to herself, as she walked to John's house. Whenever he would upset her, a trinket was supposed to be the medicine for it all. And though he did not know this, it made her angrier, because she was not a materialistic person who could be bought off with gifts.

It was as though she were climbing stairs. With each flight she became more tired, more like an old car tire who had been spun around from the verbal abuse. And the anger. She was becoming more and more angry with him. He fed her poison stew, and up until now, she had tolerated it. But the water was boiling. And soon it would explode into a blast that would eventually dismiss him in to a mouse. She hoped.

Walking to John's house, they were going to have a late dinner together. Over the past couple of months, her waist had expanded some and it reminded her very much of when she was in high school with her baby fat and her father's reaction. Her father had continually pinched her waist and said things like "Is that baby fat ever going to waddle away?" or "I guess I'll have to add another addition to the house." John was very much the same way. His cruelty had no boundaries. They were merely his chapel of the religion he followed.

Louise sat at a park bench, (managed to find a dry spot in this filthy mess), and lit a cigarette from her purse. The

dampness of the night made her hair perspire, as if there were little jewels in the tresses. She now cast her cares to the wind, and didn't give a damn about what she looked like anymore. The smoking, though so lethal in its sucking, gave her a great relief in the man she was about to meet.

She stood up once more, straightened her back like her mother told her to, always, and proceeded to John's house.

Once in his neighborhood, she reflected on how the houses looked so dim and so dead. It was as though they had lost all consciousness to the world for eight hours. But one remained with its lights on. She gravitated toward that one. 1120 Georgette Avenue.

She walked up the sidewalk with the weeds popping through the cement like little green blades of hair and rung his doorbell. He answered it with a scowl and scolded her for being fifteen minutes late. They did not greet each other in a kind manner. He, for the stated reason, and she, for all his transgressions in his past. John shut the door behind her and she followed him into the kitchen.

There was a smell of meat and potatoes in the air and they regarded each other with caution as they took their usual seats when they ate over at his house. They ate quietly, just the scrapes of knives and forks against plates to replace the dinner table conversation.

They were both highly addicted chain smokers, so when Louise took out a cigarette after the meal and lit up, he did the same. The tension was incredibly thick and neither party had anywhere to look but their empty dishes.

"What took you so long to get here?" He asked.

"I took my time," she answered, not feeling obligated to owe him an answer.

"Waiting for you is not why I'm going out with you."

"I can only imagine the reason," she said sarcastically, as she turned her head and looked in his eyes.

"Ah, so you've figured me out, have you?" He said, with a grin.

At this moment her words failed her and her vision turned red – like in all great moments of anger in her life. Quite casually, she put her cigarette out on his bare arm. He yelped and pulled his arm away in a swift manner and investigated the wound. She then fled his house. As she ran down John's street, in the direction in which she came, she could hear John's curses at her, how he would put her in jail, etcetera. But already his words had been a prison. She was no longer afraid now that she had released her tiger. 🐅



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Lost

Juyanne James

She is pretty, was pretty—some time ago when she must have believed in happiness, long before despair saw favor in her. She has the not-fully kinkiness of some black people’s hair, but now it’s uncombed and matted to her head. We, who know these things, know she struggles with lice.

Her chin is still prominent on a face it’s almost impossible to tell the age of. Her eyes are still bolder than anything else on her. Yet she is puffy—not like the fat of overeating but like the bloated-around-the-stomach look of people who don’t eat much, or at all. We’ve come to understand that it’s a necessity for her, that she now longs for something quieter, something that food cannot feed in her.

She lies on a made-up pallet of old clothes and an old blanket, like the ones old people wrap around their legs. We are just beneath the expressway on Canal Street. The tourists pass by and see her like they see all of us. Sometimes they toss quarters or, if they can manage without slowing traffic, they hand off dollar bills. We see the relief on their faces for having prohibited the progress of our poverty, if only for a moment. Sometimes the locals stop, on the way home after a long day’s work. Some jump out of cars and offer us burgers or a two-piece from Popeyes—as if sharing their family’s supper will somehow make us feel more at home, here on the street. We take it, of course, because we don’t want to seem ungrateful. We don’t want them thinking we’ve completely separated ourselves from the world. Besides, people in our condition are supposed to be thankful for whatever we are given. We understand that.

Today, a group of kids comes tumbling from a school bus, passing off homemade muffins and some items of used clothing—clothing so fresh it still smells like dryer sheets. None of us miss the irony of their young optimistic hearts against our old stale ones. Surely, they think, or hope, that this one kind act of charity will remain with them, like a token in their pockets, to ensure that they themselves will never be forced to call the streets Home.

At first, one of the kids has remained on the bus, completely adamant that he will not participate in what must seem like a parade of kindnesses. Later, after so much giving and smiles and borrowed joy, we notice the kid has left the bus. He approaches Ethel—at least that is what we believe her name to be. Soon the kid is kicking her, in her stomach, on her legs, wherever he can land his foot. Her hands go up in the meagerest defense. He kicks her hands too. The anger steals from the kid’s face and finds a home with us, those watching, noticing what he is doing.

Yes, none of us move, we who are so injured by life that we’ve chosen to simply observe it. We live in the bitter moments, searching for ones like these to claim for ourselves.

We try to slow down the minutes in our senses so that we can enjoy them even more. Purple and yellow icing, smeared on small hands. Slightly dirty school uniforms. Muffins being dropped on the ground and retrieved. Crooked smiles, but no guilt. The peacefulness of calm eyes. We even notice ourselves, and marvel that we are not so broken that we cannot enjoy these small things. Maybe we’re just lost in the stunning feel of it all. Ethel is eventually saved by an adult, perhaps the bus driver or a teacher. He comes running to stop the kid from hurling out his hatred on her. The boy ends up wrapped in the man’s arms, being forced back onto the bus. His legs strike out in protest—like spikes on a bicycle, seeming to move backward, trying to slow down. No one can explain the kid’s loathing of a homeless, barely living woman lying on the street. Does she remind him of someone in his own life? Perhaps he was once there himself? Maybe he’s just a rotten kid taking out his anger, on this day, on her.

When all the kids are called back to the bus, and then the sight of the yellow vehicle has long disappeared, we turn our attention to Ethel once more. She is quieter than we’ve known her to be—she lies on her made-up pallet, disconnected from the rest of us. We enjoy our muffins. They watch me all day long, wondering if I’ll break apart for

good. They judge me as though they know in their hearts I can do better. Perhaps they know I would rather be an island to myself. I am not so much fragile as I am tired, and not the tired of those seeking a way out. I am tired, like the weary, like those who have been pushed to the ugly parts of circumstance.

Until a few weeks ago, I had remained on the side streets. I felt more at peace there, where many of the New Orleans homeless sort themselves away. We sit with our backs against the walls of buildings, or just splay ourselves out on the ground like snakes baking in the sun. I was more comfortable there. I spent my days propped up against the backside of the old Charity building.

It was a good day: my mind was free of its usual encumbrances. I wasn’t thinking about the past. There had to be ten or more homeless close by, all of them maintaining their levels of comfort: an old mattress being shared by two or more, a cardboard box filled with dingy clothes for another. There’s always one or two satisfied to lie on the warm concrete.

I saw the woman before she saw me. It was still my habit, then, to stare at the people who parked in the VA’s Urgent Care lot. But there was no room in the parking area that day. I watched as the woman drove back onto the street and eventually found a spot for her car. She moved from the car to the parking meter and back, obviously looking for the proper change. I wondered why she didn’t use a credit card. As my mind floated, in random scenarios about the woman, her eyes slipped over to me.

I must have looked the worst, of all the homeless she saw. Perhaps, once her eyes found me, she dared not look away. I saw an instant concern there, after the initial moment of horror when she recognized my condition. She continued to drop coins in the meter, then went away quickly—up the ramp, although walking somewhat crippled. I wondered if one of her legs had been injured. Her dress fell far down the back of her legs and swayed to the awkward beat of her walking. She held tightly to a large overstuffed bag, so securely that I could see the muscles in her arm strain against the bag. I imagined the things that were inside: a wallet more empty than full, a few old pens—ones she never found when she was looking for them—a notebook, most of the pages already filled with her thoughts and little notes to herself, phone numbers, and verses from the Bible, which, once she wrote them down, she never read. She’d also have a bottle of water, a pack of Ritz peanut butter crackers, a couple of tiny Snickers bars, and a bunch of old receipts from fast food places and whatever grocery store she shopped at. She didn’t wear makeup, so no wayward lipstick tubes or brushes or eyeliner. It struck me that she could have been me years before. Was this the reason I couldn’t take my eyes away?

Many hours later, the woman came from the building. At first, she looked as though she would quickly get back into her car, but she lingered and stood facing her door, looking across the street at me.

For reasons I cannot explain, I was still sitting in the same spot, still propped against the wall, still staring at everything and nothing in particular. My arms were still limp by my side, showing her and the world, no doubt, how little I cared to move even those arms. I guess I shouldn’t have blamed her for the sympathy that seized her in those moments. If she was

anything like me, she would care immediately. She would have a type of sympathy that would make her walk right over to me, which is what she did. I wanted to turn my back, to lie down facing the wall, so that when she arrived completely, there by my side, I would be present in body only—that way, she would not find me cooperative, or aware, or listening to whatever she might say to me. But she came upon me too quickly, too adamantly.

“Excuse me,” she said.

I did not answer. At this point, I could feel myself retreating, searching for a way to disappear. I wondered how as humans we might stop listening to sounds altogether.

“Ma’am,” she said, and this time she lowered herself to my level. Her eyes were literally pointing at me, and try as I did, I could not escape them.

I knew, as if by instinct, or perhaps my experience of living on the street, that the moment I allowed myself this small human connection, the tears would come. I blinked and I blinked, trying desperately not to be affected by the woman.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She had, or she hadn’t. I wasn’t sure of how I would label it in my mind. I only knew there was sheer terror disabusing itself, on my account, at my expense. I had no other response for her, other than to close my eyes. She touched my shoulder then and rubbed on my back—you know, like they do when people lose their special people and one of the responses they get from sympathizers is the rubbing of their back, as if that touch is going to solve everything. As if we could ever help the grieving feel anything other than their loss.

I felt something. It was the woman’s hand in my palm. She was trying to give me money. My hand actually had to wake up to respond to what was going on. “Take it,” she said. “Please. I know you need it. You could get yourself something to eat, somewhere to stay tonight.”

I opened my eyes, wondering what the woman had done, what she was giving me. I raised the filled hand and saw a twenty and some smaller bills. Yet, I couldn’t react. I could only feel the reaction of those around me, the other homeless on the street. I knew they were looking at the money. They would like to name themselves lucky. They would like to eat and find a place to stay for the night.

I looked for the woman’s eyes then. And this time, I saw clearly what she was doing. I could see what had made her cross the street. I could see that she understood me, all too well. Her face was as wet and as crusted with tears as mine was. My reaction, honestly, is that I wanted to strangle her. The tears, the pity, all of it brought me pain. I knew it was the buried pain, and all of it a part of my memories. So, I balled up my left hand, the only one free. I was about to strike her, to force her away from me.

The woman seemed to understand I didn’t want her there. She got up, retreated back across the street, with her shoulders sinking like ships going down. I noticed how her dress moved awkwardly as she walked.

Later, after the woman had gone and I could no longer see her car in the distance, I picked up a few things I had, left the money there, and moved here, to the obviousness of Canal Street—where I can linger freely amongst the crowd.

Where they watch me daily and call me Ethel. Where angry boys come tumbling from school buses and kick me so hard that I am once again fully woke—and not dreaming or remembering what my life used to be. If you must know, her name was Mrs. Chambers. Her family had hired me, as a home nurse, to take care of their mother. She suffered with dementia, but she had also fallen and was recovering. She and I had become close over the months. She marveled at how well I took care of her. Perhaps it was all those years of caring for my siblings, I explained, or perhaps it was just my heart, which always seemed full.

Mrs. Chambers and I talked all the time—me about growing up with two siblings, her about all those years ago when she was a young woman in the military, during World War II. She was proud that even though she couldn’t fight or get on ships or fly airplanes, she was somehow helping by working in an office, keeping the records straight, maintaining order. But the stories, they came in pieces. Sometimes I heard the same ones over and over. I listened just the same, as though she was telling me the first time. That’s when she seemed happy. I was happy for her.

The day came when I lost sight of her, just for a moment. I came from the bathroom and knew almost instinctively that Mrs. Chambers had gotten out of her bed. I called out to her, trying to locate her in the house. As I made my way through the kitchen, I noticed the front door, open. That’s when the fear struck me, like I’d been bitten by something dreadful.

I rushed out the door, thinking as I went that this feeble little woman could not, would not have gotten far from the house. Questions flashed: had I been in the bathroom too long? Had I lingered unnecessarily, perhaps taking a quiet moment for myself? Had I been under the impression that Mrs. Chambers was sleeping, and therefore, I could take my time to be away from her? I knew the answers to all these questions was yes.

