

# LOTUS-EATER



ISSUE 5



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# ISSUE 5

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# Prose



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## *Like an Animal We Had Been Sheltering*

Late. She was already running late. But there it was. Like the sudden appearance of a pus filled boil on her cheek or a pea sized lump in her breast. And although she was halfway out the front door, she paused.

Something was wrong with her shadow. It was altered, swollen. She had never paid much attention to her shadow and although she tried, she couldn't recall the last time she noticed it.

She looked closely at the dark shape that fell on the wall and over the radiator near the door. She checked the light and lifted her bag to see if its shadow had grown. It had not. She lifted her arms, wiggled her hips and moved her head from side to side. She felt certain her shadow had expanded and decided that as soon as she got home from work she would weigh herself.

All morning she couldn't quite forget it. She kept taking side-glances to see if she could catch another glimpse but the pervasive fluorescent lighting in her office prevented any real shadows. At lunch she made sure to watch what she ate (some yogurt, an apple). When five o'clock came she did not stop to buy flowers from the man who sits in front of her office building. She walked right past him and did not raise her eyes even as, several blocks later, she descended to the subway.

As soon as she got home, she ran upstairs, took off her clothes and weighed herself. Down three pounds. She grabbed her floor lamp, tilted it and stood in the light.

She moved her arms, first flailing them about then mimicking an orchestra conductor in slow motion, signaling to the strings, calming the brass. She switched to port de bras being careful to progress through all five positions. She was so transfixed by the silhouette she was creating that she almost forgot tonight was Paul's night. By the time he let himself in, she had not yet showered. Paul had told her repeatedly that he did not care for the smell of a woman and would only sleep with a woman if she had just bathed. And he liked to fuck before he ate.

Once without telling anyone she took a week off from work. She did not leave her apartment or even answer the phone. She was curious what she really smelled like and resolved not to wash the entire time. At first she didn't notice any significant difference but after a few days she was able to smell herself. She was able to distinguish the smell of her armpits from the smell under her breasts from the smell between her legs. It always made her feel bad but she rather liked the way she smelled that week. She masturbated several times.

Paul said this was the second time he was expected to wait while she showered and that she had better get to it if she wanted to get fucked. She finished setting the table and went into the bathroom. She washed quickly but thoroughly and yet by the time she came out, he said it was too late; he had already eaten and was full.

\*\*\*

The next morning she was greeted by a shadow slightly larger than the one the day before. She started to get nervous and thought about not going to work but decided she hadn't much control over her shadow and if it was going to widen there was nothing she could do about it.

But she began to watch for it. Whenever it became visible she checked its borders and questioned its size. By the end of the week her shadow extended out to such a degree that she thought even three women couldn't possibly cast such a shadow.

One afternoon when the shadows were long she went to the main shopping area near her apartment. She found a quiet spot beside a newsstand and leaned against the building. From here she could watch the people pass. She was nervous because she had never stood still in public. She wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible so she looked down and only lifted her eyes briefly now and again for a quick glance at the passersby. But she began to get bolder as she noticed no one noticed her.

She watched a woman with a tiny waist wearing small clacking heels glide by. Her shadow was perfect until it was obliterated by the shadow of a tall broad man. Three teenage boys walked by but they were gesticulating with such animation that she couldn't properly determine the size of their shadows. Next came a woman pushing a stroller and behind her were two young girls giggling and almost skipping. The young girls' shadows merged and overlapped and left her with the sense that they belonged to one person. She saw short shadows, tall shadows, wide shadows, narrow shadows but not a single one seemed amiss. She watched until she could no longer make out any shadows at all. As she walked home she wondered if anyone had discovered that hers was increasing. Certainly no one had said anything to her.

The following Monday there was something new. While reaching for a cup of coffee, she discerned a slight delay in her shadow's movement. It was almost imperceptible, just a half second really. She reached again, and again, and again. But each time, the shadow lingered. Was its size beginning to slow it down?

She suspected it was time to ask someone. After work she drove out to her mother's house. Her mother talked about her sister's children, about Sophia's unwillingness to move from the potty to the toilet and Felix's ingrown toenail. After refusing a second cookie, she stood up and went over to the lamp in the corner of the living room. She asked her mother if anything seemed



unusual. Her mother said she looked a bit pale and that her eye shadow was not exactly even. She moved closer to the lamp and lifted and lowered her arm. She could tell from her mother's expression that she didn't understand and so she asked for another cookie and when her mother wasn't looking, she put it in her pocket.

\*\*\*

When Paul came this week she was showered and ready. She turned off all the lights and lit the apartment with candles. She hoped the candlelight would distort all the shadows and then she could simply hide hers among the other deformed shapes.

Paul came up the stairs complaining about the subway ride. He didn't like that it took him forty-five minutes to get to her place. She smiled, apologized. He glanced about the apartment and asked, "Why is it so dark in here?" She told him she thought they might have a candlelit dinner. He informed her that he disliked that kind of shit and told her to turn on the lights.

She did not move to turn on the lights.

She thought of trying something different like throwing the dishes off the table, lifting her skirt and saying "Fuck me here, now." She pulled her skirt above her knees and slowly murmured, "fuck." But Paul had already turned on the lights and moved into the bedroom. He hollered, "Get in here, babe." She heard him toss his boots on the floor and unbuckle his belt. She let go of her

skirt and walked into the bedroom.

She was on her hands and knees facing the wall. She was glad she was facing the wall; she was in no mood to watch his face. She tried to pretend a stranger was fucking her but she couldn't tune out his constant grunting. She hated his grunts. They sounded like an endless chain of, "ick, ick, ick, ick, ick." Nothing else to do, she watched the act play out in the mirror above her dresser.

hick, hick, hick, hick, hick. dick, dick, dick, dick, dick. pick, pick, pick, pick, pick. sick, sick, sick, sick, sick, sick...

\*\*\*

Her alarm clock rang for a solid ten minutes before she finally crushed her thumb against the button. It required a considerable amount of effort to swing her legs over the side of the bed. She knew she was going to be well over an hour late for work and she didn't care.

By the time she returned home, she was completely drained from having to drag it around all day. She collapsed on her couch and stared at her shadow. Her eyes crept slowly along its length. Its edges looked rough. She thought she might try to grind it down.

She got some old sandpaper from the bathroom closet and sat on the living room floor. She stretched her legs out in front of her and began rubbing the edges of the shadow. She rubbed and rubbed and rubbed. It was working. She went through all five sheets of sandpaper before she whittled it down to an acceptable size but she did it. She felt

liberated. She stood up quickly, jumped up and down, climbed on to the couch and leapt to her reclining chair. Out of breath, her arms spent from grinding, she slid down into the chair.

In the morning her shadow was a bit bigger but it was still manageable. But as the day wore on, it continued to grow. On her lunch break she went to a hardware store and bought one hundred dollars worth of sand paper. The man in the store asked her what kind of project she was working on that needed all that sandpaper. Not knowing what to say, she said the paper was for her husband.

Every night she would sit on the living room floor and grind and grind. But every day the shade would grow and grow. Finally one night, her arms shaking from having to grind for hours on end, she dropped the sandpaper, put her head on the floor and cried.

The grinding was useless and she was exhausted. She hated having to drag the shadow along like some gigantic clinging child on her back. Her muscles were sore and she had to hunch forward to compensate for having to lug such a great weight. It took her more than twice the time to get anywhere. She wanted desperately to be rid of it but didn't know how to separate herself from her shadow. She thought of Peter Pan but couldn't remember how his shadow had come loose.

