

Vanishing Act - Jay Merill



Barbra's here for a visit. But I can't see her anywhere. The sky goes racing about my head. Me in the middle of a cloud. It makes me scream and the nurse comes in, says, 'you still sitting by that window?'

I try to talk about how the cloud is breaking up and I am falling. It's going to rain and then Barbra will get wet. She'll catch cold and I'll have to put her to bed. *Mum, she'll go, can I have a glass of water?* I say, *surely you've had enough.* Her hair is wet through. *Let me dry it.* I reach out. Barbra pulls away. She is sneezing.

'Get me a hankie please will you nurse?' I ask.

'You've got the box of tissues right by your bed,' the nurse informs me.

'It's raining,' I tell her. 'Barbra's caught a cold.'

'Where's Barbra then? I can't see her,' Nurse says, laughing. 'Your bed's all made up now and I've got you an extra pillow. Come away from the window and then you won't notice the rain.'

I look round the room and can't see Barbra either, so she must be hiding. The jasmine bush is where she likes to hide when the flowers are out as it smells so nice. I see the edge of her brown sandal sticking out so I know she's there, though there aren't any flowers at present. *Come back to bed,* I tell her. *It's very late now and you won't get up for school.* I fall out of the cloud and land with a crash onto the floor and Barbra laughs. She's a bad daughter. She doesn't care if I have a bump on my head.

'What you cryin for my dear? I told you the tissues are by the bed. Look, just where they always are.'

Tissues look like clouds when they're all screwed up into a ball, with creased up shady bits where the light doesn't reach. I hear a door slam somewhere, probably its Barbra coming in. She's in the kitchen and she'll be looking for her dinner but I haven't done it yet. *That you,*

Barbra? I call out. But she's not there. She must have gone out to play again. *Where are you?* I call through the window. She should stay indoors, because of the rain. It's got heavy now and she's already soaked. *She'll catch her death.* But she never listens to me, does she? Always been the same.

'Here you are Angie,' says Nurse, pulling a tissue out of the box and handing it to me. I'm not like Barbra, I remember to say *thank you*. I squeeze it up tight into a ball but when I open my hand it unfolds again. My head hurts and I can't stop crying. Then all at once I see Barbra over by the far wall. She just stands there giggling.

'Dear me, dear me,' the nurse goes. She slips the tissue out of my hand, but I don't want her to take it away from me because I need it. I am too hot and the tissue makes me cooler. The heat makes me shout. I have to let it out of me before I burn up to nothing. It's Barbra's fault for leaving the oven on. The roast we were going to have is all burnt up. Now there'll be nothing for dinner. I snatch the tissue back again. Why should I let Barbra have it? She doesn't deserve it after the way she's behaved. In a minute I'll have to send her to her room. To teach her a lesson. *Stop that*, I tell her. I shout the words very loud but Barbra doesn't seem to hear me. She's wayward that girl, and I dread to think where she'll end up. She just hears what she wants to hear and makes up the rest. *Look at that smoke!* I tell her. Barbra doesn't say a word and the nurse is taking me back to bed. I don't want her to be late for school, do I?

'Here,' Nurse says. She is wiping my eyes. 'No need to cry now, is there? Look, you're back in bed, and the rain's stopped. It's all fine. Let's put the TV on.'

'No,' I tell her. If I don't get to sleep now I won't hear the alarm in the morning. It wouldn't be the first time I've slept right through it. It rings so loud too.

'I don't want to be late,' I insist. Sometimes Nurse doesn't seem to understand me.

'Why, where you going?' she says, dabbing the tissue on my cheeks.

'Is it Saturday?' I ask her.

'Tomorrow is Saturday. Barbra's coming for a visit, remember?'

Saturday is when we go to market like one of the little piggies. I'm not sure which one it is but it must be one that cares about having the dinner ready. Nobody else does. I think it must be the first one because by the time you get to the third piggy there is roast beef to put on the table, and the one that stayed at home won't get any. And that's not fair. Because the one at home is probably doing all the work. Cooking and cleaning and looking after the kids. For years on end. For years and bloody years.

'Don't tell me that is fair,' I can't help saying.

'What's not fair?' Nurse asks me raising one eyebrow.

She's plumping up the pillows and I can't help noticing they look like clouds too. Perfectly white puffed out clouds this time. I know there have to be five piggies altogether because it's the same number as the toes on one foot. *Put that sandal on*, I shout out to Barbra. She'll only

catch cold again. I stare hard and see the edge of her brown sandal sticking out from the bush. Why is she always hiding? It's not a good sign, is it? There's something deceitful about that child.