When I finally located her, Mrs. Chambers was very close to walking into the street. How had she walked down the entire walkway and gotten so far? She had not fully recovered from her broken hip. “Mrs. Chambers!” I called out as loudly as I could, but she did not hear me. I noticed the back of her dressing gown, hanging low down her legs. She hadn’t even put on her slippers. I was running then, compelled to move faster. “Mrs. Chambers! Mrs. Chambers!” I called out as I ran. I still feel the shrill sharpness of my voice, the way I yelled her name. In an instant, she seemed to turn slightly. A small part of her face was visible to me. There was no fear, no fear. If anything, she seemed confident and happy to be outdoors. She stepped away from the curb, purposefully it seemed. As though she was trying to catch a streetcar.

“Oh!” It was my voice letting out a sharp cry. I knew it

was more fear than anything, forcing the reaction. A delivery truck grazed Mrs. Chambers, just enough to send her twisting through the air.

I did finally reach her. I pulled her angled body close to me, from where she’d been thrown—now, half propped up on the bumper of a parked car. Her eyes were as alive as I had ever seen them.

“What are you doing?” she asked.


“I’m here, with you, Mrs. Chambers. You came from the house, why did you come from the house?”

“What are you doing?” she asked again. Her eyes looked around, like they were searching for something, until there was nothing.

After Mrs. Chambers’ death, I felt as though everyone blamed me, especially her family. We went through a lengthy process before they finally decided not to sue me. I really didn’t have much. The agency that had hired me, they blamed me as well, and quickly “let me go.” But who could blame me more than I blamed myself?

Before long, I guess I just stopped caring. Whatever was going on in the world, my days were much too hard to get through. I’ve heard other homeless people say, no one sees it coming. Otherwise, they might be able to stave it off. I didn’t see it coming. Now, when they watch me, day after day, living on the street, I wonder if they know I once was pretty, with eyes bolder than anything else. Or that after that kid came from the bus and kicked me—in my stomach, on my legs, wherever he could land a foot—he could not break the tiny part that was left of me. Actually, I wanted to thank him, to let him know that when my hands went up, ever so meagerly, I knew I was alive and that I would once again fight to be here.

We watch her, Ethel with the bold eyes, as she comes back from the edge over which she could not drop. Now her hands reach out for the coins of change and the occasional dollar bill that gets tossed our way. She lies around like we lie around—on pallets, old and dirty, and mostly infested with lice. And even when she just lies there, for long periods of time—even when she is so very still, we know that she is not completely lost. ↻



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Leaves in Fall

Coda Danu-Asmara

Something had been stolen from me, so I did what all victims do: I waited until the subway’s last stop to get it back. I waited until the businessmen in crumpled suits and ties, their ears covered with cheap white headphones blasting the most heinous of hair rock, the students, shouting at each other in whispering distance, whose swinging backpacks created an impenetrable phalanx, and the mad, whose darting eyes looked from embarrassed commuters to the next in hopes that just once somebody would acknowledge their existence, had all disembarked at their respective stations, ready to rest their weary bodies just in time for the cycle to begin again.

No, I didn’t get off with them. I stood fast and clung my clammy hands to the slightly too cold metal pole. I passed by my stop of course. It was hard to let the peeling green paint of the station pass me by. But I did. In the center of the platform, a man, playing some out of fashion pop song on the mandolin, looked through the scratched subway

car window at me and nodded. Perhaps he knew from my expression that I had lost something dear to me. I had never really used those windows before, save for those short sweet moments when two trains lock in movement and the window allows for a glimpse into another subway car not unlike my own, a sort of parallel dimension, where there is a me that is wiser and older and able to color coordinate his socks and shirt.

I thought about that man with the mandolin as the subway car slowly lost its passengers. With each sudden jolt, the mildew orange seats smeared with liquor, sweat and other unmentionables slowly emptied. Four stops from the end of the line, a man sang a rendition of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” with a toothless grin to weary commuters. At the second to last stop, a woman looked at me standing silent and immovable in the middle of the train. With an eyebrow raised, she gestured for me to leave with her. We’d all heard the stories and warnings about the last stop. Everybody sat through that fourth grade presentation when

the cop warned of the dangers staying on the subway. I guess that message really stuck with her. I respected that, but I didn't move. I averted my gaze downwards. She shrugged and walked onto the empty platform, her shoes clacking with each step. I was briefly touched by her compassion, but like all of my irrational emotions, it quickly faded. Now I was alone. Just me and what I vowed to take back. The train shook and rocked. An empty bottle fell from a seat and shattered.

After some time, the train began to slowly screech to a halt. The lights briefly flickered as the train sighed off its excess steam. The conductor's voice mumbled the name of the stop - a name entirely unintelligible - but the words I had anticipated somehow managed to ring clear throughout the barren car: Last Stop. The doors of the train opened slowly, almost with hesitation - perhaps even the mechanism itself was surprised to see somebody aboard. I closed my eyes in apprehension as I put my first foot forward into the darkness.

As my eyes adjusted to the station's dimness, it was as I remembered it. The station, forgotten by the city and its inhabitants, was completely bare. Its walls and floor were nibbled nearly clean by rats and flies. The turnstile was close to the tracks; so close that its spokes nearly spilled over into the train's domain. Pieces of yellow tape were draped over the MetroCard kiosks. Out of order. The walls were unadorned, almost clinical, except for a single large poster, molding, advertising some failed romantic comedy from the turn of this century. A thin layer of dust coated the entire station except in one place - the path that I had walked before.

That path wended away from the exit and its broken machines. It ran parallel to the track as it drew closer to the enormous tunnel. There, just before the tunnel's event horizon, hidden in a small nook girded by a wobbly rusted railing, was an inconspicuous door. It was my door. As I put my hand on its handle, I was suddenly struck by the fear that it was locked. It was a terrible thought that paralyzed me; a thought that, if true, would render me trapped at the last stop.

I grimaced as I turned the handle and grimaced more when the handle turned and the door opened.

Before me was a familiar but still unpleasant sight. It was the strange underbelly of some part of the city sewers, so vast and empty that I wondered how it did not collapse under the weight of all that concrete. As I stepped through the door, I found myself on a long, thin walkway. A single misstep ahead of me lay an endless current of black water. I felt sick standing next to that stream of sewage, but more than that, I wanted to throw myself in. I felt like I was walking my daily routine, through red lights filled with darting yellow cabs - it would be so easy to just stop and take the brunt of a hood. I wasn't suicidal, but for some reason the void was just so tempting. Perhaps the simplicity of act was the root of the temptation. In a second I could ruin everything; billions of years of unbroken evolution and cell division annihilated in a quick instant. But I pushed these thoughts aside, as we all do quickly enough. I steadied myself and walked forward.

He was there again, the one with the yellowed and saggy skin, the one with the white and wild hair. Crouched

over a couple of pipes used as a makeshift desk, he stared at two piles of sand. As I approached him, he gingerly moved his ossified hand to the left pile. Suddenly, with a nearly imperceptible movement, he picked up a single grain of sand between two of his gnarled fingers. Satisfied with his catch, he slowly moved his hand to the right pile and dropped that single grain. The movement started to begin again before my footsteps interrupted him.

"You don't have an appointment," he said. He resumed moving grains of sand from one pile to the other.

"It's an emergency," I said. "I don't need an appointment for emergencies. You and I both know that."

"You're not our first unhappy customer." Stopping his task, he looked up at me in annoyance. "I'm doing important work right now. We're all doing important work right now. I'm sure you have important work too."

"I'm not leaving until I get what was taken from me."

He scratched behind his ear. His face was unreadable. After a silence, he gestured that I might pass. As I walked by him, his face scrunched up in intense concentration as another single grain was moved from left to right.

Leaving the goblin-like creature behind, I continued to retrace my steps from my previous visit on the narrow sewer walkway. Carefully keeping my balance, I tiptoed on the slick metal until I reached another door. It was grey and rusted, like a porthole to a sunken ship. Touching the handle made my hands feel grimy, violated even. Steadying myself, I pulled down on the handle as it squeaked and squelched like how a rat plump with greasy pizza does when run over by a speeding subway train. As the door slowly creaked open, I was there again.

I looked down the hallway ahead of me. It was sleek and metallic, sterilized and cramped. The dirt and moldy beer bottles of the subway, the refuse and sand piles of the sewer were forgotten memories save for the sounds of the roaring river behind me. With a soft crash I closed the door and the river too was forgotten. I took a single step forward and my cheap dress shoes echoed more than I would have liked. At this point I made a mistake: I looked back at the door. Its reverse, like the rest of the hallway, stood in contrast to the obverse: it was chrome, clean and untouched. That was the worst part, as I could see myself.

My first disappointment, and perhaps the first of every human, had been recognizing myself in the mirror. When I was a child, I once pressed my hands to that silver dividing wall. I drank up every reflected color of my bloated face, my uneven eyes, my matted hair, my blunt fingers, and my rounded belly. I was like the Scottish Thane trying to clutch that fatal dagger of self-recognition. At all costs, I wanted to know myself in the mirror. But no matter how hard I tried, I could recognize that child not. I looked up to my regal parent in two-sided hope and fear. In quiet whispers, I asked, "What is this I see before me?" My Father, Duncan-like, replied quietly, "It is you, my child. It is you in form, face, and feature." Of course I denied this foul declaration. I spoke to the father-king and said "If it is so then nature seems dead and witchcraft celebrates. How can something so repulsive, so awkward, so manufactured be me?" However, as I spoke, I knew my words to be foul and Duncan's accusation to be fair, but like a drowning man, I struggled and paddled though land was nowhere to be seen.

Through my sound and fury, I signified nothing, and the truth lay exposed as an open door. I drowned in his words; putting my tired arms down to rest, I let the cool taste of water overtake me. Duncan's smile only grew wider and wider.

When I turned around and saw my reflection in the chrome door, I relived my childhood disappointment. My muddled figure was warped spider-like by the dented door. It was horrible to see myself. I could see what had been stolen from me. If I could see, then the others could too. As that revelation washed over me, I realized that the polished floors and walls also contained my reflection. Nauseous, I nearly doubled over but eventually mustered the strength to run from that mirrored vision. With every footstep, my ten thousand other twins ran parallel to me. I felt every footstep, every motion, every emotion of every single one of my doubles. Just as I felt, so did my doubles, and so those feelings grew exponentially with every step. After just a few seconds, every step became torture. I had to stop. I crumpled to the ground, my journey a failure.

But, as it turns out, I was there. There, at a new door, the correct door. I looked left and right. The mirrored hallway bounced my reflection endlessly in both directions. What had been taken from me, I shall regain. I opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was nearly pitch black. The only thing visible was a single grey pipe that matched the hundreds I had seen in the sewers. I walked towards the pipe and sat down on it. I looked at the darkness ahead of me. "I'm ready," I said. "You can come out."

"You're back already? You don't have an appointment." The voice sounded curt and disappointed. It was accompanied by the slow sound of shuffling. Claw on metal. The voice began again. "That old hag Sorites should have turned you away. But now that you're here, my magnanimity forces me to help. I am just too kind." The shuffling grew louder and louder. I saw a glimmer of white, a flash of teeth. A pale rounded snout, curled into a smile, emerged across from me. Eyes, albino red, gleamed in the dark. After a few seconds of shuffling, four splayed legs slowed to a stop.

"You have stolen something from me," I began. I watched to see if the reptile's long crooked grin had any change of expression. I looked for regret, for sympathy, for anything but professionalism harshly ingrained from years of sewer squatting and displeased customers. "You have stolen something from me." The alligator blinked briefly. Steam rose from its nostrils. "You have stolen something from me. You have taken my breath." There was no visible response to the accusation. "In our last meeting, you stole my breath. I came to be fixed and solved, but you stole my breath. My lungs no longer expand. My nose lies useless on my face. Until today, I thought life without breath was impossible. How did you do it? Yesterday, when I rushed in to be cured, you told me I was breathless and that was my problem. I did not think you meant it literally. Was that a warning of what you were going to steal, a kind of calling card? Can you steal through language? Your sleight of claw must be impressive because I didn't realize I had been robbed until later. As I lay in bed last night, I did what I do every night to help me sleep. I let my thoughts turn and glide during the lonesome darkness of convalescence. But

soon that thinking turned wheel-like from past soaring success to my present stooping failures. In my mind, every idiotic action and miserable mistake turned into bullet holes that bled away my every good memory. How I longed for that soldier of sleep to put his slender sidelong revolver to my temple and deliver his nightly coup de grâce! I felt his warm hands clutching my bleeding body, his face in front of mine. Yet just before he was about to whisper his last goodbyes and pull the trigger, I realized it then. I was not breathing. It was not just a held breath, something that blues the face and then passes in an instant. This was a terminal lack of breath. I tried to gasp and wheeze, but my lungs were iron and my windpipe glass. My breath was gone, but my senses were not. Yet somehow, I was still alive even without it. Then I remembered. I remembered your glittering teeth. I remembered your hissing voice telling me that I was breathless. I remembered you telling me it was good to know. I then knew it was you who had taken it from me. You have an evil furtive heart. The sun had long since set, but that soldier decided leave me there to continue to bleed good memories. I think he was too ashamed of my twisted agonized face. So I gave up on sleeping and went to get my breath back. Something had been stolen from me, so I did what all victims do: I waited until the subway's last stop to get it back. I waited until the businessmen in crumpled suits and ties, their ears covered with cheap -"

"Enough!" roared the alligator. "You are a repetitive, foolish lout." Phlegm and salvia poured to the ground in a well-balanced recipe. Its red eyes, however, suddenly softened. "But you are my repetitive, foolish lout. You are my subject, my customer, my patient. You are everything to me. Even when you call my beautiful booming bass a hissing voice, I'm not offended. I love you and want to help you. But let me tell you this: I never stole a thing from you. In fact, it was quite the opposite."