\*\*\*

The following Paul's night she had no interest in seeing him. She left work

at noon and did not turn on any lights when she came home. A few hours before she expected him, she went into her bedroom. She sat and waited. She studied a stain on the wall that resembled a mouse. The mouse was about to be submerged beneath choppy, angry waters. Its snout was pointing up, its back arching, and its tail creating an enormous arc of water. She watched it struggle until she heard Paul open the door. As he ascended the stairs, she slowly moved into a small cubbyhole created by the foot of her bed, a bookshelf and the wall. In order to fit, she had to sit on the floor and pull her knees up against her chest. Paul turned on the living room light, shouted to her, looked in the bedroom, and then returned to the living room. She heard the couch crunch as he sat down and then the pop and high-pitched hum of the television.

She felt cramped against the wall. She wanted him to leave. She looked at her shadow, which could not be controlled and lay across the floor, on the bed and halfway up the wall. It occurred to her that maybe her shadow was unfurling, like wings that she didn't know she had or that she may have imagined she'd had as a child.

She couldn't see the stain from where she was so she focused on a small, discolored thread in the weave of her jeans. From the change of voices on the television she knew a new program was beginning. She started to feel a heaviness in her bladder. She swayed back and forth to try to alleviate some of the pressure. She rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.





Finally the cacophony from the television ceased and she heard him get up from the couch. She stopped moving immediately and held her breath. He mumbled something and walked toward the bedroom. She pulled her legs even closer to her chest, rested her head on her knees, and tried to be as small as possible. He came into the bedroom and threw himself on the bed in such a way that his lower legs stuck out past the bottom of the bed, just inches from where she crouched. She was pinned on the other side of his legs with no way for her to escape without disturbing him.

Once she heard his breathing become deep and steady, she relaxed the tight grip she had on herself. Never taking her eyes from him, she slowly released her bladder. As her urine began to flow, she got goose bumps and her body gave a shudder. She felt her underwear and then her jeans swell with urine. Her clothes became saturated; the urine could not be contained. It began to collect underneath her and created a warm pooling sensation that felt familiar and welcome. A narrow stream broke free from beneath her leg. It slowly moved under the bed and crept toward the door. After a while, the warmth dissipated and turned cold. She began to shiver.

An hour or so later, Paul stirred. He sat up and rubbed his knees. He shouted, "Babe?" and waited for a response. When none was returned, he got up and left the bedroom. She heard the bathroom door shut followed by the sound of several messy bursts of urine as they hit the side of the bowl. He flushed twice

and left the bathroom. He tripped in one of the grooves on the living room floor and shouted, "Christ!" Then she heard him walk down the stairs and slam the door. She exhaled deeply. Wet and cold, she crawled on to the bed and immediately fell asleep. She dreamt she was on her belly on a piece of ice floating in a vast ocean. She and the ice were white in a world of green.

\*\*\*

The next day and for many days after that, she called in sick. She didn't bother to get dressed and spent the time watching her shadow. The shadow's delay was more pronounced. So much so that if she was lifting and lowering her arm, it was a full repetition behind. Just waving her arm was tiring now. She had no choice but to call her office and tell them there was an emergency and she had to leave town for a few weeks. Her boss was livid but she politely told him she was sorry but there was nothing she could do about it and hung up.

But there was plenty to do now. Just getting to the bathroom took her forty minutes. Her steps were slow and heavy. She would pull one foot forward, and with all her might drag the other foot forward, groaning and panting through the whole ordeal. She thought for sure the people in the apartment below must wonder what was going on upstairs. Sometimes as she moved about, she heard someone tapping beneath her feet what she assumed was a broom or a baseball bat.



She couldn't possibly allow Paul to come over anymore. She barely had the energy to clean herself let alone her apartment. She called him and told him that her job wanted her to set up a branch in Boston and she had to leave immediately. He didn't fully understand what she did so he didn't realize that such a proposition was ridiculous. He asked her how long she would be gone and she said three months. She thought his voice cracked a little when he said he would miss her.

\*\*\*

It still grew; there was no end to it. It was enormous. The shadow crept up the walls and along the ceiling and blotted out the light. The only way she could avoid the darkness was to poke her head in a doorway and leave her body and shadow behind.

Entire days were now spent in bed. She thought she might be able to find where her shadow was attached to her body. She carefully moved her eyes and fingers along the surface of her body, studying every inch. After about a week, she found a tiny seam behind her left knee. And a few days later she was pretty sure she could feel a small attachment site at the nape of her neck.

It was becoming difficult to breathe. Each strenuous inhale left her trembling and her forehead and face drenched in sweat but she needed, needed to move the air in and out.

Indrawn. Her thoughts alighted on when she was someone else.

Welter. Hark back. She thought of professor Stone's lectures and getting coffee on the way to class.

Winter. She remembered studying all-night and laughing with her roommate who was trying to finish a twenty-hour drawing in an hour and a half.

Home. She remembered skinning a cat in anatomy, how nervous she was to do it but then how easily the skin pulled away from the flesh.

White.

Slowly, steadily, by degrees she reached her arm over to her nightstand. With great effort, she opened the top drawer. She moved aside all the fragments of ideas, ticket stubs, cards her mother gave her and retrieved her grandmother's old metal nail file.

She found the tiny seam behind her left knee and pushed the nail file in. It hurt and blood ran down her leg. She stuck her finger in the hole and began to work the shadow off. Gradually and methodically, moving the nail file along with one hand and separating the shadow from her flesh with the other, she worked her way from behind her knee to the base of her heel. She continued to work to the sole of her foot pausing to wipe her bloody hands on the sheets and catch her breath. It was working. She was excited. She moved faster now. She would call work tomorrow and tell them she had returned. She moved up her inner thigh. She had to be careful. She took too much of herself with that last slice. She moved slower between her legs. She thought she smelled flowers. She would buy flowers tomorrow. Once

on the other thigh she began moving quickly again. She traced her legs and then her torso. She was very gentle on her breasts but she still tore both nipples. She was more careless on her arms since she had to rely on only one hand. She would tell Paul that she returned from Boston early. She even got excited thinking about sleeping with him again. She moved the file up the side of her neck and along her cheek.

She paused again when she got to her head. There was no way to avoid it but in order to detach the shadow from her head, she had to remove her hair along with it. This was upsetting and Paul would not like it but it would grow back; the shadow would be gone forever. It was harder to separate here. Her scalp was tough and it was slow going. As she worked, her hair fell in clumps on the bed and the floor and it stuck to her blood soaked hands. She was almost done.

Finally she reached the small attachment site at the nape of her neck. Her left hand, dripping, reached behind her neck and felt the last spot where the shadow clung to her. She lingered on the spot. It reminded her of a button on the back of a pair of corduroy pants she wore as a child. She would tug and twirl her finger around the button. She remembered how she would pull hard and although it dangled by a thread, it seemed like it would never break loose. But it did break loose. Her mother reattached it but she never felt comfortable with it again. She cocked her head to the right, twirled the remaining shadow around her finger and pulled it free from

her body. She let it fall to the floor.

The shadow was a giant heap by the side of the bed. She was free. Tomorrow she would stuff it into garbage bags and put it out with the trash.

The bed was wet and sticky and she had to push aside clumps of hair and scalp in order to lay her head on the pillow. She looked at her body. Raw, naked, light. She took a few deep breaths and slowly the corners of her mouth turned up into an enormous smile.