'Look, the sun's come out,' Nurse is saying. 'It's nice now. Want to watch TV?'

She leans me back against the clouds. I hold onto the side of the bed. If I fell I could bang my head again. Then Barbra wouldn't be able to stop laughing. And all at once I see the girl lean forward, splitting her sides, a squeaking noise bursting out from her. *Stop that*, I call in my cross voice, but it makes no difference.

'What's that you say? Sit up nicely now and watch TV. It's nearly time for dinner.'

Now Barbra's gone back to being a baby. I am holding her tiny foot. She is wriggling, waiting for me to single out the big toe. I take the toe gently, say, *this little piggy went to market ...* 'Barbra squeals with delight.

'It's ok, you can relax,' Nurse is telling me. 'You don't need to hang on to the bed like that. You're quite safe Angie.'

I can't remember who Angie is and I look around the room: at the walls and the ceiling, and the back of the door where my dressing gown is hanging. But she is nowhere. Angie's hiding too I suspect. It's deceitful to hide when you come to think about it. A nasty way to carry on. Not at all funny. *Come out*, I say and I lean sideways, trying to look underneath the bed.

'What you doing that for?' I hear the nurse asking.

'I'm just looking for Angie, that's all.'

Now Nurse is pulling me back and putting something cold into my hands. I look at it.

There's a shiny handle with glass at the top— a round flat glass.

'Just look in the mirror,' I hear Nurse say. She guides my hand up to my face. 'What do you see now?' she's asking.

'A face,' I tell her.

'And who's face is it?' the nurse wants to know.

I stare at the forehead which has lines in it and at the crinkly grey hair which puffs out over the ears; feel myself going into a trancelike state.

'Well?' Nurse asks, tapping the mirror with her fingernail. The clicking sound brings me

'Is it Barbra?' I ask her, uncertain.

'No Darling,' Nurse is saying. 'Barbra's your daughter. You've got a bit confused. Barbra is visiting you tomorrow, isn't she? Have another guess.'

I look hard at the face. The eyes are dark and mysterious, at first they don't tell me a thing. Then I see everything clear as day. Why is the nurse showing me the mirror? I don't want to look at my own reflection. I've come to the last little toe. I wiggle it back and forth and the baby shrieks with laughter. Then I run my index finger up her side till I reach her armpit. I hear this voice very distinct saying, *and this little piggy ran wee wee wee wee, all the way home.* I think it's mine.

'Why has it gone all dark again?'

'It's only the time of year. April showers.'

'Well I'm fed up with the rain. I'm wet enough already.'

'I'm going to draw the curtains,' someone says.

They move across the room and pull them together with the cord. Whoever is doing this I do not recognise. She is wearing something blue. Matching trousers and top, like a tracksuit. It must be Barbra but where did she get that outfit? *Barbra, come over here and let me look at you,* I call across. I hear her giggle.

She's always giggling when I'm ticking her off and it makes me see red. *Stop that noise,* I tell her, *and listen to me. I'm supposed to be your mother; you're supposed to do what you're told.* Not that she ever does. She's my daughter but we don't see eye to eye. Hiding under that bush and with the rain coming. She, getting wet right through. Getting a bad cold then and next thing the cold turning to pneumonia. Had to go into hospital. I sat by the side of her bed and couldn't stop crying, I was so worried about her. She should never have gone out in that thunderstorm but it's not my fault. I looked for her everywhere. Didn't know where she was till I saw the corner of her sandaled toe. A doctor came over and patted my arm. She said, *don't worry Angie. Your little girl's going to be just fine.* Angie and Barbra in the hospital room. Who are these people? For a second I can't remember either of them.

'Be a good girl now and watch the TV. There's a nice show on with a lot of dancing and singing, you'll like that. It'll cheer you up,' Nurse says, going across to the door. I see she is wearing a tracksuit too.

'Now where are you going?' I ask her.

'I'm very busy,' she tells me. 'There's lots to do. Not long to go before it's time for dinner.'

It's so dark, it must be night time but we haven't sat down yet. *Eat up,* I say and I serve up the food and put the plates on the table and then I wash up the plates and dry them and put them away. It is all tidy, ready for the next morning, so nobody will be late. *Time to sleep now, isn't it?* Barbra says. She lies down and closes her eyes. *Have a nap then if you've come over tired. Just for a minute or two though.* Because I know if I let her sleep too much now she'll be awake all night and won't be able to get up for school. So after a bit I shake her arm.