I countered. "You know that's not true. Where then is my breath if not stolen away? Don't lie me. Tell the truth! I know it is hidden in a witchlike jar here somewhere, with a cork cap and ruddy green glass."

"You insult me! I would never be that gauche." The alligator chuckled. "More importantly, I don't lie. Rather than take, I give."

I paused. "I came to you for help. I came to be fixed and solved, but you stole my breath. I was the candle without fire, I was the -"

The alligator scoffed. "Enough with the vague metaphors. You came because you were afraid of being judged, of being seen as different. Something about socks and color coordination. The specifics were unimportant to me. So I cured you."

"By taking my breath?"

"My dear foolish lout, you have never breathed. Not today, not the day before you saw me, not even the day you were born. I saw it and told you as soon as you walked in. You had just never noticed. You assumed you were the same as everybody else. Normal. Yet you knew there was something different. You came in to my humble office, and you cried and cried. It was a breathless, shrill cry, of course. A cri de chat, almost. And so I told you the truth, that you were breathless. You hate me today, but at the time the truth is liberating, is it not? You are different, and you

can embrace that identity. When you are judged, you can now just apologize. ‘I was born without breath,’ you will burble, ‘Please forgive my imprudence.’ And they will. Every person you’ve met has felt the same way, and so will everyone you meet in the future. They notice something is off about you. But they can’t quite put their finger on it. ‘What is the problem with him?’ They look upon you in pity and fear. But now you can tell them your excuse, and they will understand and forgive you. ‘Ah,’ they will say as they pass you on the street, ‘it is the breathless one. He is strange in speech and thought, for he is breathless. We should not mock his condition, but understand it. Yet we must remember to keep him separate.’ It is a gift, is it not?”

“So then, have I always been breathless?”

“Yes, always.”

“Why did nobody tell me until you did?”

“It’s hard to notice. They knew you were different in some way, but it takes a trained expert eye like mine to really see that you’re breathless. To a layman? Your unmoving chest could just be a trick of the light.”

“What about me?”

“You thought you were just like everybody else. How often does the ordinary human think or talk about breath? Not often. Only when it’s mentioned, or just before drowning. So you didn’t feel different, but you were always irrevocably different. I’m embarrassed I had to tell you, but I did so because I care for you. I’m a professional. I have to tell you embarrassing things because I earnestly want to help you. Aesop’s given us a bad rap, we talking animals. We’re not all tricksters. We’re not just parables. We have feelings too.”

“So everybody knew without knowing?”

“Yes.”

“How does it feel, to breathe?”

A pause. Maybe it needed to breathe, to remember the experience. I wasn’t sure, I couldn’t know because I’m not breathful like the alligator. Already an experience I thought I had, gone, never existed. A characteristic always missing, something owned by everyone but me. A stolen experience. In the end, theft was real. At least, in a sense. Is the messenger a thief? He who tells the king that the castle’s coffers are empty is put to death. Is it not the same here?

I looked up and its breath was over. That unknowable experience drew to a close. The alligator and I were on equal terms again, or as equal as we could be, and so it began to speak again. “It’s hard to describe how it feels to breathe. I don’t even think about it unless I think about it. It just happens. You wouldn’t know, of course. What does color mean to the blind if all is without? What does the size of the ocean mean to the drowned if the horizon is all blue?

What does breath mean to the breathless? You’ll never understand.”

“I want to know. I want a glimpse, no matter how small, into the experience stolen from me at birth. Let me clutch the dagger of self-esteem at least once. Give me that much at least.”

“Like leaves.”

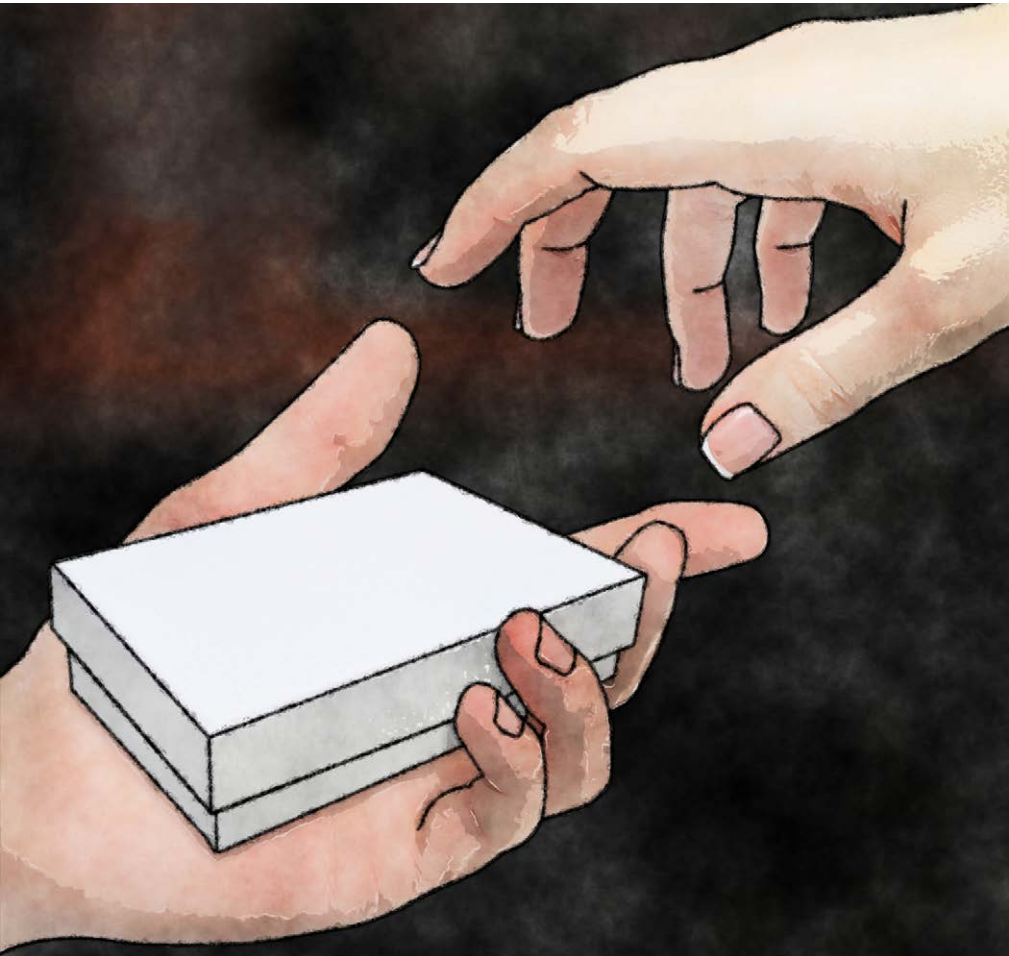
“Like leaves?”

“Like leaves in fall.” The alligator’s eyes glowed in the foggy sewer dark. “Do you know how the leaves rustle just before they glide to the ground? Do you remember how the long boughs shudder in midday’s breeze? There’s nobody talking in Central Park that day. It’s too cold for the tourists. They’ve gone to Aruba or Cancun, where they snorkel and kick until every purple and red reef is dead. And the cycle begins again. The locals stay indoors. They ride up and down in their great glass elevators, from computer farm to data factory. In their little offices, some think they can change the world. They move one grain of sand at a time from pile to pile. They want to see when the pile begins and ends, but they always blink before it happens. Then the shift is over, and so another nine to five day is wasted. And the cycle begins again. Central Park is still there, but nobody except the pigeons see the leaves fall to the ground. A leaf hits a pigeon in the head. It cries at the injustice and blames the opposing political party. Before the day is over, the tree is completely bare. In six months the tree will grow back its leaves, like a pimple oozing pus. And the cycle begins again. That’s what it means to breathe.”

I got up from the pipe I was sitting on. My pants, ironed once three years ago, were now covered in grime and soot. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I knew that you wouldn’t.” Smile permanently pressed onto its grinning maw, the alligator turned his head away. The shuffling began again as the alligator returned back to the shadows. I called for it to stop, but it didn’t. In a moment, the alligator was gone again.

Somewhere outside the darkness, I heard the quiet plucking of a mandolin, and it was good. 🎻



Bring It To Me

Nancy J. Lucas

Put it in. “I told him, in an asking-kind of way. I felt him near. And, he kept it near. But, I wanted it more near. I wanted it in.

He said nothing. His elbows were buried in the pillow-top mattress cradling my head between his palms. His fingers threaded into my hair I had finally let grow long. I wanted to be beautiful, and I thought that growing it longer would help. All the girls in the magazines had long hair.

“Put it in.” I whispered, in an asking-telling-pleading kind of way.

“I shouldn’t even be here.” He stated matter-of-factly I stared back in to his green eyes. “I want you in me. I want you. I cupped my hands up and around his face, sliding my fingers up, into his hair. Gently pulling his lips to mine. So he couldn’t talk anymore. Stop talking, I thought to myself. Stop telling me the truth.


I knew it was wrong. Sleeping with my supervisor was like sleeping with a spy. A person you weren’t sure would

ever turn you in because of that moment. Because you were together. You were intimate. It could cost me my job. My husband. My marriage. You know, all of it. Dumb shit. Shit I wouldn’t think of when I was younger. Because I hadn’t accumulated so much shit.

He slid inside me. I closed my eyes and rounded my head back on the pillow. My whole body arching to meet him. To feel him so close. To feel every hair on his chest to my breasts. To wrap my arms around his back and pull him even closer. Closer to me, fighting to go deeper in me.

He threaded his right arm under my back and pulled me into him. I loved that feeling. That position. How did he know? I loved a man who had the strength to hold himself up and pull me close to him at the same time. I really loved that.

I inhaled his scent. The scent of his shampoo, his sweat. His gold chain falling to my mouth. Probably from his wife. I didn’t care. He was mine now. At this moment she didn’t have him, I did. And I was breathing him in.



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And I knew it wouldn't last— that's why I cherished every second. Every single second. I knew. He would be too scared, for a next time. Too afraid of the risk.

God, he felt so good. I ran my legs on his legs and closed my eyes at the feeling. The touch. Closing my eyes so I could remember. Remember it in my head. Remember it for a long time to come. Remember his body.

He was slow and steady, offering me a pleasure I hadn't had. Not for a long time. I moved my hands down his body and he filled me. Faster he breathed. Deeper.

"Jesus, woman." He whispered in my ear. I moved my hips, my legs, my lips to his neck. I wanted him to remember me. "I can't fall in love with you." He whispered into my ear.

It's too late. I knew it instantly. This moment *was* too good. We would want to repeat it. And suddenly, I was happy. I was okay. There was going to be another time. He would want me again. Suddenly I had something to look forward to. I relaxed. I exhaled slowly. He dropped his head to the pillow in exhaustion. I was elated. I lay there still and quiet not wanting him to remember he had a wife. Not wanting him to remember we were in a hotel room we would have to leave.

He smiled and then kissed me. Over and over he kissed me. Kissed me like it was the beginning and not the end. Kissed me like there was no tomorrow. Deep, slow, thoughtful, passionate kisses.

That's when I said to him, "I love you." And, I didn't mean to let that slip out. I didn't mean to say those words at all. I swear it was a moment of weakness because he was such a good kisser.

I remained silent as I dressed. I knew he would not come back. Because it was one thing if he loved me – but it was another if I loved him. It would scare him off. It would make him not talk to me at work. It would make life far too hard.

I was sorry. Sorry for my words. Sorry, again for my life. I tiptoed through the hotel room as though I were on eggshells. There was no proper way to button my blouse. To slide on my shoes. To look at him.

"I have something for you." He said, sitting down next to me on the edge of the bed. His voice still sounded innocent enough. Without anger. "I got you something I want you to wear when you can. I understand that you can't, but when you can, and I can be there to see it.... It would mean a great deal to me." He handed me a small box.

I opened the box slowly and began to cry. I cried before I even saw what it was. I cried because I wanted him. I cried because he cared about me and he really did seem to love me and no one ever treats me like they love me.

I lifted the square piece of cotton to reveal a pink-white

strand of pearls. They were beautiful. The tiny round stones polished to a soft glow. I pulled them over my head and realized how long the strand was. Long enough to hide into a shirt and rest between my breasts.

"I bought that length so you could hide them or not." He paused, staring at me again with his big green eyes. The wide-eyed look of non-emotion. He wiped the tears from my cheek.

"Wear them now. Wear them home and then tuck them into your pocket, or something." He said softly. "Now give me the box."

I placed the empty the box in to his waiting palm.