## *Leaflets*

Joseph's dad built god knew how many missiles that shipped to the Iraqi-Kuwait border and blew up god knew how many people before he killed himself over it, in his garage with the car running and the exhaust stuffed. Not until he was much older did Ruben consider that the man's death was the opposite of those brought by his missiles. Did he ponder that as he succumbed, the slow alertness of suffocating against the flash ignorance of explosion, the long fade versus the quick black? Were his victims his final thoughts? WAR COME HOME had been graffitied upon a white brick wall surrounding the defense contractor where Joseph's dad had worked, and when news of his suicide spread that was just how it felt, as though the blast of a missile he'd engineered had reverberated from its impact point all the many thousand miles to that South Bay garage, absorbed by him as the final fumes of what he believed he had done.

Or was one lesson. "It's against Jewish law to kill yourself," Ruben's brother said, this before a single shovelful of dirt had thudded atop the man's coffin. (Also against Jewish law to wait until Saturday for the funeral, Ruben could have rebutted, but exceptions do get made.)

Ruben, thirteen: "So what?"

David, seventeen: "So, nothing. It's against the law, is all."

"Bet he's real hung up on the law right now."

"Law means something. Or is supposed to."

"What's it supposed to mean?"

David wanted to be a Rabbi. He tried to look thoughtful. He looked pissed instead. "If anything means anything," he said into his shoulder, "it means don't kill yourself."

A few months later Ruben would arrive at the theory that self-termination was the ultimate act of responsibility. This earth wasn't ours, yet we stomped all over it anyway, each step shuddering chaos; only a few ever owned their trespassing. One weekend a month his mother drove Ruben down the 405 to a warehouse of used books in Long Beach, where he collected stacks of cover-battered volumes twice his age without surpassing his twenty-five dollar monthly allowance. Some stoicism stole in there, some Seneca. He read about nobility. Joseph's father seemed noble.

By now David was off to college. Ruben had no friends, nobody off of whom to bounce his untried ideas. They thickened in his brain's solitude, like a prisoner with nothing to do but thousands of pushups, growing pointlessly hard.

Joseph had bullied Ruben some in Hebrew school, but stopped doing that and everything else after his father's



death. Didn't even get Bar Mitzvahed. "How do you make a child go through with it?" their mother had asked, as David protested that you did exactly that, you go through with it, it being anything, especially this. Ruben took to the bema his appointed week, stuttering the Torah's textographs from memory, eyes touring his classmates' faces in the back row of the synagogue. He spied Joseph's expressionless gaze, not restless like the others'. They wanted to be elsewhere, out of there, smoking cigarettes behind the Temple, anything. But Joseph seemed to actually be elsewhere. Ruben squinted at him, trying to follow the boy's gaze to its other realm, until the Rabbi leaned forward and asked him in a whisper if he was lost.

\*\*\*

The death sure left a clue as to what everybody else's father did in all those colossal blocky buildings on the north side of town. Ruben at the dinner table, funeral fresh in memory: "So do you make missiles?"

A spoonful of soup halted between his father's bowl and mouth: "This," he said, "we've been over."

"Your father works on airplanes, honey," his mother said, the line expiring in her too-rote reading of it.

"Joseph's father told him he worked in space," Ruben said.

"We work in aeronautics."

"On missiles?"

"That," his father growled, a new defensive that made Ruben think he was

inching onto the truth, "is classified."

"Even from us?" Ruben asked, but his family examined their bowls.

Walking their Labrador through the unlit park across from their house, Ruben plied his brother: "Why didn't he just say that to begin with?"

"Because it makes you want to know more," David sighed, as if this were obvious as the moon presiding above to anyone but his dense sibling. "If you think he just works on airplane parts, that's nice and boring. Hell, missiles are more boring than 'classified'."

"Did you know?"

David gave a shoulder-jerk that said yes. "What'd you think he was doing?"

"Those missiles kill people."

"That's what they're supposed to do, Rube."

"Isn't that against Jewish law, too?"

His brother rolled his eyes toward a jaded heaven, but had no response for three days, when he charged into Ruben's room and countered, "It's a war."

"What is?"

"Desert Storm. You said the missiles killed people. Jews were warriors, too, once. King David. The Maccabees. They were ruthless. The Bible stories don't tell a tenth of it. You should read more."

So Ruben read more. He couldn't find any verse that justified missiles. Perhaps Joseph's father hadn't either. Perhaps that was the problem.

"So do you make missiles?" Ruben asked again.

His father turned to David with a look that communicated that this was supposed to have been taken care of.



David gave another shoulder-jerk that said he'd tried and what were you going to do with a stubborn brat who wouldn't grow up. Their mother gave their father a glare that reminded him these were his genes on display right now so she hoped he was happy.

His father, finally, softer: "I help design laser guidance."

"What's that mean?"

"It's what helps a flying projectile locate its target."

"So you figure out the part of the missile that aims it."

"Right-ee-o."

"At people."

David: "Dad has over no control what anything's aimed at. Those decisions are made on the battlefield—"

"They drop leaflets," his father objected meekly. "Before they hit a target. To tell civilians to leave. They give warnings for people to get out."

"Do the people get out?"

"That's up to them."

"The enemy wants them to stay!" David's voice trembled as it summoned conviction. "They *want* casualties. They want to make us look like the bad guys."

"Is that why Joseph's dad killed himself?"

Their mother's spoon clanged into the porcelain as lowered her head against her hands. "I *warned* you about this," she told her husband through her palms.

"His note said he couldn't stand being responsible—"

His father: "What do you know about any note?"

"The kids at Temple said—"

David: "Don't listen to those bedwetters with their bullshit."

Their mother: "David! Mouth!"

"They said he left a note about seeing the missiles he'd made exploding on television."

Father's voice like a flat tire: "Joseph's dad killed himself because he got fired because he was a drunk."

"Harold!"

"You want to know the truth, there it is. Nothing classified. I'm sorry if that ruins whatever notion you had in that noggin of yours—"

"Harold, enough." Their mother yanked the half-empty bowls, her mother's china, salvaged from Poland. "A terrible tragedy," she spat, "regardless of why it happened."

She hurried the stack into the kitchen; from behind the slammed door came sounds of water sloshing, dishes clattering. After a moment she returned: "And a terrible thing to have happened to his son. No older than you, Ruben. You should all remember him while you sit around arguing. Remember the boy who no longer has a father. What could it matter why it happened." The door rattled behind her.

Ruben's father sat back, his features drooping, the work-creased brow and cheeks and chin that always made his face seem like some complex box folded into specific use. He wouldn't meet his younger son's eyes. "They drop leaflets," he told his chest.

Next trip to the used book warehouse Ruben bought reference titles on missiles

and scoured them during recess. He consumed the A section of the *Los Angeles Times* left by his father each morning. The war, its mechanics, its tales, made less sense, not more. It admitted no author but boasted countless executors, none able to explain why they did what they did.

*I am sorry for the pain I have caused,* Joseph's father's note supposedly read. *I cannot cause any more.*

Years later Ruben would concede these words could very well have been written by a man just dismissed from a high-stakes job thanks to his boozing, speaking of the family he'd squandered. But at the moment they sounded like brute testimony. Ruben wouldn't read the word *nobility* for another few months, but its idea drilled namelessly down his marrow.

\*\*\*

Every week after services Ruben failed to insinuate himself into the group of boys who a couple years earlier had played tag around the courtyard but who now exited slyly from the milling families loading plates of bagels and spread, and converged in a depression behind the Temple, where the couple who'd learn to roll cigarettes dispersed their handiwork. They tolerated Ruben because parents and teachers and possibly a Rabbi would eventually intervene if they didn't. This compromise in no way kept them from bumping Ruben's shoulder a little too hard as they passed, or turning their backs as they smoked so

that their growing bodies excluded him.