When I look up Nurse is by the bed tidying the covers.

'Here's your meal,' she says, wheeling over the mobile table.

‘What are we having for dinner today?’ I ask.

‘Macaroni cheese. It’s what you said you wanted.’

‘Barbra likes roast beef you see.’

‘Yes alright. But that’s tomorrow,’ I hear Nurse saying.

‘But where is Barbra?’ I look round the room.

I wish I could put a stop to this vanishing act of hers. It makes me feel so helpless when she disappears like this.

About the Author

Jay is a Pushcart Prize nominee. She is the author of two short story collections – God of the Pigeons (Salt, 2010) and Astral Bodies (Salt, 2007) and has been nominated for the Frank O’Connor Award and Edge Hill Prize. Her story ‘As Birds Fly’ won the Salt Short Story Prize and is included in the ‘Salt Anthology of New Writing, 2013’ She is now working on a 3rd collection. Jay has an Award from Arts Council England and is the Writer in Residence at Women in Publishing. Her latest stories are forthcoming or recently published in 3 AM Magazine, Anomalous, Bunbury Review, The Casket of Fictional Delights, Crannog Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine, Matter Press, Minor Literature[s], Platform for Prose, The Galway Review, Litro, SmokeLong Quarterly, The Story Shack tNY Press and Wigleaf.

Image

by [Beth Maiden](#)

Yours, Always - Michael Wynne



1.

Because I'm thinking: you can't ignore me all these months and then reach out like that, as if only minutes have passed, like we're still in bed catching our breaths, or you're in the bath and I'm on the toilet and we're chatting about things we used to chat about—the war, hiking in the mountains, the way you'll let me do you like a girl. Will you be my girlfriend? Put on this dress, the white cotton summer dress with the green floral print, the kind of dress women wear in Paris, and oh my god do you look beautiful in that dress.

2.

Not a day goes by that I don't think of you. And by a day I mean an hour. Probably less.

3.

Making my way across London, torching whatever I can, digging talons into anything. I will leave this city before they chase me out. There's a limit to how much one can run around screaming love me, love me. It gets to the point where grief stops providing rich fodder for whatever. You've not seen me rage, have you? I'm a child in the eye of a tantrum. Come near me, motherfucker, and I'll annihilate you, and you won't be the first.

4.

Hold me.

5.

My Love, three months have passed. Winter's almost gone. My feet are cold in these slippers. Three months and—nothing. I can't risk asking the men about you and they don't mention you in their conversations, at least not while I'm in the room. Any questions I ask would give us away. The moon is a slither—a toenail clipping—just enough to illuminate this page for a few more seconds. I am yours, always.

6.

In the aftermath of your death—there, I said it—I went to the British Museum to sit and stare at the mummies; that's what you looked like, wrapped in a shroud, though not as colourful nor as rigid. I'd comfort myself with thoughts like: the Egyptians preserved their people the way we buried you, no coffin to conceal the body; no coffin to stall decomposition; no coffin to flaunt wealth. A bandaged corpse lowered into the ground by buff gravediggers in dirty white T-shirts ripped at the side to reveal taut skin.

7.

Are you following me? How did you know I was in the forest— how?—walking hand in hand with a ghost, and everyone who passed smiled and said hello. That's how it works when you're not wearing war paint, suddenly the world is green hills and clean paths and strips of wilderness that go on forever, and by forever I mean Highgate Woods, which—remember?— we didn't get to in the end because your leg was hurting and you were tired. You were waiting to hear what the cancer was doing inside you, if it was still there. To think: they can cut a chunk of flesh from your body and, with it, glean the disease. Just like that. But they didn't.

8.

When you hold me—my hair, my hand, my neck—you must pull and push, apply force. I can't bear the kind of touch that is ants on skin. If you slap my face, I'll be yours forever, but you'd better love me while you're doing it.

9.

It was a shock, you know, a shock to be walking home and see your letters pasted on trees and lamp-posts like photocopied pages for a missing cat. You might as well have graffitied them on mountaintops, written them in the sky with a plane. And then when I got home there was a note from you on the kitchen table to say you'd gone. I'm empty. Leaving has always been my thing. It's a trick I learnt as a baby; the stone heart of the unhuggable child. Imagine! Me? Unhuggable? I know, hey. WTF.

10.

And I said: “All afternoon, I'd been singing your name.”