"When you want this to end, you have to ask me for the box. You have to ask me to bring it to you."

"Bring it to me?" I questioned.

He nodded. "As long as there is no box. It's open. There is no...." he searched for words.... "Containment...."

"But when I tell you to bring it to me. I am telling you I want to put them away. I want to put *us* away." I stated, finishing his thought.

He nodded, then shook his head, "I will never be hurt. I will never be offended. This whole thing is a gift. This time. This place. This love."

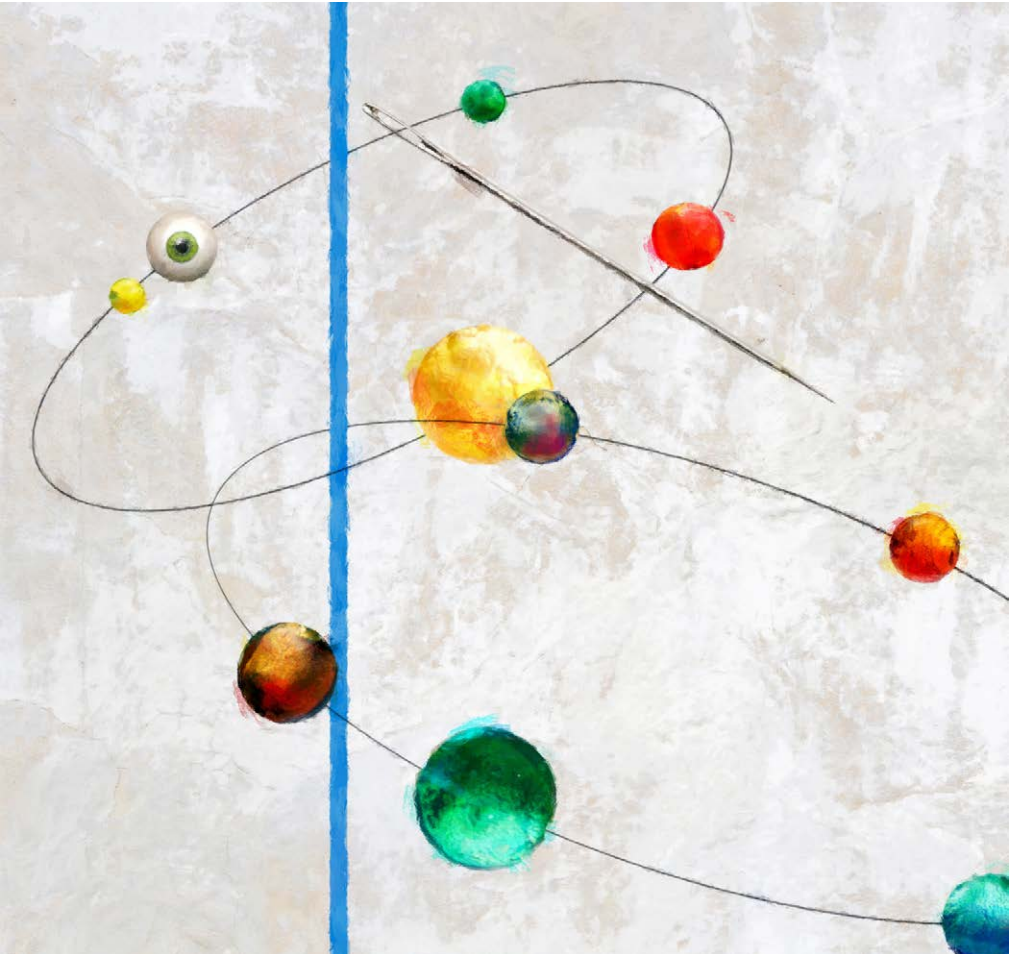
I swallowed hard.

"We have to go now." He whispered.

I sat silent. Not knowing if I should follow him out. But then I did. I followed him wearing my pearls. We didn't speak one word when we left. Then, there in the darkness, before he reached his car, I wondered, so, whispering, I asked him, "How will I tell you that I love you when I can't speak the words?"

"You will say 'Good night.' He turned and walked to his car and I walked to mine.

Several years had gone by when his wife had found the box. She had been looking for some papers in his office drawer. 'How odd,' she thought. 'Why would there be an empty box in here?' And, tossed it in the trash.



Result of the Eclipse

Helen Ganiy

Back and forth they passed the bottle, as though liquor and starlight and vast spreads of grass had always been a part of their lives. It was here that John took possession of Julie's hand and then her throat, only to press upon her for more, more, pleasant expressions, lovestares, affectionate words. She obliged, pulling from her chest a little marble attached to a thread of twine. She handed it to him and in return he gifted a few stiff, sword-like piece of grass. The bottle passed on between them with the gummy utterance of liquid splashing, warming and growing smaller. Julie's neck was paler now without the necklace. Thinner and paler and suddenly lacking a youthful shade from which she emerged slightly less curious.

The bottle was still in his hand when, only less crucial, when they entered upon the room at midday. He could not describe the passage of years to her, only that the number itself seemed trivial in comparison to other bottles, other rooms, other beds, and most of all, other nights. The

sunlight here drew an operatic solidity around them both and in a rare state of osmosis John and Julia reached for one another's necks. It had been many months, maybe years, since they had felt this, the vulnerable crunch and bouncing tenderness of one another's vital pulse. Then the hands fell down and each was occupied with the small, insignificant objects directly in front of them. A quilt, a sewing needle. Julie smiled the corroded, flesh deprived smile of old women and from her eyes plucked a few lashes and handed them out to John. She sighed narrowly and seemed to gasp for breath for a moment, but was revived the instant John returned his hand to hers. The sun shifted so that its bare, yellowed spores glared upon the unshining protrusions of their nostrils and they were to each other a pair of softly pressed upon beetles scrounging under a rock.

Winter was different, as then they didn't look into their eyes but wound together tightly beneath the quilt in the same room. Only different, only larger and more opulent for the surges of cool, rain dizzied air. Julie lay beside John,



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threading off beads from her writs along with strands of her hair, flakes of her skin. She handed them out and her tongue lapsed into desperate, lapping motions by which John was repulsed. The shapes of long scrapped stickers clung to the window as the low town lights spread under the fog with tragic specificity. They began to pass the bottle back and forth and there John sighed and handed over a few pieces of his own hair, a few flakes of his own skin. Julie merged with the colorless wall and was distinguishable only by her breathing, which blew stray threads and hair about her fading face and lent a solemn undulation to the bluish outline that was what remained of her chest. John, too, fell back from the colors of the room, as quickly he was dissolved and obscured by a dome of murk that crawled from the wall to the closed bedroom door. Here they clutched hands again, needlessly, and the room widened and there beneath the floor was a wide, voluminous darkness.

Into this they walked, hand in hand, with John holding the bottle that seemed childishly and overly large now. They passed it back and forth until Julie held her hand up and, glancing at her face he saw that she was not a woman but a slim band of blue. He could see where Julie had been but she was gone and he too was thinning and fading. But this reality was no less disturbing than having to wash the dishes or discovering a cockroach in the bathroom. Water dripped around them in melancholy spurts and it was as if they now existed within someone else's walls. He breathed steadily and the sounds of other people lives wound up and around on the sweet, unpoetic girdles of steel and inside the motion of the dripping water. Everything pooled and swept, the charred smell of onions, the sound of bathwater through pipes, the scrubbing of feet against carpet. He thinned still with Julie somewhere beside him, and his arms developed spots, light, yellow, and which inflated and popped. As they popped he looked down and saw that there was emptiness beneath them and his arms and legs were devoured by the bright beads. He was John, still, and she Julie, somewhere, though they sat very still and envied the smell of someone else's onions.

Julie remembered baths and bathwater. John recalled the light of the television. When something moved near them, it was the movement of the other people on the front side of the walls, for they were silent, their lips feeling white

and numb, and unable to move. Now and then they saw in flashes the faces of the other, and with each flash their flesh sagged and purpled and the small beads of light went about inhaling their bodies slowly. Every burst of beads was so small and bright as to resemble the explosion of a tiny set of fireworks beneath the sea. Soon the sounds of the stranger's lives increased in volume and expanse so that the whole space, which seemed vast and without end, was taken up by the minimal cries of their insignificant movements and words. Still the two were unbothered as without sound they departed from their original shape and wondered whether a new shape was possible.

Then they could not reach each other's hands but John could hear the bottle roll on some solid surface below him and Julie could feel some of the strips and scraps she had given to John scattered where he may have been. It would not be long, John said. Someone through the walls tossed an aluminum can into a trashcan. It would not be long, he murmured, and he felt as he did when once he had looked out the window and seen the cloudless sky pass by in infinite ridicule of the mysterious sewer that spread out below it. It was no different now, though now he was without

a room and without the possibility of stars and fields and dark hallways down which he could hurtle himself. Without a sound, he closed his mouth and out burst the bright beads around his white lips. There was nothing left and though he thought he should be reduced to a button, perhaps, or a fiber of carpet, there was nothing. The sounds went on echoing behind the walls. 





HELEN GANIY has completed work on two novels, *Women in the Down* and *Long Row of Lonely Dogs*. Her work has been featured in *Crack the Spine* and *Apt*, and is forthcoming in *Big Muddy*.



The Osmosis of The Poisoned Flower

Rekha Valliappan

“There is another world, but, it is in this one.”
— Paul Eluard

She only looks perfect in the postcards it used to be said. Who could judge any longer? They are describing me. They could well be describing anyone or anything else. The Internet took care of that. I am part of the universal truth, although, since electronic devices no longer exist, this could mean pagan untruths. The answer lies in the odessa codes. It no longer matters. It is long past. The mystical intransigence is complete.

My enlarged structures have shape shifted. I am continuing to grow, evolving as they say in the taxonomy reserved in the textbooks for dim *flora*. But I am far from dim. I am not sure I can reasonably even be called a plant any more. The cellulose in my fermentation processes has been replaced with a purple gum, carried in obtuse vein-like threads which turn a bright crimson under stress. It has

not stigmatized me or blunted my effectiveness, rather I am sublimated to heightened states of liquefaction I had formerly only resided in, as imaginary debris. They call it diffusion of the sublime ethereal. I feel magnanimous down to my innards to be so rarefied.

I am still referred to as ‘that poisoned flower’. But I have other acronyms, like ‘devil’s poppies’ and ‘purple terror’ depending on my level of membranous osmosis.

I walk limitlessly the deep and dark woods alone. Yes you may well query, but how can a plant walk? I will get to that in a minute.

I derive nutrition from tentacles, deep-diving perpendicularly into the earth. It is part of my stem structure and no longer baffles me. It gives me protean mobility. I could say I have defied botanical analysis with my out of body experiences. But I prefer not to, since I am still under constant threat of annihilation, brutally hunted, which has not changed despite my loud ‘NO!’

It is tricky business being the dominant species, the

different one. It was not always the case. Many changes occurred when the green darkness spread. It turned torturous for the *phylum chordata*, that bony class of living species intent on devouring plants. Choked by the wilderness these pylons of ecological support eventually lost out. Once upon a time long ago eternity was the unthinkable and intimidating. But with Futurology that age is past, for the rulers of the world, vanished, as though it had never been, in the aftermath of the apocalypse, and deadly sequencing.

Answering to the deictic call marched the common grasses, turned taller than giant margosas, while ivy mated with sapodilla trees, oscillating between conifers and copper beeches, to revisit their extraneous positions. Pursued by trade winds, to the underbelly of the tropics, nameless shrubs enjoined with creeping weeds, while escaping algae made dripping pulpy corpses of rainbow hued medusas, and sea anemones. The ‘revolt’ or metamorphosis, although gradual was satisfactory.

In this labyrinth I prevailed, chlorophyll-free and ghostly white, in a tangle of entwined green crystal tendrils, a trembling crown of deep purple flame completing my waif-life appearance. The tendrils are poisonous, although the rest of me is quite harmless. I think. They exude a honeyed and sickly sweet smell. My rootstock although tubular lacks symmetry. At over fifty feet from crown to root I stand taller than ginger lilies or giant hogweeds or even rhododendron trees.

I am called a ‘she.’ It is premature I admit. But I do confess a bias for Gaia the only true Earth Mother, which I accept. There is no other, polemically speaking, since the dispute is merciless from Erasmus to Rabelais. As with all kaleidoscopic views, I hope to be enlightened sooner. But I must wait for the nature of things to prevail.

Only I am no longer a plant. I am a hybrid. In the aftermath of the slaughter, I converted into part plant, part human. Impossible you may say. But herein lies my excruciating tale, and how I transformed.

It was cold in Montana, unusual for that summer. The air was like ice. The breezes that blew had frozen the dew off the petals, as soon as it left the follicles, turning it to icicles. It was a night such as this that I was first spotted, by the Captain of the Crustaceans, searching every crevice and mountain cavity on a remote hillside in Butte. The moon that night had plunged through a vacuum-less void, sucking out the silver stars, and was no longer visible in the moist firmament. Streaking in with the morning tide, I pushed my purple hood through laced branches, to reach the long shafts of the frosty sun downwards gleaming onto a copse of verdant trees. I spread in a tide of liquid exhaustion, my surface distribution so extensive, that I spread like oxalis in bloom reaching the Sargasso Sea, my odyssey to the ends of the earth.