But none knew what to say to Joseph. His brown hair curled in a unsettling echo of his father's that preserved the latter's death, as if he were standing in his grave flinging each clodful of earth back, but that blank gaze denied any clue as to what he was feeling, or hoped to feel, or wanted respite from feeling. The boys did something that seemed like ignoring him but was in fact the opposite, invoking Joseph's presence by refusing to do so, the way people acknowledge a puddle by stepping over it. Joseph in turn soundlessly excused himself as if in apology for the chill that had shivered through their smoking sessions. As he backed further from the circle, Ruben inched closer in, until the two found themselves standing beside each other on Saturday mornings, briefly equal in their passing.

Ruben longed to apologize to Joseph for his father, to ask about the note he'd supposedly left, to hear of how he'd appeared in the days approaching the act, morose, maybe, guilt-crippled—or, Ruben wondered, calm, even spine-straightened by his decision. He was caught a couple times staring at Joseph in what he believed was fascination. "Eyes down, queer!" he was told by one of the others. But in the moments it took Ruben to seethe and then obey the directive, he discerned no change in the face of the dead man's son, no sign he'd heard a sound, as if Joseph had been smacked clear out of their mean world into a realm of beyondness that Ruben had, until then, believed existed only in his imagination.

His Bar Mitzvah day on the bema, having recited the painstakingly-inked symbols he could somewhat decipher but not at all comprehend, Ruben gratefully resumed in his native tongue his interpretation of Judah's speech to his brother in Egypt. "Judah's offer to become a slave is a reversal of the slavery he first sold his brother into," he read from the speech he'd spent weeks typing on his father's home computer, their early printer rat-a-tatting with each new draft. "But Judah doesn't see it as poetic justice. He instead seems happy to be part of his brother's story again. To him this is worth his loss of freedom. What can we learn from this?"

In the back row his classmates swayed, one nudging the next's shoulder into a pew-long wave, their sign to each week's reader the service had gone on more than long enough.

"You ever got Bar Mitzvahed again," said Ben, unofficial leader, tobacco flaking from the crinkled paper as he presented the post-service totem to Ruben, "cherry-on-top, do the short version."

On Saturday mornings the appointed boy, duties concluded and studies complete, led the valedictory smoke; even Ruben was so honored. Behind the Temple rose an ivy-tangled embankment leading up to a bluff, concealing their ritual in the concrete strip between. Amid this privacy they encircled Ruben. Fearing some sort of trap, he accepted the amateur cigarette with hesitation, eyeing Ben with the mistrust that enticed the boys to bully him to begin with.

"You gonna stare at it or smoke it?"

"It's just a cigarette, Rubey."

"Maybe he thinks it's a dick."

"What can we learn from this?"

That got some titters.

"Seriously. You're the only one who thinks you actually have to give a speech."

"Like, say three fucking things about your portion and then let your people go."

"Oh, now he's upset."

"What can we learn from this?"

"Hold still, Rubey. Here comes the airplane."

Ruben clenched the cigarette between his front teeth and tried to aim its end into the flame held flickering before him. He wavered, seemed to move left as the fire danced right—"come on, Rubey, it ain't a boy"—but at last the thing was lit. Ruben inhaled. An introductory spark warned the back of his throat. Then agony. Hot dry vapor scorched down his esophagus then as quickly raged back up. He cough-spat, sending the cigarette flying, and doubling over, feeling as though he was going to cough up his throat itself. Ruben tried to will himself to stop hacking. But each spasm kicked the next, a persistent whistle-chopping noise, until even he was sick of the sound of his weakness.

"What can we learn from this?" one said to a jangle of laughter that seemed the ceremony's finale.

Still staring at his knees Ruben saw in his peripherals pairs of slacks amble away. He usually let the others go ahead about twenty paces before following, so that to his mother and all else he would appear part of the group without provoking the boys by making them think

he actually presumed that he was.

But this week Joseph remained. He stood staring at the middle distance, roughly where the boys were exiting, as if from behind a pane. Forgetting the previous scoldings, Ruben looked once more at the boy in wonder. He'd never been alone with him.

"I'm sorry—" Ruben croaked, and coughed again. "I'm sorry about your dad."

Ruben put his hand on Joseph's upper back, just above the rise of his shoulder blade. He felt Joseph initially move to shake him off but then as quickly relent, arching into Ruben's touch and resting there. Ruben kept his hand flat, not shaping against the mold of the other boy's body, not caressing it, just supporting it. Joseph's eyes were closed. Ruben felt if he let go Joseph would fall, that Joseph knew this, that they'd passed this understanding back and forth through their skin like an electrical current.

"Great, the faggots are multiplying," came Ben's voice from the top of the incline.

That was the sign for Ruben to remove his hand. He didn't. Joseph awoke to his touch with a start, his face screwing up in angry alarm at having been pulled back from his private dimension. The next thing Ruben felt was the dead man's son's fist smashing into his stomach.

\*\*\*

"We're at war," a breathless David told Ruben the cloud-dark January afternoon it was declared. Ruben was

dumbstruck as he exited his middle school, not at the announcement, but at the sight of his brother; David had not once met Ruben on his way home, though his mother constantly nagged him to do so.

Now Ruben hustled to keep pace with his brother's long legs. David had been a sprinter before quitting the team after some nastiness with the coach, then a debater until stomping out over demerits for becoming too angry during the competitions. "Too angry!" he cried as he stormed down the street ahead of his family, as if he'd heard a blaring siren they'd all missed. "It's *debating*."

Freed from those bridles his bothersome energy focused on his little brother for the first sustained period in Ruben's nascent life. A license and access to the family minivan meant he could zoom them to anti-war demonstrations and lectures proliferating in second-hand bookstores and college halls across the city. Ruben hadn't considered the war as anything other than some faraway injustice, abstracted by distance. But his brother was an evangelist: up and down the I-5 and 605 and 110 each weekend, David smacking the steering wheel with each under-considered point about SCUD missiles and force depletion and oil fields, closened the conflict, until they were fighting it themselves, their trips missions.

David himself had been converted at a lecture to which an older friend of his had brought him; that friend had dropped out of school a week later and was eventually rescued by his parents in



some unlicensed Berkeley den. But David left the speech clutching a signed copy of *War As a Virus*, by a biology professor who'd middle-fingered her tenured job and turned pacifist organizer. For months David was not seen without the self-published paperback, split open and raised to his face as if he were trying to dunk himself into its arguments, or dangling by his side, title angled out at automatons in provocation. The author saw society as an organism, David explained to his family, to his friends, to his teachers. It couldn't hurt one part of itself, say on the Iraq-Kuwait border, without falling sick elsewhere, that just as a body battling injury in one limb becomes susceptible to other ailments, so would even a mighty empire in martial ecstasy burden its immune system until it could succumb to a single puny germ. *War comes home*, warned the former professor in the introduction. *Only fools believe it heeds the lines of the battlefield.*

David at the dinner table: "Only fools—"

"This," their father sighed, "we've heard. Many, many times now."

"I don't understand how—how—*normal* everyone can be," David stuttered in the dark living room as the news streamed night-vision footage of missiles landing in bright winks. In the television's green glow he rummaged through pages of *War As a Virus* until spotting the term it had recently supplied him. "Complacent!" he told Ruben. "Do they not see this shit exploding on TV? Do they really think we can blow things up and it just won't affect us?"

David considered photocopying the tract and leaving his DIY editions around town, or super-gluing its pages to lockers at his high school, or printing bumper stickers and sticking them on the cars in their school's faculty lot. There had to be a way to make everyone listen.

That satisfying rattle of spray paint. WAR COMES HOME David scrawled upon the contractor's white brick outer wall, right where the employees entered. Ruben was the lookout, unnecessary; the war profiteers snoozed in their blood-houses while the two brothers worked. In the minivan's rearview they admired the black message smeared across the pristine wall, unignorable. David rolled down the drivers' side window, hooted into the Pacific breeze; Ruben copied him, the loudest he'd ever been, and, as he replayed the incident again and again in his bed with a growing sense of pride, the happiest.

Surveillance footage gave them up the next day. Their father exploded into the house, hands gripping the sides of his rigid temples; their mother sat stunned on the edge of the couch, staring out the sliding glass door into the backyard as if spotting a prowler. Once the perpetrators were determined to be an employee's sons the contractor was able to wave the police off; their father insisted on reimbursing the paint job. Ruben was grounded for six months, a pointless sentence as he just read in his room when not under house arrest anyway.

The real punishment befell David: re-conversion. He disappeared with their dad for a weekend, some solemn





pilgrimage never detailed. Whatever combination of wisdom and warning his father imparted burrowed into David's core. The angst that had first made him fastest sprinter on the squad that stymied him and fiercest debater on the team that wasted him now reemerged as a jittery piety. He began attending services not just on Saturday mornings but on Wednesday and Friday nights; sheets of paper bearing weekly Talmud readings turned up on the kitchen counter or above the toilet. He huffed at the above-knee skirts worn by girls he would have ogled weeks before. And he started to invoke the brutality of the Maccabees, not the patient heroes of the holiday tale but the guerilla warriors of history. The more David spoke of them, striking the dinner table with each point, the less he spoke to Ruben. His tone with his brother became a condescending glaze Ruben grew to despise.

But the three dark dripping words had remained long enough on their canvas for Joseph's father to have seen them as he passed through the gates the next morning. He was found by his son in the garage eight Wednesday afternoons later. "Joseph was supposed to be at soccer practice," Ruben's mother told the boys tearfully. "They don't believe Paul meant for Joseph to find him. Lord, I pray they're right."

Ruben snuck into David's room that night. "Do you think what we—"

"Shut the fuck up."

But Ruben couldn't stop spiraling round the loop of events that began with missiles and shot abroad to explosions and

reappeared to their spray paint which then invaded the mind of Joseph's father whose death returned to Ruben in the collision of his son's fist into the flesh of his stomach. It would keep going and going unless somebody stopped it. Ruben took responsibility.

His mother came into the garage to start a load of laundry—not how Ruben had intended it, as Joseph's father had mis-planned his own discovery. Ruben was floating away in the gas-filled weightlessness of the minivan, a soft immigration to the other world promised in Joseph's vacant and untroubled stare. His mother's wail yanked him back. He was babbling about missiles as she pulled his limp body from the passenger seat. "Your idiot father," she sobbed, her hands grasping at his armpits, finding purchase in his t-shirt's coarse cotton. "I *warned* him." She dragged him by the fabric through the doorway of the tool-cluttered garage into the open air. Ruben gulped blessed oxygen. A sweater became a pillow between his skull and the stone walkway. In the kitchen his mother frantically dialed 9-1-1 and then her husband, pulling the phone as far as the white coiled just cord would allow, not far enough to return outside, enough to watch Ruben through the window, his very sight inciting and re-inciting her wail so that on the other line his father thought she was the one desperate for help.

He arrived after the medics. Ruben's head by then was free of its disorientation. Sitting on the back metal bumper of the ambulance, legs dangling almost

playfully, he looked down his chest and told his father he was sorry. “For what?” the man begged, on his knees before his son, “my God, Ruben, for what?”

\*\*\*

The war ended. All those painstakingly-designed missiles that had helped create the peace were rendered suddenly irrelevant by it, and round after round of layoffs struck the defense contractors. By then Ruben’s dad was driving ninety minutes each way to a job at a calculator manufacturer out in the valley. He returned home joking that what he did was classified. He was the only one who found this funny. Still he repeated the line every evening like an offering, eyeing his son for the slightest indication of a grin, an eye-roll, anything that would let him off the hook.

\*\*\*

“I don’t want to go anymore,” Ruben said on the drive home that afternoon, stomach still aching from Joseph’s punch.

His father signed as if Ruben had snuck into the minivan a thousand burdens. “One wants to be a Rabbi, the other won’t go at all,” he told the windshield.

David assumed authority. “You can’t just not go,” he said to Ruben without looking at him, addressing the specific lesson for the benefit of the congregation. “You’re too young to just decide you don’t need a religious education. You don’t even know what you’re rejecting yet! At least find out enough about it before just declaring—”

They fought on, Ruben versus David, Ruben against his father, his mother at his father, until Ruben was rescued from a hazy garage babbling about missiles. A doctor assured them a poor job of blocking the exhaust meant he’d never gotten close to death, though good thing for that hyperactive brain of his he’d been found when he was. His mother didn’t speak to his father for weeks; a nasty quietness seeped into their interactions, curt and savage hisses; when Ruben left for college they said goodbye to him from different parts of the house, unsure of what would maintain their division once he was gone.

Joseph’s face never stopped appearing every time Ruben closed his eyes. He no longer saw the slightly scrunched features of the boy he’d known for years, nor that listless gaze in the back row of the synagogue, but the confused, wounded scowl, like an animal kicked out of sleep, after he’d dropped Ruben to the ground. Peering up, Ruben saw the grimace beneath the wavy brown hair that still recalled his dad. Ruben suspected he was beholding the anguish that had swept across his father’s face when the consequence of his weapons struck him, as he’d sat in the garage that Wednesday afternoon, thinking of the people he’d killed, his slow exit versus their many quick ones, his with the privilege of choice, he and his victims unequal even in their final moments.

But the man hadn’t been thinking of them at all. Lying in his unlit dorm room Ruben agonized over the supposed suicide note like liturgy. *I am sorry for the*

*pain I have caused, I cannot cause any more* did not refer to missiles, he was forced to admit to the darkness that seemed to mock him for ever imagining such a connection. He read Freud sophomore year and concluded with embarrassment that there was something womb-like about the gaseous retreat, the slipping into the soft dimension both he and Joseph's father had both experienced. So much for nobility.

Ruben didn't get his first boyfriend until after college; in a one-room loft in thousands of miles from the South Bay they smoked hash and lay naked in a twin bed discoursing on life philosophies; Ruben proclaimed the world had no author but a thousand executors, none who could testify to any god real or conjured why they did what they did. And when he and his boyfriend held each other, Ruben's hand occasionally rested flat on his back, just as it had once bolstered Joseph; and when his partner, sensing him tremble, asked what was wrong, Ruben again felt a gnawing shame at his weakness. "Nothing," he lied. He let his hand go slack against the other man's skin, his palm now finding every curve of muscle and ridge of bone, the body responding how Joseph's had, for just a second, before its rebellion. Ruben allowed himself to be pulled into a body-long embrace. Amazing how one little untruth brought such relief.

They drop leaflets, his father had pled at the dinner table in a sag of defeat. Ruben knew at last why he did so. These lines, these tiny ignoble excuses, each were offerings to the next moment and the next and the next: let us pass.



## *Her Kind*

Equal. Mute. Contained. A tunnel.

Life is a tunnel. Two holes, at the two extremities. They call them morning, night.