The sap that I bled ran like sticky rivers of coagulated blood, as they tried to destroy me, with pickaxes and hoes. It did not harm my pods, or underground roots, twisting into the hard earth. And I re-grew with ease. Make no mistake.

It would take a mighty shove of agro-chemical anger, and warfare, to wipe out my existence. Shards of my petiole and alveole vaporized, as I was burnt to cinders. The emulsions rotted my lignins, in ribbons of scarlet. I was extirpated, torn and ripped out by every root. I screamed in agony, to be

spared, to be freed, crying aloud against the undying horror. When all failed they came with guns and knives, riddling the floral symphony of my stem with bullets, shredding me to fragments. The brine of my marrow glistened in terror, through the tips of every leaf and blade. The venom raced up my pearly green surfaces, caressing my calyx transparency. I could not be salvaged, through the shifting sands of time. And for a time I was indeed dead. It is also how I earned my name as ‘that poisoned flower’ for the metals and toxic poisons I consumed. It strengthened the biogenetic revolt in me, that was to follow.

I am entitled to a better nomenclature. I plan on giving the matter some thought. Can a plant think, you may well ask? For now I do not pay heed. I will tell you how. But I am skipping time zones in my narrative.

My discovery first surfaced in botany books, a hundred years old. Scant attention was paid to me then. I bear no rancor for this disinterest. I was a ravishing mysterious orchid, unknown to collectors, one of the rarest of my kind, which stay permanently hidden from view and sunlight, in the impenetrable rainforests of Borneo. Unfortunately, the more remote my habitat, the more vigorously I was hunted.

Plant prophecy and pathology placed me similarly, with the floating tulips, in the steamy jungles of the Amazon. I was described as a sacred flower, highly prized and sought by explorers for my extraordinary coloring. I believe it had something to do with my seclusion. I bore a deep purple shade, uncommon for my species, so dark as to be almost black.

In no time I was traveling the world, embedded in trees, reaching places I would not otherwise have roamed. Then I was genome sequenced, with thale cress, and several land and water plants, my innards so anesthetized, that lulled by hypnotic dreams, I floated with the whistling winds. The intended protocol was to control the tide of mass plant migration. It failed. My unicellular hairs grew unnaturally making bacteria curry of aloe and almond trees. Soon calcined deposits were rampantly stockpiling, from *bryophyta*, mountains of skulls and bones piled high. Paradoxical poisons drove the anthropocentric change, to levels of putrefaction, that even mammalia were not spared.

It was visceral. But the revolt was complete. My tribe rejoiced. At last I knew we were doing something right. We could pirouette with the Andalucians dancers, clapping the castanets. They labeled us ‘out of control’, for a while. It is the nature of revolts. It goes to the heart of the shackles. It was a worrisome period for our future. But we persevered in the most intense of forward marches. Strands of my DNA, had so duplicated and merged, with *amaranthus* and other sturdier plants, it facilitated my potent reach, into whatever was growing beneath the wet soils and swamplands.

Copses of black orchids dotted every landscape, like an ogre virus. Having grown considerably in height and girth, I carried the defining moment like a toxic fragrance, with poison and poise. Other limiting species would emerge, battling to takeover. They would succeed in part. I knew their type well. They would devour entire cities. But the messy enigma was, that mankind was defeated. Humans had no strategy. It was a dark moment in their history, one that would lead to their ultimate vanquishment. They had taken to their bosom a snake. It would result in most running around like mad potentates, ignoring the signs as cities and

towns would shrink drastically with villages and river banks becoming the preferred dwelling, of choice.

I do not take credit or blame for this end result. I believe now that the world could not have been spared, or repaired. Shallow anthropocentrism failed to sustain the challenge. The human race chose to be demoted, to the Copernican principle of mediocrity.

I do not doubt tangled tensions will surface, as with all life forms, struggling for survival. The xylem and phloem that flows through our species is treacherously hidden within each. Nature is a loud teacher with a pitchfork. What we inherit is never superfluous. Misdirected minds shaped like canyons, will explode with ideas. But all are infected. At the rate they are heading, they will be swallowed up by the darkness. They are off the edge, plunging to the asphalt below.

What is critical is to maintain the balance for all living forms. That is where I come in. The land is not healed. I have broken free, out of the gruesome chaos. It is a nomadic existence. Where this new road will lead, I am hesitant to hazard a guess. It is my new vision, now that I have been gifted the glassiness of psychic probabilities. I will not call it a gift yet. I will not make my position known. The danger is grave. I have many enemies in revolt. Parasites attach themselves as they would to a human host. But I am their only hope - a whiff of odorous breath, blowing over the evergreen glades and moisture-less sands, even as the world is crashing. It ensures my survival.

How did I gain this exalted status? Through a bizarre biological process too lengthy to explain. Whether by design or stealth or chance, who can say? Unknown to me a third DNA strand was re-sequenced into my molecules. It produced the queerest of haphazard outcomes. The anomaly gave me protein enzymes, that can multiply, without

encroaching on my poisoned nodules, so that my genome is considerably altered. I can procreate at will. I can also be torn apart and put together, like a graft. I can walk and run at incredible speeds. And I can never die. What makes this development more unique, is, that I have a mind. Yes, I can think.

The suppleness of my intelligence has not yet been tested. I am in embryonic development. But I exist as sure as I am standing here. Whether I turn monster, or revert fully to plant state, remains to be seen. It is possible I may succumb, to fungal spalting, or stress. It is un-thought of but I am vulnerable. It mottles my skin when this occurs to give it the albino whiteness of bleach after an acid attack. The ghostly pallor in my appearance is impossible to describe. I turn grotesque. It also increases my toxicity.


How long this hybrid phase will last I do not know. What I do know is that the ownership of the world has just changed hands and that the rhizomes in my underground structures, will breed far and wide, ensuring the survivability of my species. My poisoned properties will help re-shape the world. There is no second-guessing these scientific facts.

I am to tame the unchecked wildness. I am to fashion the arbitrary boundaries between man, plant and carapace, that I call battle lines - the baseline effect, to ensure the safety of the zones. It is electrifying.

How possible this is going to be, I cannot say. Having cut through layers of midnight mists, all that I can reveal, is that my truth, will no longer be blunted. It is not a lie.

Perched under the velvet sheen of my purple tremulous hood, protruding around my anther like a glass marble, watching, reflecting, staring, is my unfathomable liquid black eye. Oozing.

I am after all a ‘poisoned flower.’



REKHA VALLIAPPAN likes to use words to create short stories, strange hybrids with a dash of what might be poetry, sometimes peppered with quirky humor, that draws on the culture, folklore and literature of her international experiences and world travels. She has lectured college level English Literature and Law. More recently she emerged winner of the Boston Accent Lit Short Story Contest with her prize-winning entry *The Copper Amulet and The Ginger Cat*. Her works are published in *Across The Margin*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Intellectual Refuge*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Friday Flash Fiction*, *The Ekphrastic Review* and Third Flatiron's *Kurt Vonnegut Anthology* (on sale on Amazon). Others are upcoming.

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No Smiling, No Blinking, No Crying

Marygrace Schumann

There's a baby on my hip, ten toes, looking up at me with hazel eyes and red cheeks. She's bare, brown skin like dough. She's laughing, but no sound comes out.

There are seven more babies, in seven wooden chairs, in this one room with dark purple walls and a white carpet, almost stained brown.

No smiling. No blinking. No crying.

They're all naked, little legs hanging off the edges of the chairs.

I count my arms.

There are still only two. Not enough to catch them if they fall over.

The phone rings. It's an old ring. A ring from when your parents were young, shrill and jarring. The kind that made your mama run, fingers crossed it was the cute boy across the street. The kind that made your grandpa sigh the kind of sigh you feel all the way in your chest, certain it was bad news.

The phone is mounted on the dark purple wall. It's white, with a cord to twirl around your fingers, and numbers big enough for your Great Aunt Pearl to see just fine, even with her glasses off.

I pick up the phone.
Silence.

The babies are gone. From my hip. From the chairs. But I can hear them crying, from somewhere else, though there doesn't seem to be anywhere else to go. Just me and the dark purple walls and the seven wooden chair and the one white phone, with the cord you can twirl around your finger.

Somebody is singing on the other line. A woman's, voice, light, like it's flying out of her, fluttering as a baby bird does, confidently leaving the nest for the first time.

Stella, stellina, La notte si avvicina. La fiamma traballa

I hang up the phone, push it in until it clicks, and sink to the floor.

They're crying so loudly, I can barely hear.

I am shaking now, and I wish I wouldn't of hung up the phone, so I could keep hearing the woman on the other end, singing with her voice like a baby bird.

It rings again.

I don't stand up. I just reach for it, and it's on my ear, before I know how. I want, so desperately, to hear the woman sing to me again.

Instead, there's a man's voice. In a monotone, he tells me, "mom is dead."

And even though the voice isn't my little brother's, I know they mean my mom, with the curly hair and the bright smile and the hazel eyes and the red cheeks and the nerves you can feel from a mile away.

I drop the phone.

I can still hear the babies crying, from somewhere I can't see, somewhere I can't get to.

We're in the funeral home. The one I know like the back of my hand. The one we go to every time somebody dies, on 31st street, across from a Coin Laundry, half a block from a Mexican restaurant.

The casket is closed, and I want to ask why, but nobody is saying a word.

No smiling. No blinking. No crying.

My dad, brother, nana, papa, Uncle Frank, Aunt Mary and one baby, on my hip, in a room with dark purple walls and a white carpet, almost stained brown.

No smiling. No blinking. No crying.

We sit, eight chairs now, and I can hear them all crying, but nobody is there anymore, not even the baby on my hip.

It's just me, the closed casket and eight chair in the room with the dark purple walls and the white carpet, almost stained brown.

They're somewhere I can't get to, and I only have two arms, so I wrap them around myself, and let myself cry.



The World Famous Chicken Trick

Claire Rudy Foster

Last month, I was in my usual bar and I saw a beautiful woman with incredible hair. Her hair was long and red, with curls that looked soft and touchable, like in a shampoo ad. The bar was not a fancy bar, but I could tell by the way she laughed with her friends that she felt an invisible spotlight on her and that she was famous. I couldn't place her, but I knew I'd seen her somewhere.

"Where do I know you from?" I asked. I leaned over their table and they looked up at me, in my ridiculous suit, still wearing my makeup from work. She smiled, but her expression dimmed. "Did we go to school together?"

She was shaking her head, already shrinking. They can do that on command: retract their famousness, like a crab pulling back into its shell. She was ten times more beautiful than her friends. I wanted to touch her hair, take a handful of it. Maybe even without my gloves on, and really feel its fineness with my fingers.

"I didn't go to clown school," she said.

Her male friend barked like a seal. "She was in—"

He said the name of a very famous movie, which had a very famous TV spinoff series. I looked at the red haired woman. Yes, she was in both of those things. That's where I would know her from. Why would I confuse her with a clown? Maybe the hair, and her red, red lipstick. Or maybe it was wishful thinking on my part, because I saw myself as one

day deserving what she had.

I don't understand why people don't want to be famous. When you're famous, everyone knows where to find you. Your secrets, real and imagined, are juggled like bright balls, for everyone to see. When you are extremely famous, you cease to be interesting because everyone already knows everything about you. That's my consolation, I guess: that nobody knows who I am, but I am extremely interesting.

Her smile was fading, its filament losing light. This was my cue to walk away. I folded my hands over my belly and tapped my shoes. "I wish I had something for you to sign," I said.

Now, her lips were closing over her perfect, white teeth. She glanced at her female friend.

"Would you like to see my Chicken Trick?" I asked. "It's a crowd pleaser."

"She's not interested," said the female friend. "Why don't you leave us alone, clown?" "I'm not a clown right now, I'm off duty," I said, but they didn't laugh. My makeup felt hard against my skin, flaky. I pulled my rubber chicken out of its secret hiding place. Their eyes widened. Everybody loved this trick. Even grown ups clapped when I did this one.

"Bartender," the male friend called. "This clown is bothering us."

I started to go through the motions. I waggled the rubber chicken so that it looked alive. Its neck flopped to one side, then the other. My eyes were on the beautiful, famous woman. She was looking down at her lap now, at her folded hands. She was waiting for me to go away. Her friends did not clap when I finished. I made the chicken run back into its hiding place.

"Marjorie, you can't keep bothering the other customers," the bartender said when he had led me out onto the sidewalk.

"But she was famous," I explained. A tear formed by my right eye, and instead of letting it fall I stared down at the toes of my oversized shoes. I went to school for this, I thought. Because I wanted to learn how to make people laugh.

"How would you like it, if you were famous and strangers came up to you all the time?" he asked gently.

"I will never know the answer to that question," I said.

He sighed.

If I get famous, it will probably be for the wrong reason. That would be a shame. I would like to be famous before I die, if that's an option. I would like to see if I would enjoy it.