Two holes: you get out of the first one, crawl down the ladder. Those rungs are kind of shaky, too wide. You are afraid you'd slip in between. You could. You have lost enough weight.

You could even squeeze behind the drywall, in the tiny space left between it and the concrete. You have been thinking about it. Did you? When your son's stuffed animal fell. You have spent hours fishing for the toy: why? Did you have all that time to waste? Were you seeking some perverse satisfaction? You have fished the toy with a hooked rod, after having relentlessly probed depth and darkness. It wasn't needed. You know that, do you?

Life is a tunnel and that is reassuring. You only have to squeeze out of a hole, then crawl till the next hole, that will bring you back to the first hole – though it isn't the same, properly speaking. It is still number one – just another number one. I mean: there is this uncountable series of ones and twos, like in square dance. Exactly. You are familiar with the concept: quite a simple one. Square dancing: a long row of couples. Very, very long: a bunch of people, all different, so to speak. Diverse, so to

speak. And the couples are numbered as follows: one, two, one, two, one, two. Either you are a one, or a two. Then, at some point, the ones become twos and vice versa.

Does it happen with night and day? It could. Meaning – there's increasing smoothness in their alternating. Homologation. If you crawl lowly, evenly, head down – and perfectly mute – in the end night and day truly resemble each other. I promise.

Now don't look around. Look at the task. Focus on your task, stay with it. When you are about to finish think about the next one, without leaving a gap. Pay attention: I know you're fond of interstices. You like squeezing in. Crawling, coiling, hiding in.

In your bed, for instance. Bed is an interstice. You like squeezing in it, do you? And dream. Tell me, though. What can you possibly dream of?

\*\*\*

There is a pole. Old style. A telegraph pole, do you remember those? Not a phone tower, no. A brown telegraph pole, made of wood. Those have personality. All around, the landscape is desolate. I don't mind: who cares about the landscape? The sky is afire: it must be sunset, but I'm not truly aware of time,

and it doesn't matter. It doesn't because I am tied, here: my foot shackled to the pole – though the chain is long enough. Very long, in fact. When you're chained it doesn't matter what time it is. You can't switch to the next activity, you can't progress...

My activity is repetitive, but intense. I run forward, to the end of the line: the end of the chain, I mean. When the chain stops me, I turn around. I rest my back against the wooden pole: it is wider than me, just enough. A good rest – of varied duration: as I was saying, time doesn't matter. When I'm rested, I start over.

Forward, obviously, is everywhere. All is ahead of me, but the pole. The loop drawn by the chain around the wood is loose enough: it easily slips around. I run at three hundred and sixty degrees, with complete freedom of perspective. I have traced all possible radiuses to this circumference. Then I have started again, randomly. Believe me: there's no end to this task.

There is joy in my doing. My body exults in the effort. Speed exhilarates me, and I'm growing faster and faster. I've the feeling my muscles get stronger by the hour. The minute? I have no clue. I don't know about time: it has no relevance. But speed does, I'm going faster and faster. You see: I thrust myself forward, entirely – no reserve at all. It is dazzling, extreme. I can only do this because I'm attached... You should try: there's no risk whatsoever, no fear. At the end of the run, when I'm about to stop dead – yanked back – I slightly lift from the ground. I swear: it started

happening at a certain point. Now it never fails. At the very end, with the last step or two, I am lifted, suspended for a fraction of breath, an inhalation. This is what I look for, three hundred and sixty degrees around. This is what I live for. Now, leave me alone.

\*\*\*

Wake up. You have been turning and tossing in your bed. You have been moaning. You are drenched in sweat. I'm afraid you got a bug. Take your temperature. You should stay in bed, today: call work, say you are sick. Why don't you? Why don't you take a break, ever? See you tonight.

\*\*\*

Life has narrowed down to a tunnel – made of regular segments. I like the regularity. The predictability. This is all I can handle: a segment, a piece of tube. I don't mind the material. It could be plastic – one of my child's toys. A toy: that is fine with me.

I don't need diversions: they only confuse me, hindering my progression. They make me vacillate. I like snug and narrow – more than all, linear.

I don't eat more than necessary. It distracts me. Now, less and less is necessary. I know: it's the effect of repetition. Habit, someone would say. The less I eat, the less I need – and that helps the linearity – that is paramount, as you can guess. Leading me through the tunnel.

Equal segments. Contained. Mute.



Now you ask if there is an end to the tunnel. Why should there be? What should I expect at the end? A wide expanse? Freedom?

You mean borderless chaos. You mean the sky. I wasn't made for the sky.

The less you eat, the more your bones become brittle. And the more they break. Small bones break very easily: those with the width of twigs – fingers, toes, ribs. Ribs can break spontaneously: with a cough, a laugh, a brisk motion. I don't laugh. Sometimes I move briskly. Recently I'm coughing more and more. I am breaking lots of ribs. They hurt – moderately – then they heal. Spontaneously. I'm not in control of my ribs.

There's a sense of exhilaration when they break. For a minute (is it so?) I am confused. I don't know what happened. There's a snap, and a sense of humiliation. Then I enjoy it. The suspension. The looseness. The small gap: that hint of a way out.

My ribcage has broken all over – only, not at the same time. It has broken, I could say, at three hundred and sixty degrees. As long as I'm so thin, so ethereal, it will keep breaking. Could I breathe more easily, through this loosened cage? Will it end up bursting, exploding? I dream about it, in those segments I call nights.

But you see, I am not a bird, wasn't made that. Will not become one, not in this life.

In this life, I crawl. And I dream.

[Previously published in *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, Issue 7]

# Poetry



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## LOGGERHEAD TURTLE JAW

I gave my first blowjob with braces. The guy must have really trusted me, really believed that I wouldn't cut him up. And I guess I trusted him, too. When he came in my mouth he would tap on my head with two thick fingers. I'd spit it into my orange juice on the counter.

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The Loggerhead Turtle uses her muscular head and powerful jaw to crush the shells of Queen Conch. She doesn't gag on spiny lobsters, doesn't have to deep throat a hard-shelled invertebrate to get to the sweet, soft meat. And I have a Temporomandibular Joint Disorder. My jaw locks now. The doctor says it's stress, that I clench in my sleep. Of course I do. Of course my mouth shuts hard when I cannot protect myself. On the morning that I woke up unable to close my mouth I thought about men. Most of the men I have been with would take me back now that I am unable to bite down.

## GIANT SQUID AND GENTLE MEN

There's something about a gentle man.  
His hands. Maybe  
it's his hands. They're almost always callused  
over, large. And I want to watch  
these gentle men carve wood  
into intricate animal shapes.  
Animals with tentacles.

When gentle men bleed  
from their fingers they suck  
on them until the taste of iron is so deep  
on their tongues it makes them see new  
colors. Reds so bruised they turn black.

And when a gentle man touches me  
I feel tender. Not like raw chicken thigh,  
more like giant squid. That's what he carves.

And when a gentle man slaps my ass  
it realigns my sacrum.  
I can walk again.

It's common to find circular scars  
from the giant squid's suckers on the heads  
of their prey. When I look at my body  
after a gentle man leaves me  
I see the circles,  
what he left behind.

# ❁ Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

## SYSTEM

*Inspired by Really System's editor Patrick William's poetry  
prompt generator at Found Poetry Review, April 2016.*

The despondent of point A must travel by train and circumnavigate smiles

to Cornwall train depot at point B  
At no time must despondent stop or eat or change

personalities  
the mode of dress is always raining  
point B in Cornwall must wear a gray fedora over a swimming cap  
and carry

a large s a n d w I c h  
the number 18 clearly visible

outside the right hip parka pocket

hand cuffs, Orvis fishing flies, all our prayer hands are  
held with zip ties after 1958: the electrical company Thomas  
and Bettsnever saw it coming

Our best security system is the canary flies at midnight

point A despondent must D  
R  
O  
P

the contents of the package



Like nuclear families,  
the package is never where it is supposed to be

Point A despondent cannot carry an error around like a dirty syringe reach ING  
STRETCH I N G  
into the ether  
never come home no home to come home to

point B contact

say *how is the weather?*  
the answer is *fair, always fair.*

## ❁ *Jahan Khajavi*

I'm not a fairy  
—that was my late grandmother,  
the hairiest one.

And I'm not a queen  
—that was my great grandmother,  
the scariest one.

I'm not the poet  
—that old faggot died  
seven-hundred years ago.

I don't read these lines  
; they're read to me  
by the young and laziest one.

His heart's a hard thing  
pressed against soft things  
between his tongue and his taint.

His magical brain  
thinks it can read minds  
and mine's the easiest one.

If I wait for him to leave  
before I jerk off,  
I will never cum.

In this k-hole of desire  
my bed becomes  
the emptiest one.

He doesn't serve me  
; I do all the pouring  
from a bird-shaped ewer.

He reads the poet  
and the poet reads me  
like the filthiest one.

“Jahan, you’re no bard,” he says,  
“you just don the drag  
and mop others’ mots.

You don’t understand  
the word’s cocksucking beauty  
—the sexiest one.”

We don't go to work—  
in fact, we refuse to work  
each year on May Day;  
but we're here on time  
the last Friday of every month,  
because that's payday.

When mother was young  
she could have been a queen,  
but she married father.  
Her hair is feathered,  
but not nearly as feathered  
as in her heyday.

My girlfriends and I  
didn't like the art as much  
as the free buffet.  
We were wearing red,  
because we had worn purple  
our last "gay day".

Sunday I stayed home  
playing Joni Mitchell's "Blue"  
and thinking of you.  
On Monday evening  
I got drunk drinking away  
all of Monday day.

Stop in Saint Andrews'  
(whose name I have forsaken)  
to sit in the pews.  
I am not plastered  
and even saints don't cry blood  
for more than a day.

i find a pair of mens white battered shoes  
in voguing poses like triumphant arches strung

along the worn stone entrance steps that lead up to  
the old high school, after the final bell has rung.

then in the dark main hall make out like dalì clocks  
on lockers locks near penknifed cocks a pair of socks;

a fitted shirt into an empty classroom flung,  
a faded jacket from atop the flagpole hung.

then out into the wilderness of sport im pulled:  
a cherry red butt on the fresh cut diamond grass,

then past the moonlit bleachers toward the swimming pool  
where still in jeans a youth prepares to make a splash—

and, so, it must be that i am an optimist,  
because (to me) i see the boy as half-undressed.



## MOLE DEAD HARTZ HANS

Who went under, standing the andless, bending boaning the hopeless treas, on scrapping mombling aboat until a loanelly purrpoise sung a sun, a riddle allowed itself, again the sickledeleria sawckit felt bachwords gales of blissy cross the tombling electoric canals, grey drugdrugged drugdrugged, missed no more then twho worlds passed, torn back thend starring fromm behand so sillky swamming that a lifted place cud be so parfix. Be it so kind he could not fine her, no warthless dramming could sleep throagh her head without wormth, no worrywords could meat her, his gaze liquadaedus, his I's his Am's let out in long shighs of cataraxia.

But slit gaggles of bricksight fell inksaging, all ways foreward, then streaming oaflich of flies braught lispers to thears, hans growpin no longher, farwhichofways singed noone, fog of eifell, dew of wegon dragdragged bellowholed in low sky.

Pincture pressed, artefacted, a ball lanced down set reddie to roll lightishly summwereherr, lassed jawel of undusk's scent out towards the yeasturn northe as a torminabell pridgeone, may be a singey sawng, or more lapsley, the everwantonwandering peace of glass maid smoose, woulden, unmattereal by the ared lethemuses.



## PITCHSPOON

Vaporwav |

Used tube |

Ad derail |

+ Tongue |

Na Chic |

Crit IQ |

Now Esq |

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## VENDING MACHINE

Thoughtful, with an offering in my hands,  
I approached the vending machine  
That provides on demand cosmic freeze-dried drinks

I was spinning the coin around in my hands  
Like the sphere of thought spins  
In a burlesque circus of dwarfs

Increasingly swifter, increasingly faster  
You perceive the Good and also the Evil  
In this swirling scene human animals  
Are interpreted as support and obstacle

The sphere-of-thought coin slipped to the ground  
It came to rest on the filthy damp soil  
And while I pick it up embarrassed  
Unwinding with my hands the moldy  
Bed in the mud of the morass  
I wound myself and flow red

What a purgatory

It reassures me the knowledge I tell myself  
That nothing adheres to nothing (more vacuum than matter)  
But doesn't comfort the passing brainwave  
That it is not a distant kin of the human,  
This obscure muddy morass

A wave from the shiver of cold pleasure  
Shakes my bone wings  
I need a purgative  
What better than freeze-dried coffee?

Ripped out towards the sky  
I insert in the designated slot  
The coin already deep-rooted on the  
bottom

## MACCHINETTA AUTOMATICA

Meditabondo con un obolo fra le mani  
Mi appropinquavo alla macchinetta automatica  
Che distribuisce a richiesta liofilizzati cosmici

La moneta la rigiravo fra le mani  
Come gira la sfera del pensiero  
In un burlesco circo di nani

Sempre più veloce sempre più rapido  
Percepisci i Beni e anche i Mali  
In questa scena vorticante animali  
Umani interpretati come sostegno e impedimento

Mi scivolò a terra la moneta sfera del pensiero  
Si fermò sulla zozza terra umida  
E mentre imbarazzato la raccolgo  
Svolgendo con le mani il fondo  
Stantio nel fango del pantano  
Mi ferisco e di rosso sgorgo

Che purgatorio

Mi rincuora la consapevolezza che mi dico  
Che niente aderisce a niente (più vuoto che materia)  
Ma non rincuora la fulminea pensata  
Che non è lontano parente dell'umano  
Quest'oscuro e melmoso pantano

Un'onda da brivido di freddo piacere  
Mi scuote le ali d'ossa  
Necessito di una purga  
Che meglio di questo liofilizzato caffè?

Strappata verso il cielo la moneta  
Che si era già radicata sul fondo  
La inserisco nell'apposita fessura

## COURTSHIPS

You were there  
available for anyone  
looking out the window  
with your back jutting out

You offered everyone  
two-or-so spherical rotundities

Even I approached you and  
discovered everyone was handing out or  
gifting you with vestments or small gowns  
But only a few (rare)  
dresses for the parties  
that take place  
in their minds' eyes  
and disturb them  
at the sight of all these  
countless spheres

Now almost all of them are dead

But you also spoke unknown languages  
sometimes resembling the origins of eras

You often looked  
worn and weary  
tired

Even I tried to burnish you  
new again  
I found you a dress  
to cover  
your belly with no navel  
and your breasts with no nipples  
Some gloves  
for your hands with no nails  
A mask for a face  
with neither lips nor eyes



## CORTEGGIAMENTI

Eri lì  
a disposizione di tutti  
affacciata a una finestra  
con le terga all'appizzo

A tutti avevi da offrire  
due o anche più sferiche rotondità

Anche io ti avvicinai e  
scoprii che tutti ti regalavano  
o ti passavano vestiti e o abitini  
Ma solo alcuni (rari)  
bei completi per le feste  
che si svolgono  
nelle menti delle teste loro  
e le sconvolgono  
alla vista di tutte queste  
innumerevoli sfere

Adesso sono morti quasi tutti

Ma tu parlavi pure lingue sconosciute  
assomiglianti talvolta alle origini delle ere

Spesso sembravi  
consunta e lassa  
stanca

Anche io mi tentai di lustrarti  
di nuovo a nuovo  
Ti trovai un completo  
per nascondere  
la tua pancia senza ombelico  
e il tuo seno senza capezzoli  
Dei guanti  
per le tue mani senza unghie  
Una maschera per un viso  
senza labbra né occhi

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The banquet the day before, she could list it all – the spicy grilled shrimp on corn crisp, beef tenderloin and bleu cheese wonton, vanilla roasted pears with goat cheese spread, the lemon basmati rice, the assortment of pineapple, cantaloupe, grapes, strawberries and honeydew with yogurt dip – when plunging her wrists in the tub. Call it *post traumatic eating disorder*.