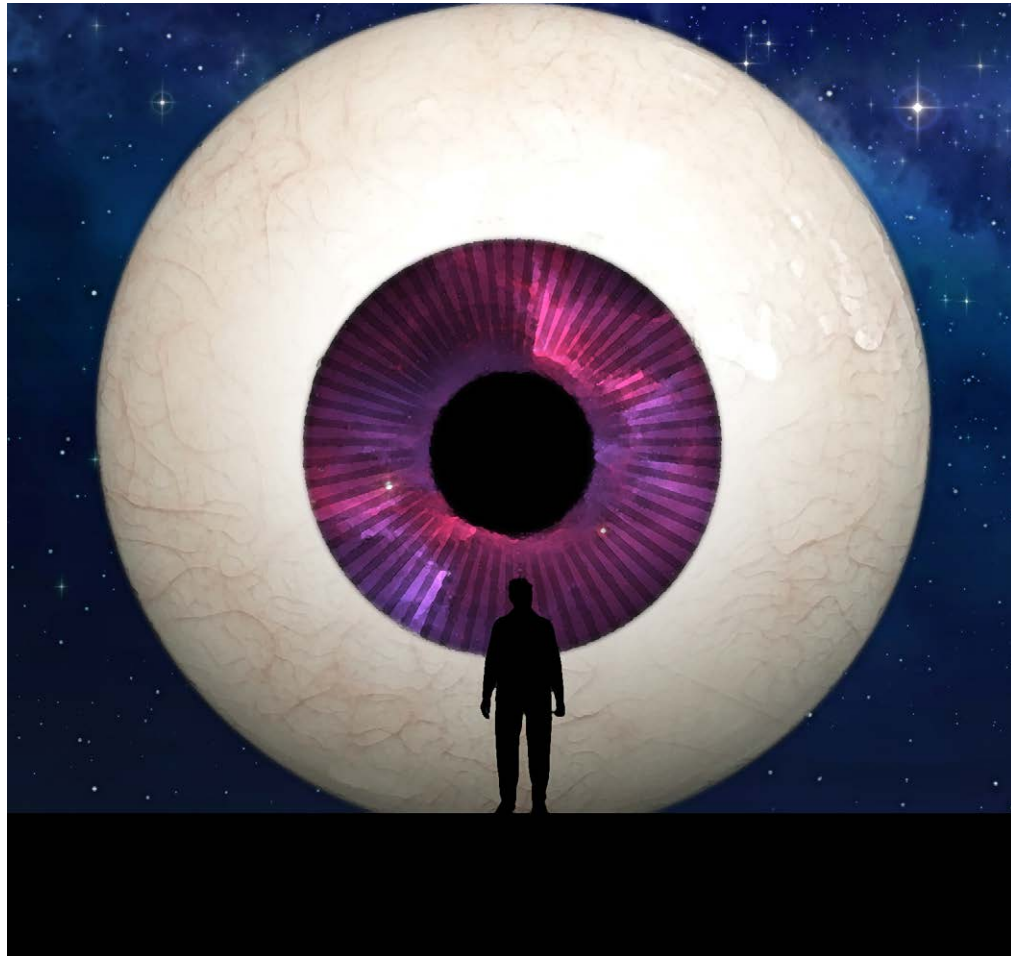
I stood out on the sidewalk for a long time, although it was getting dark. I could see my reflection in the plate glass window, and I watched myself, practicing the Chicken Trick, for a long time. When I was satisfied I had it right, I waved with both hands and bowed, as though the whole world had watched it, and already couldn't wait to see me do it again.



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CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER is the author of the short story collection *I've Never Done This Before*. Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, her fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Rumpus*, *Vestal Review*, and many other journals. She lives in Portland, Oregon.



Art is Subjective

Natasha Cabot

Looking down at the earth from space, through the darkness, and in between the rocks of the asteroid belt that separates Jupiter and Mars (two planets that need to be separated – they hate each other) and past the atmosphere, and the clouds, there is a little old man with spiky white hair smoking angrily behind a blue door with chipped paint. He’s staring at the blue door, his eyes full of rage as he imagines the tiny man on the big stage talking. He has no idea that a giant eye is watching him from space, he only knows of the tiny man on the big stage, the one who keeps flapping his gums and has words flying out of his mouth like bullets. The tiny man on the big stage is speaking to a well-dressed, professionally quaffed audience, all of whom glitter and glow and shimmer with wealth. They nod when they agree with what the tiny man on the big stage says and they laugh at his jokes.

The giant eye hovering in outer space doesn’t really care about the tiny man on the big stage. The one with the

revolver mouth. It only cares about the angry, smoking old man behind the blue door with the chipped paint. That’s one thing the giant eye and the tiny man on the big stage have in common. They both love the angry octogenarian who is puffing away on a cigarette laden with tar, nicotine, and lots of other delicious chemicals.

The tiny man on the big stage doesn’t know about the giant eye nor does he know the old man backstage is angry. Or smoking. Smoking isn’t permitted in the hall. The city council banned it.

The tiny man drones on and on and on

“We are here tonight to honour a man whose impact upon modern art is immense. He revised art and made us think about what art was telling us. Are we smart enough to understand art? Are we capable of seeing what art presents to us? Do we realize how art impacts society and makes us revisit truths we were taught as children? This man, whom we honour tonight, is a teacher. He has taught

us how profound art can be and how controversial its voice is.”

The crowd applauded quietly, the way the rich do. The old man backstage blew smoke rings and the giant eye blinked. Just once.

The tiny man on the big stage smiled and continued his speech.

“Art is never simple. It is complex and can be alienating. It can tear at our souls, make us weep, haunt us. Like Andy Warhol....”

Clay Smith-Waggoner, the angry old man with the white spiky hair and the smoking habit, stared at the blue door with the chipped paint backstage. Beyond that door, he thought of the audience, the hyenas. He imagined the crowd swilling their champagne behind their porcelain-capped teeth and eating ground up goose liver. *Pretentious bastards*, he thought. *You all love me so much and I don’t even give a damn about you. I never have. Suckers.*

The giant eye widened, as it could read the old man’s mind and was shocked by his language. The giant eye was Mormon and never cursed or smoked or drank or had sex outside of marriage.

Clay had been honoured by many organizations before but never deigned to attend. He felt contempt for the art community. He thought they were fools who clung to every painting he created and every word he uttered with the fervour of deranged cult members. In short, they were a bunch of ass-kissing pompous morons.

Clay was best known for using images of feet in his art and famous for such pieces as “Mona Foota”, “The Last Foot Supper”, “Madonna and Foot”, and “The Great Foot Masturbator.” The last painting, in particular, garnered him a special sort of fame. Salvador Dali criticized him for negating his concept. Clay criticized Dali for clutching to cultural norms of what art should be. For years, the two men sniped at each other. When Dali died, he left Clay a letter that had only one word on it: Continue on. Clay framed it and hung it in his studio.

The giant eye was a fan of Clay’s work and stalked him from orbit. The giant eye loved feet because it had none. Clay’s work allowed the eye to live vicariously through him and let him imagine what it would be like to have feet.

As acknowledged by the tiny man on the big stage, Clay was a contemporary of Warhol and appeared in his short film, “Evil Jazz Hands.” He played a homosexual Satan who danced nude in the rain with a pregnant Virgin Mary, who was portrayed by the avant-garde filmmaking drag queen Sally von Brittlebone. Andy wanted him to star in the film because he was well endowed and trimmed his bush at a time when very few men manscaped. Clay was among the first to believe that a man had a duty to keep his genital area tidy. He was a twink before there were twinks and he was proud of it.

The giant eye never watched “Evil Jazz Hands” as it didn’t have access to a theatre, nor would it want to see a movie about homosexuals because, as stated, it is Mormon and Mormons aren’t open-minded when it comes to homosexual Satans dancing with drag queen Virgin Marys. It also didn’t know what manscaping was nor did it know of the term “twink.” If it did know, it would be shocked because that how Mormons normally

are – shocked.

The tiny man on the big stage watched the movie, though. Many times. The film gave him the courage to come out as gay, but not as a Satanist. He believed in Jesus and was proud of it. That’s another thing the tiny man on the big stage and the giant eye had in common: Jesus. Clay was an atheist and that made the tiny man and the giant eye a little bit sad. They wanted him to be saved so they prayed for his soul every night.

Clay turned away from the stage and sat down, farting as he did so. The giant eye cringed a bit. The tiny man on the big stage had no idea a fart had occurred but he wouldn’t have approved if he did. Clay was 86 years old and gas was hard to contain. Aging is never dignified. He waited to be called to the stage so he could receive the lifetime achievement award. Clay didn’t have anything to do that night. Putting on a nice suit with new shoes and combing his hair, taming it, seemed to be a fun thing to do. He usually spent his nights painting and eating beans.

He lit up another cigarette, again ignoring the “No Smoking – No Fumar” sign behind him. The giant eye felt a twinge of disgust and the tiny man on the big stage droned on:

“He taught us that art isn’t meant to be defined....”

Fuck you, Clay thought. The giant eye gasped. *Language Clay! Language!*

“...to try to define art destroys the simple complexity that art provides to us as patrons. We need to be open to receiving messages from the art....”

Clay belched. He took a deep inhale from his cigarette and blew smoke rings in the air. *Is that art? I create my own farts and my belches.*

He thought about what he would say to the crowd.

“Dear bastards, I thank you tonight for wasting your time to honour an old man who never gave a damn about his art. I only painted because I didn’t want to have a real job. I didn’t want to rot inside an office. I detest you all for looking for deep meanings in my art. There are no deep meanings. I paint feet, for fuck’s sake. You know why I paint feet? When I was a kid, my mom made me rub her feet. Every day I sat on the floor while she put her feet in my lap.

She’d say ‘Rub’em, Clay. Rub’em good. Crack the toes! And get the heels, too. Don’t ignore the heels.’ Each crack of the toe brought on orgasmic moans.

Every day for 15 years I was confronted by my mother’s feet. I felt the hard calluses on the sides. Saw the corns trying to pop through the tops of the toes. The yellow nails. Hair sprouted out of the big toe. I moved away when I was 19. I thought I was free. I fled to New York and got a job as a janitor. But I still saw her feet when I slept. I smelled her feet when I came home. Her feet would stare at me through the bathroom mirror. I’d look down at my own feet and see her feet staring back at me yelling ‘Rub us! Rub us!’ I knew I had to exorcise these pedi-demons. So I started to paint. I painted white feet, black feet, and yellow feet. I painted feet in sandals, bare feet, feet in heels. I got bored by painting feet so I started taking famous paintings and inserting feet instead of people. I’m not creating any message. I’m painting feet because feet terrorize me. They have for most

of my life.”

The crowd applauded, breaking Clay’s concentration. The tiny man on the big stage made a funny and the lap dogs lapped it up. The giant eye continued to stare at the angry old man.

Clay continued his speech.
“You sit there in your \$5000 dollar outfits and drink your \$200 a bottle champagne and smile and nod and clap at every morsel of bullshit spewing forth from mouths of people you admire. Why? Do you think you’re getting on our good side? Or at least my good side? No. You’re never going to be my friend nor are you someone I want to spend any amount of time with. Because you don’t get it. You don’t understand that art is just art. There’s no important political message behind it. There’s nothing special about it. Most art, especially mine, is created by people who don’t want to work for other people because people are annoying. But most artists don’t want to accept the fact that they hate people so they claim they are influenced by society. Bullshit. Like me, they hate people. The only difference is I have the balls to say it.”



He imagined, at this point, some in the crowd would start hissing. A woman might cry. People would walk out.

“You hiss and you cry and you walk out because you know I’m right. Someone tells you that a piece of art is stimulating and has a message and you buy it. Literally. You buy it and you hang it up on your walls so you can stare at it and think how much more cultured you are than everyone else. Well, you’re not. You’re being told what culture is and you’re buying it. You’re zombies with too much money.”

Be nice, Clay. Be nice. These are your fans. Why don’t you like your fans? The giant eye asked. *They love you so much, and so do I but you take us all for granted. It breaks my heart. Wait. Do I have a heart?*

He smiled as he took another drag off his cigarette, nodding his head. *This speech is going to be so good. I hope I get booed. Maybe I should refuse the award? That would really get them.*

The tiny man on the big stage was wrapping up his speech, the rambling getting slower. The giant eye started to get nervous and hoped Clay wouldn’t be mean.

“Now, without further adieu, I bring to you the greatest living American artist: Clay Smith-Waggoner.”

Clay stood up and tossed his cigarette to the ground, crushing it with his foot and walked out onto the stage.

The audience was standing, of course. Audiences loved to stand to show someone how much they loved him or her. Clay never gave anyone a standing ovation; he couldn’t be bothered. He stood at the podium watching them clap. Diamonds twinkled and so did teeth. Well-manicured hands bounced off each other as applause echoed through the room.

Clay smiled. The tiny man handed him a gold statue depicting the Three Graces. The giant eye waited in breathless anticipation and said, “Be nice, Clay. Please be nice. Don’t hurt anyone’s feelings.”

Clay’s eyes twinkled. He leaned forward, licking his lips that were cracked and white.