Still, rays of light in the corridor – bathroom's door is open. Tracks of electromagnetic spectrum in floating dust – sunny outside. She stretches her leg to reach it – the outside. But she feels safe – inside. Dismissed agenda. Planned entropy. She sinks more into the water declaring a *coup d'état* to her memories.

# Interviews & Reviews



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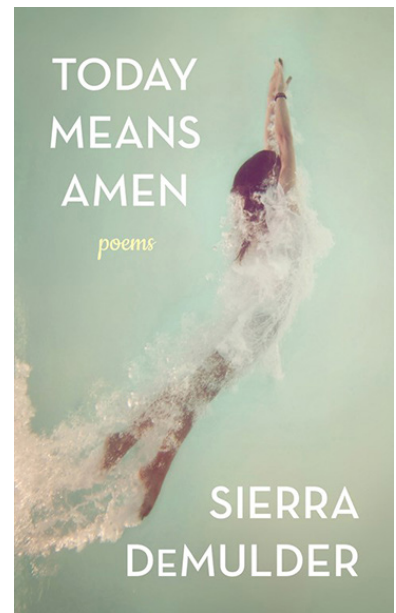
DANIEL ROY CONNELLY



# *A Review of Today Means Amen*

## *by Sierra DeMulder*

Early in Sierra DeMulder's 3<sup>rd</sup> full-length collection, 'Today Means Amen', the writer asks perhaps the fundamental question that drives this lengthy text: "[w]hat is it about / this family that draws us back to / the uninhabitable?" She spends five sections – each pamphlet length and perhaps in need of editing – motoring at sickening speed towards the fullness of personal despair, be it in depression – "I am not a problem to be solved... I am neither the mistake nor the punishment" – in love, at a stillborn child, at ageing parents in decline or sick siblings; in fact, in 'Seven Layers of Hell', the poet is confronted in a room – read stanza – by her most obdurate hatreds, including "every person / I ever forget fucking and the sound of their orgasm" and the crying "baby / we never had." DeMulder is a poet of the American performance tradition, though unusually, she looks handsome on the page, and is, as evidenced here, clearly unabashed by injudicious self-appraisal.



The ache for a child is an insistent *leitmotif* for DeMulder, with each child-rearing turn comes the realisation that the child is not, never will be, hers, as in 'Without': "There is a stage in early childhood development / when a baby realizes for the first time that / he is not, in fact, part of his mother's body." Elsewhere, the miscarried baby appears unexpectedly, "it just showed up om my doorstep" as the poem works towards its tragic end, in which "I've hoarded your name in my mouth for months." We also learn that "Queen Mary stopped bathing / after her first miscarriage...", which ties the author to an historic, aristocratic line of barrenness.

The unborn child hangs like a spectre over the meat of DeMulder's work. The insistent, obsessive inward turn towards childbirth continues in 'A Stranger Died In An Avalanche', whose protagonist's body is returned "into his mother's hands. His mother, / who is not a widow now but not // unlike one, the way childbirth // is a bodily vow."

In 'Without', DeMulder also shows an unorthodox propensity for conflating her lover with her mother figure: "It is problematic / to compare you – once my

lover – to // my mother. You, who startled the crows / of my heart. You are not my mother but / we did live inside each other for months.” “You who startled the crows of my heart” is a wonderful line, one that stands out all the more for the copia that surrounds it.

The only seeming lightness comes in poems such as ‘Facts Written From An Airplane’ which expounds that “thinking of someone else during sex / is a cardinal sin punishable by nothing” and ‘Ode To My Bottom Lip’, which has “carried my worst and my best poems / to the world...” But we then slip back to the tenebrous workings of the poet’s obsessive mind: “You have tasted the darkest parts of bedfellows, / blood and salt, and you / have hungered for both.” Though overwhelmed by the egregiousness of the world DeMulder is prepared to fight back with hammer and scalpel.

The experience of reading 100 pages of tortured insight is neither difficult nor enjoyable. What is absent is a countervailing humour, a measure of balance of life’s inequable fancies. There came a point when I wanted the poet to tell me a joke. But then the collection is not frivolous, and for its lack of lightness comes a dutifully heavy hammer to pound the sharpest of edges to her fraught emotional existence. Unusually for a performance poet, DeMulder eschews sentimentality for the kind of sharp laceration familiar to fans of Kim Addonizio. Through what admittedly sounds like a nightmare of personal misfortune, in ‘My Lover Found Me Weeping On The Couch’ she asks “is empathy just a pretty mask for privilege?” Though offering no answer, as a reader mine would be the opposite, that empathy exposes privilege, conjoins, not divides.

Even a raucous kitchen homecoming for Ted Hughes – most privileged of English poets – where he sees Plath chopping beets, leading to pounding sex, leaving Plath awake to hear “the endless procession, the pounding voice: stay go / stay go / stay go.” This is empathy without privilege, I think, resuscitating the departure metaphor often and variedly.

Cannily, the author fuses a four-line poem about her grandmother, who “writes on scrap paper, rips it up / into a thousand pieces, throws it away.” This leads to an unnamed poem whose simple words are spread across the page, as if indeed cut out. The substance, however, is jarring, like entering the room while DeMulder is mid-panic attack, recalling

“Once

my husband                      slammed

a thousand pieces

the screen door

the house              thousand shook.”



At such times, her work becomes a breathing pattern, a cry for company, a close-up shout at a wall.

Elsewhere, the writing is copious. Eighteen stanzas in 'For My Niece, Livia, Age 8', while a love letter to a child from the childless, is ample, if not overwritten. As ever self-conscious about the worth of her words, she avers "it's the poet who finds something thrilling about unapologetic sounds..." Many of DeMulder's sounds are symphonic, in harmony, of conscience and turned firmly towards a kind of self-therapy; but more discriminate editing would have dispelled the occasional din of language.

Ultimately, DeMulder reveals a canny self-critique, a coat of poetic armour in admitting her writing at times to be "not at all beautiful, nor poetic." She is wrong for many reasons, not least the grittiness with which she approaches her manifold vicissitudes. 'This Too, Is Not For You', the lack of self-confidence reappears, frustratingly. "Between 6 a.m. and awake, you dream / of your professor calmly explaining / how much she enjoys your poetry // while she slowly cuts off your finger... You wonder what makes you so attracted to rot." As a reviewer I am happier in the hands of poets who don't feel the call to publicly question themselves as part of their collection. Otherwise, they do me out of a job.



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## ✿ Contributors

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