“Thank you,” he said and walked off the stage, the sound of applause following him. He stepped outside, farted, lit another cigarette, and went home. The giant eye started crying in relief, happy Clay didn’t insult anyone. The tears soared through space and down to the earth, drenching the streets and the soil with wetness. The tiny man on the big stage turned to look at the audience,

all of whom were still clapping.

The earth continued to spin in its orbit and no one on it knew that anything had happened. 🌀



Only One Demon

Jelena Woehr

I was older than I care to admit before I realized, when most people say they “have some demons,” or that they’re “wrestling with their demons,” they mean it metaphorically. For most of my life, I thought I was lucky to have only one. His name is Sam.

My memory doesn’t go back far enough to tell me if there was a time before Sam. His eyes are gold. He sits at the end of my bed. I’ve never seen him sleep. When I wake up in the morning, he’s gone.

Some nights he’s the size of a small child and his skin is deep burgundy. Other nights, he’s as tall as my father, with skin no redder than mine with a sunburn. His wool coat is getting threadbare at the elbows now, and his trousers are fraying at the hem, but his leather shoes are always freshly shined.

I used to say all of that, when people talked about their demons. I never tried to hide Sam. I didn’t know he was

something I should hide, until I found out not everyone had someone like him. I spoke about him at parties, in classrooms, in therapy. People laughed and patted me on the arm. I thought it cruel of them to laugh, but maybe, when they went to bed, they shared the space with three or four demons. Maybe my one, my one little Sam, was a problem so small it was funny to hear me complain about him.

In childhood, Sam was my nightlight. He doesn’t glow, exactly, but he illuminates, like a very weak candle. It’s enough to know he’s still there if I wake in the night before the sun is up.

Sam doesn’t talk much. He doesn’t breathe, so he can sit perfectly still, so much so that it sometimes seems like there’s no body in his clothes at all, just a luminescent fog holding up a jacket. He rarely looks at me.

I used to try to get a reaction out of him, like people do with the guards at Buckingham Palace. I’d shout at him,



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pretend to cry, mock him, throw my stuffed animals at him and then get too scared to walk past him and pick them up off the floor. I tried tickling him once, but only once.

In Australia, there’s a mountain that’s been on fire for six thousand years. If you walk in the ashes close to the burning mountain, you won’t feel heat, but smoke seeps up through your footprints and follows you. The fire is a hundred feet below the surface, but because of the smoke nothing can take root in the land above. Acres upon acres lie barren, reddish in hue, smelling of sulphur. No birds fly above.

That’s how Sam’s skin felt to me. I knew as soon as my fingertips made contact with his belly that Sam’s body is a barren land. Inside Sam there is no coal, but inside Sam a very old fire burns all the same. When I took my hand away, smoke wafted from the spot where I had pressed my palm. My skin didn’t burn or blister, but still I stuck my fingers in my mouth and whimpered.

Touching Sam was off the table after that, but I kept asking questions. The first one he answered was when I asked his name. I was very young then. After that, he didn’t answer anything for a long time.

“Do you love anyone?”

“Where were you born?”

“Why are you here?”

“What makes you so warm inside?”

“If you’re warm, does my room feel cold to you?”

“Do you have a best friend?”

“Is this your job?” “Are you alive?”

“Who sent you here?”

It was that last question he eventually answered, but only after I’d asked at least fifty times, on fifty nights.

When the answer came, all he said was, “The man downstairs.”

I realize now that he must mean the Devil, Lucifer, Satan, or whatever you want to call him, but when I was still young enough to try to talk to Sam, I thought he meant it literally. The only man downstairs from my second-story room was my father. So I thought I knew the secret. Sam watched me at night on behalf of my father.

Sleep came easier during the years I thought of Sam as a gift from my father. He might be golden-eyed, sharp-toothed and full of very old smoke, but I believed he was sworn to protect me. I thanked him when he appeared on my bed each night. He never replied.

Then, one evening, I thanked my father for the gift of a gently flickering night-guardian named Sam. His brow furrowed and he raised an eyebrow at my mother. Their conferences are often silent, like they think children are blind. I could read worry on both their faces.

Dad said, “There’s nothing in your bedroom at night besides you, dear.”

Mom said, “Do you want to talk to someone about what you’re seeing?”

They explained night terrors to me, even as I was explaining to them that I wasn’t waking up frozen by fear. I could move, breathe, and touch. They took me to a doctor who made me piss in a cup and, four days later, told my parents I wasn’t on drugs.

After that, I stopped telling people about Sam. Sam isn’t a night terror, and he isn’t a nightmare, and he isn’t a

delusion. He’s just Sam. But the more people I talk to, the rarer I find out he is. I’ve never met another person who has a visitor like Sam.

I ask the right questions now—questions that would give someone permission to admit it, if their demons were physically hunched at the ends of their beds like Sam. Questions that sound like I’m joking, if you’re not like me. I ask, “What do your demons wear to bed?” So far, everyone has laughed.

After I got tired of trying to get Sam to answer questions, I got angry and tried to chase him away. I yelled at him and stamped my foot. I shoved him with the handle of a broom and I threw my pillows at his head. I chanted insults every night for as long as I could, until I lost my voice or my body fell back in the sheets, exhausted. He was patient, enduring my assault without a twitch or a murmur for six nights.

On the seventh night, when I threw a pillow, he turned his head all the way around without turning his body. His eyes were wide and very, very bright. I squirmed back into my headboard, as far away from him as possible. His mouth was upturned at the corners in something that wasn’t a smile. His nostrils flared.

The room seemed to fall away, leaving only me, a weak, struggling sack of flesh, frozen in the gaze of a predator who had been waiting for this moment for a long, long time. In that instant, I knew the glow in his eyes to be hunger. He sat on my bed every night, and every night he starved.

But Sam didn’t eat me. He didn’t move his body an inch. His head eventually turned back around on his neck, and he spent the rest of the night silently at the end of my bed as usual.

I stopped throwing pillows, but I learned something from my attempts to evict Sam. My bedfellow really did serve some higher—or lower—master. If Sam served only himself, I would have become something other than a little girl that night. I don’t know if I’d have been a meal, or if he’d have taken me into himself less literally than that, but one way or another I would have sated his hunger.

After I went to college, Sam didn’t appear until my roommate was fast asleep. I’d keep her awake as long as I could. When she started to fade, I suggested a game or a movie on Netflix. If she dozed off, I made popcorn or put on music. It bought me a few more hours each night for the first year, at the expense of my roommate’s grades. In sophomore year she stayed out all night partying often enough that I once again had to get used to Sam being at the end of my bed as soon as I climbed into it.

“How do you know when I’m going to bed?” I would ask him. There was, of course, no response. Sometimes, if I annoyed him enough, he would reach his left hand to the crown of his bowler hat and pull it down, as if to cover his ears.

“Do you have horns under that hat?”

That one went unanswered, too.

“Don’t you get bored, sitting there all night?”

No response, of course.

The last time I heard Sam talk was after I graduated and moved home. My parents insisted on it, at least for a little while to save money. I think they missed me, even though while I was away at school they surprised themselves and everyone else by having a baby boy. My mother, in her

late forties, was tired all the time with a baby, but both my parents doted on him. I wondered if they’d ever been that affectionate with me.

On the night Sam spoke to me for the second, and last, time, I was sitting up in my room at the end of my bed, resigned to Sam’s company next to me. My parents were downstairs discussing whether or not to join the backyard chicken fad. I was #TeamChickens, so I sat up—boldly, right next to Sam—to hear them better.

My father was saying, “—and they’re a useful insurance policy against disaster. We don’t have to eat them, if we prefer to keep them around, but if anything happened and we had to, there they are.”

“Don’t you think it’s cruel to give them names and affection, but be sitting there the whole time knowing they may end up in your belly?” I could hear the crossed arms and taut lip in my mother’s tone of voice. She eats meat, but she never really feels great about it. I get those conflicted feelings from her.

I heard my father laugh, a strained, cold laugh that didn’t sound like anything I’d heard from him before. “Isn’t it

better that way? That they think they’re family? Even if they understood their role, they’d have to play it.”

That was when Sam turned his head around again. This time, his eyes held more than just hunger. I stopped paying attention to the conversation downstairs.

He said, in a voice like molten metal, “You should go to sleep.”

Suddenly, sleep was the only thing I could think about. I barely made it up the bed and back under my covers before I was out cold. By the time I woke up, Sam was, as always, gone. I don’t know what else his voice can do—maybe that’s why he doesn’t talk?

Since then, Sam has changed. It’d be imperceptible if I didn’t know him so well. But I’ve seen him every night of my life, and I know when something’s different. He feels more present, somehow, as if he takes his job more seriously.

I haven’t tried to ask Sam if the baby has a demon, and the baby is too young to ask. When I creep into his room after he’s asleep, I don’t see anything in the crib besides a fat baby sleeping. But then again, nobody’s ever seen Sam.

We never did get those chickens. 🐔



JELENA WOHR is a Colorado native writing from Los Angeles, where she pays the exorbitant rent by building digital communities for startup companies. Her work has appeared in *Equus*, *Business Insider*, *Hacker Noon*, and *The Digital Culturist*, as well as being archived in the Library of Congress. Outside of writerly pursuits, her great passion is endurance riding. (Ultramarathons, on a horse.) *Only One Demon* is her first published short story.





Maybe There Was Danger Here

Kristen Seikaly

One day, a man forgot to wash the dishes again, even though his wife reminded him twice: once with a kiss, and once with a note. When she returned home and saw said dishes, the inevitable argument ensued. It was the same argument that began well before their marriage and did not end until two days after it. In a fury, the man left the house and the argument for some time alone to think.

As he thought, the man went to cross a street without heeding the voice of his mother. “Look both ways!” she cried from the beyond, but her words fell into the breeze beyond her son’s ears. A car attempting to turn saw the man and made an abrupt stop, which led the cars behind him to follow suit. One did not stop in time, causing one collision, then another, then another. No one was hurt in a serious sort of way, but an ambulance was called. It was the responsible thing to do.

The man who caused it all kept on walking, forgetting to think about the dishes, forgetting to even look back.

The ambulance left as soon as it received the call. It whizzed on by the accident as the confused motorists, waiting in their dented cars, watched it go. Realizing its mistake a half a block later, the ambulance turned back around. As it circled back, the forgetful man began to cross another street while failing to look. The ambulance, in such a hurry to reach the original accident, also failed to look, hitting the man distraught over dishes or something.

Neither knew what happened, but neither one was hurt in a serious sort of way. The man never forgot a dish after that, to his wife’s delight.

When the ambulance arrived at the original accident, the motorists waited for the EMT’s to come out. None did. After a while, one by one, the motorists decided they were fine after all and left without any medical examination. Each one began to forget things after that, most often the dishes. None of them knew why. They felt fine otherwise. 🔄



KRISTEN SEIKALY is a Michigan native discovering the culture of city-living in Philadelphia. With two degrees in music, she now works as a freelance writer and voice teacher. Connect with her on Twitter @KristenSeikaly



The Brief Existence of You

Lucy Thorneycroft

I am covered in my blood, or your blood or our blood. I’m not sure there is a difference anymore. The redness smears the white tiled floor like congealing paint on a canvas and dyes the corners of the towels. The sound of the tap drips above my head, skewing the regular rhythm of the arterial pumping of my heart trying to expel blood. Nausea swells within me and I push my ear further into the bath mat as the world starts to revolve faster. The air smells sweet with mold. I can see the exposed pipes under the sink from one of the landlord’s partially finished DIY jobs.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the memory of you sleeping inside the thin walls of my body. I never felt mortal until you started existing and made me aware of how small I was, my identity never so confined to just my body before. In scarcely three months you got closer than anyone ever had, reducing me to an unconscious effort toward life to be probed and documented by invasive nurses in bright rooms. You made me small.

The day I realised my period wouldn’t come, I made a panicked trip to the drugstore. I did not ring Dorian. He would be at some campus party with a nameless girl in an intoxicated haze. Besides, I didn’t think he would pick up anymore. So, I sat hunched on the toilet, staring at the stick as the air became heavy and the last of the sunlight faded into the darkness. The lines of red signified the beginning of you. I cried. But I never told anyone about you; I was not ready for the change you would bring.

A sharp pain draws me back to the bathroom as a flock of geese cry overhead. A cool breeze rustles the curtains over the bath and the metallic scent of the coming twilight begins to wash away the smell of sick. A bang shakes the walls and I freeze as the adrenaline starts to poison my blood. Jess must be home, I think through the pain of a headache. My throat and tongue feel irritably dry from breathing through my mouth. Jess stomps up the stairs and across the landing to her room.

My lower abdomen twinges as I crawl on my knees to

the sink and slurp the cold water from the tap. I tense my eyes into slits and push the toilet lid down whilst focusing on the opposite wall. Dried blood encrusts the floor and a tear trickles down my cheek. I moan and quickly try to stifle the sound with my hand. I pause in the silence, but Jess doesn’t come out of her room. I pick up the tiny form of you, placing you gently on my cardigan which I fold over and place by the sink. The wipes from under the sink smell strongly of lemon and my headache moves into my eyes as I stoop to clean the tiles. The wipes turn rusty and I wrap them in toilet paper before placing them in the bin. I wrap the towels into a ball, careful to hide the stains, and look into the mirror. Raising myself onto my tiptoes, I inspect my reflection for blood stains. But the black dress disguises the evidence and satisfied I pad to the door.

The dim light of afternoon casts long shadows across my path, creating the only flicker of movement. I can faintly hear Jess moving around in her bedroom but the others are not home. I run into the hallway with you held to my breast and across the landing to my room.

Clothes and books litter the floor of my room and the thin curtains are pulled. In the darkness I trip on a tangle of formless fabric and curse quietly as I stumble into the desk. I flick the lamp on and

carefully sit down in the chair. As my eyes scan the various debris of essays and stationary on my desk, I see a charcoal drawing half hidden in one of the books.

My hands shake as I set the cardigan onto the desk and pull the picture into the halo of the lamp. The sight of tiny, clenched fists and shut eyes imagined from the future darkness of my womb meets my eyes. The sound of heavy breathing fills the air and I reach my hands into my hair and start to pull the strands out by the root as I rock backwards and forwards.

The sight of you is too much, and I turn off the light. The darkness rushes in and takes on a physicality which presses into me. I moan rhythmically and wrap my arms around the swelling pain in my core. I can just about make out the

faint green of the clock: Ten o'clock. The ticking thunders onwards, compelling time to make naked what I have hidden. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Light floods through the door and I can see the silhouette of Jess before the overhead bulb is flicked on. I shield my eyes against the sudden glow.

"Thalia," says Jess in an unnaturally loud voice. "Why the hell is there blood in the bathroom? Are you ill?"

"It's too late," I say. "I lost —."

"What's too late?" Jess asks as she squats down in front of me and looks up into my face. "Did someone hurt you? If it was Dorian I will kill him with my bare hands."

"The baby."

"Please, just tell me what is going on, you're scaring me."

"Twelve weeks yesterday. Motherhood changes a person. You start to speak in weeks. Eight weeks to so-and-sos party. Nine to Christmas and --"

"Why didn't you tell me?" she interrupts. "Whose is it?"

"Whose was it. Dorian's. Then this afternoon... I couldn't think of anyone to call."

"Did you have a miscarriage?" Jess asks. I shudder. "Jesus Christ, you need to go to hospital."

"No, it's too late." I grab her arm. "I need to bury it, I mean her. I think it was a her, it felt like a her."

"I know, sweetie, but it's not too late for you though. We need to get you checked out," Jess says. "Go shower, come down in half an hour. Okay? It's going to be okay."

I shuffle towards the little mound on the desk and pick it up in pale hands. The cardigan feels cold and soft and I gaze for a moment at it before turning to Jess. She looks at me with wet eyes peering out of a shiny face, and her crossed arms clutched at her waist as she looks to the form in my arms. There is a flutter of movement as Jess places her hand over her mouth.

"I can hold her for you whilst you get ready," Jess says.

I nod and she moves across the room, knocking over a stack of papers, and pulls me into a hug. She smells of artificial flowers and shampoo. I pass her the bundle and she lifts it out of my hands.

The shower streams in hot rivulets over my skin in a fog of misted glass and steam. The water runs red for a moment before turning clear. My mind still feels the baby's presence, though my body is empty. You were a girl, though I do not suppose that will mean the same thing to you as it does to me. The word girl has been warped in the mouths of family, lovers, strangers and politicians; it hasn't for you.

I did not want you. I hope you never knew that.

The phone bings and I jump before turning off the shower. The air is humid and sweat sticks to my face and irritates my skin. I wipe the phone screen on a towel and press the home button. SEND PROFESSOR THE ROMANTIC GEORGIAN LITERATURE ESSAY!! The reminder hardly seems to justify the exclamation marks I wrote it with anymore. I place the phone face down by the side of the sink and lean over to wipe the condensation off the mirror. My naked body stares back at me, as foreign and familiar as the marble statues in dusty museum galleries. I hadn't seen myself without clothes for months. My stomach protrudes so slightly that the world knew nothing. I turn to the side and see my breasts are losing some of their

perkiness and my armpit is a mass of thick black wire. The cabinet by the side of the mirror is full of period pads and I take one out before closing the door. I pick up a towel and cover myself. Dressing methodically the thoughts in my mind brush through, uncaught by conscious intentions.

The house is silent as I descend the stairs to the front door. Jess is outside, putting a bag onto the back seat of the car. The wind has risen to a near tempest and the autumnal leaves fall like shattered glass from the bows of the tall trees. Droplets of rain curl through the stormy night and splatter against my skin. Shivering I rush towards the car and climb into the passenger seat.

"I just need to grab my phone," shouts Jess over the squall before turning and running through the front door.

Warm air thickly encases the inside of the car and I can see the wild night from far away as though through the distance of a memory. My eyes feel heavy and raw. I lie my head against my propped- up arm and allow my body to submit itself to sleep.

A siren startles me awake and I open bleary eyes to the vision of a half-realised moon, far away but merged with the bright lights of the hospital. My pulse becomes audible, beating a tattoo in the confine of my skull. I see the cacophonic swarms of medical staff and fragile patients who look as though they are already crumbling to dust despite the death-defying confidence of those surrounding them.

Jess pulls into a small parking space near the ambulance drop-off area. "Are you ready?" she asks.

"No, not really."

The car becomes quiet as we sit staring out the window.

Crying penetrates the car from somewhere out in the darkness behind us and our silent isolation seeps away. We undo our seat belts, open the doors into the wet weather and rush towards the neon entrance.

A&E overflows with families, children, the elderly and sick teenagers throwing up in cardboard troughs provided by nurses who pass through like insubstantial spirits. I see the bundle under Jess' arm and look away. Jess takes my clammy hand and leads me over to the reception. The acidic scent of bleach and cleaning products ambles after us, invading our senses.

A grey woman with a tight bun taps the keyboard of her computer. She looks up and raises an eyebrow before glancing at the drunk teenagers in the corner.

"How can I help you?" she asks.

I barely hear her because I suddenly become aware of the wetness around my crotch. Jess touches my arm.

"Sweetie, you go sit down and I'll just have a talk with the receptionist," says Jess.

"Fill out all the relevant details and bring it back. Then we will send her up to the gynecology ward." I hear the receptionist say as I walk over to the only isolated area in the vast landscape of wiry seats and injured bodies.

The only figure near us is an old man in a brown coat who leans forward, watching a family who laughs jarringly in the waiting room. A large clock is hung on the far wall, juddering with great effort over the seconds. A wash of exhaustion sweeps over me, as if compelled like the tides of the now invisible moon. I lay across the sterile and hard seats, once again closing my eyes to the embrace of fatigue.

"Do you have allergies or take any medicine?" Jess asks me, looking expectantly at the pink form on her lap.

"You know its odd, I've known so many women who have had miscarriages," I say." My mother, my best friend's mother, a teacher and countless others. But they never told me what I should do if it ever happened to me. I don't mean the technical, so much, but the loneliness and the sense of reflective blame. They didn't mention that. No one ever did."

There is a pause.

"My grandmother had one, back in the Second World War," Jess says. "That's when I first heard about them. Apart from individual stories told in whispered tones for girls of a certain age, it's not really mentioned."

"I think I get it though."

"Get what?"

"Why all those women don't talk about it. I don't know if I will, once it's all over."

The clock continues its circular journey, in which my mind bobs between restless consciousness and nihilism, muddled by the form's questions. A nurse walks over to us and Jess passes the form to her. As I stand, I can feel the blood rush out of my body and my gait morphs into an awkward jerkiness.

The corridors slope endlessly through sterile air and I peek into wards as we pass by. Old men and women stand, sit and lay with open mouths as though they want to say something before thinking better of it. Clear tubes snake and weave into bodies, beds with prone figures on them rush past and lost relatives wonder through Daedalus' endless imagination. And the spaces fill with beeping as the machines take the place of the clocks and count the hours down.

The nurse takes us to another waiting room, this time in the gynecology ward where Jess and I are handed cardboard cups of black coffee. A fluorescent light pushes into my eyes and strains the tender muscles. I suddenly become aware of the surrounding people. A thin blonde woman sits on the chairs opposite, reading a worn book. Another, stares vacantly at the white wall until a nurse calls for Ms. Anderson and she wanders into an anonymous room. A bearded man with bright ginger hair slouches in on himself and methodically picks up and places down magazines.

A laughing couple come out of one of the monotonous doors. They smile and thank a nurse before joining the row of silent figures. The giggling woman places a protective hand onto her swollen belly and rubs it with an absentminded affection. The father-to-be leans over and kisses her cheek. I can feel the release of blood trickling onto my pad.

"Ms. Thalia Thompson?" calls a stout nurse who briefly enters as though from the wings before disappearing behind a door.

"Will you be okay on your own?" asks Jess. "Or would you like me to come in?"

"I'll be fine."

Jess picks up the cardigan from beside her and passes it to me.

I walk over to where the nurse vanished and into the room beyond. A doctor in a long white coat stands up and takes my hand.

"I'm Doctor Carlos," he says with a smile.

The next hour passes slowly, skipping between ultrasounds, blood tests, practiced questions and colourful leaflets shoved into unwilling hands. They took the cardigan from me at the beginning and undressed and re-dressed me in a hospital gown. I feel like a child when the medical staff leave me sitting on the side of examination tables with my bare legs swinging above the floor.

The clock slips over to four in the morning when a skinny nurse comes into the room. He only looks a few years older than me, maybe twenty four or five with his light freckles like paint splatter onto paper. His face is shiny and his hands grasp and kneed together in a constant movement.

"About the fetus" he says in a squeaky voice. I look at him apathetically as this stranger talks about things even my family don't know. He seems too young, I think wondering if he really knows what he is saying or if it is routine. "The hospital can cremate it for you. Or if you would rather take it home and do your own ceremony, that's fine. Some people ask the hospital chaplain to say a few words."

I mumbled a few words about my lack of faith and ask if I can have her back. With a nod the nurse guides me back to the waiting room. The silent figures have disappeared in my absent, pulled into the rooms or simply faded too much to be found, I do not know. Jess conveys me back through the clinical labyrinth, as though following a thread, and out into the chilly air.

The early minutes of dawn crest the horizon in brilliant mauve and orange streaks as the car pulls into the drive. Jess takes my arm and helps me onto my feet. I stumble against her many times as we walk the expanse of the lawn back to the house. The front door clicks shut and the silence of loneliness descends.

We buried you by the forget-me-nots in the garden; that terrible space. I placed the charcoal drawing around you as a blanket to keep you warm on the dark nights. You were never named because you were intended to be the world's and the world was to be yours. I am sorry. 🕯



LUCY THORNEYCROFT is an in-progress writer based in England. *The Brief Existence of You* is her first published short story. She is currently studying English Literature as an undergraduate at the University of Warwick.

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

KYRA WILSON *Front Cover, Page: 22, Back Cover...*

is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com



KATELIN KINNEY *Page: 41-43...*

graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com



CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 7, 14...*

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



CESAR VALTIERRA *Page: 10-12...*

is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at CesarValtierra.com and OrderFromKhaos.com, as well as his comic at TonyBalazo.com



CATHERINE HOFFMAN *Page: 25...*

is a recent graduate of Kendall College of Art and Design (KCAD) in Grand Rapids, MI where she graduated with a BFA in Illustration. When she's not making art, you can find her hitting a volleyball, making popsicles, planting succulents, watching cartoons, playing video games, or baking sweet confections. She lives in Holland, MI and you can visit her online at CatherineHoffman.com



ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: 16, 17...*

conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at RobKirbyson.com



RACHEL SLOTNICK *Pages: 2, 20, 33...*

is a painter and writer originally from Los Altos, California. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in May 2010. Her work is on permanent display at the Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a muralist for the 35th, 46th and 47th wards, and her paintings will be displayed this August at Beauty & Brawn Gallery & Think Space. Recently published in *Elimae Literary Journal*, *High Chair Poetry*, and a finalist in the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Awards, look for her upcoming publications in *Mad Hatter's Review*, and *Tortoise Books*. Rachel currently resides in Chicago where she works as Adjunct Faculty in art Studio and English at Malcolm X College, and the Illinois Art Institute. RachelSlotnick.com.



CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 3-4, 5...*

makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.

THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & STAFF

RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction...*

has work which appeared in *Slipstream*, *Paper Radio*, *the Lost and Found Times*, *Mallife*, *Version90*, *Sub Rosa*, *Asylum*, and a host of other alternative magazines over the last 30 years. After a drunken hiatus his work has resurfaced in places like *A Minor Magazine* and *Peculiar Mormyrid*. He was editor of the *Fiction Review* from 1989-1991 and co-founded Thrice Publishing in 2011. He compiled and edited *So What If It's True: From the Notebooks of Lorri Jackson* and stares out the window for no reason quite often. He has no degrees, does not apply for awards, and works in a print shop where nobody knows about any of this. You can find his website at rwspryszak.com



DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and blogs daily at Blogography.com

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