11.

When the rain started it started and poured like the world was being erased, rewound, begun again (there was an old man called, etc). Ark and all. I couldn't reach the windows to close them and the water came in, wetting old photo albums, pictures of ancestors, the black and white stuff. I wasn't planning to tell you—never mind the albums; they're nothing to do with you—I wasn't planning to tell you how the water came into the house while I slept at the foot of the bed and washed itself against me, stretched itself along my sides, my flesh unfurling like lotus petals as the water trickled into my mouth, clear and glistening in the late evening light.

12.

Have I told you the story about the frog who swallowed the ocean? Well, this was the opposite.

13.

My days stack up like dominoes, waiting to topple, like //////////////, waiting to bring us all down. Let's go away together, just me and you in the wilderness. I'll have the log cabin and you can go off for days, walking, eating berries, hunting, and I'll write things to you like: now that the cherry blossoms have gone and the branches are hidden by leaves and at night it's warm enough to leave the window open, you'll creep into my room the way you used to. The path from the sill to my pillow is clear. The breeze will alert us. The cat will raise its head, shift gently so that its fur brushes against my belly. Did the men tell you how they made me leave, what they did to me at the edge of the garden in the cold? They were proud of their footprints in the snow, blood dripping from daggers, punctuation marks on silk all the way back to the house. Still, I am yours, always.

14.

I have ripped open the wound for you to press yourself against me. If you can't help me put a stop to the bleeding, well, then, we might as well go our separate ways, backs turned, pistols at our sides, forward, march, one and two and three and, until we've stepped over the horizon, me over mine and you over yours.

15.

Lying on the sofa is so confusing at the end of the day. I mean, at the end of the day (when you get home from work) lying like that on the sofa, together, touching—god, I love it when we're all melded together. You fit so well against me. Skinnier and skinnier so that you're like a slither, a film, cling film—*cling to me*—and I pull you against me so that anyone looking from the outside will think I've vanished and become as beautiful as you.

16.

Is that the way it always is: one person exposes more of themselves than the other? One holds back while the other chases. So yesterday, there I am, walking amongst strangers, more or less naked, and this guy, magnificent in that blond Christian kind of way, the way these people have of being perfect in the eyes of those of us—*me*—who've been transformed—*fucked*—by centuries of lithe Christ figures stabbed into the brains of my ancestors. This is what beauty looks like. So, yes, well, anyway, *him*... he kneels before me and lifts his arms to expose armpits and smiles up at me and says, *Smell that*. And I'm like, *I'd rather not*. And he's like: *I love that smell*. Up until then I thought I could ignore the stink because he was so magnificent. Sometimes we are chased away.

17.

And yes, wherever I go I'm looking for devotion. And by devotion I mean someone to devote myself to. But also the other. If you can't devote yourself to me, well, what's the point? Isn't life too short to be light-hearted? Some people ... some people are genuinely happy, aren't they? As in: *happy-go-lucky*; as in: *laid-back*. Is it humanly possible to be like that most of the time? I'm trying to figure out whether two people can offer themselves up as sacrifice in equal measure.

18.

You died in January. A horrible, slow death surrounded by, as they say, people who loved you. One man in particular had been with you for thirty years. This man spent the last months of your life cleaning and bathing and lifting and holding and whispering gently, in that beautiful house you lived in and where I'd come for dinner on Sundays and you'd be there with open arms, the table resplendent, and friends far more interesting than me. You and him the perfect couple. And where was I while he did all that devoting? I waited.

19.

Whisper in my ear: Thank you for not running away.

20.

In your letter on the table to say you were gone, you wrote: waiting has been like death, it has eaten at me from inside. I don't care for the sun, those long days and warm nights. Even sleep when it comes, and it comes so rarely, is not an escape. Waiting has been my gift to you; it's a gift I'm no longer willing to give. Come or not, I'll be gone. All I hear is noise, noise from everywhere, the tapping of crickets and cicadas, the scurrying of geckos on walls and mats, the chattering of women in the distance while they wash their clothes in the river. I can't silence the world. The only way out is death, and in death I will be yours. Always.

21.

Some weeks later, I planted strawberries in the ground where they'd buried you. The strawberries grew. And now, months later, the bushes are so wild I've had to uproot them and hunch here, surrounded by their leaves, plucking off the strawberries. I will place them in a large bowl, which I will bring to the men when I see them tonight and we will feast on the fruit that made its roots amongst the slats of your bony ribcage.

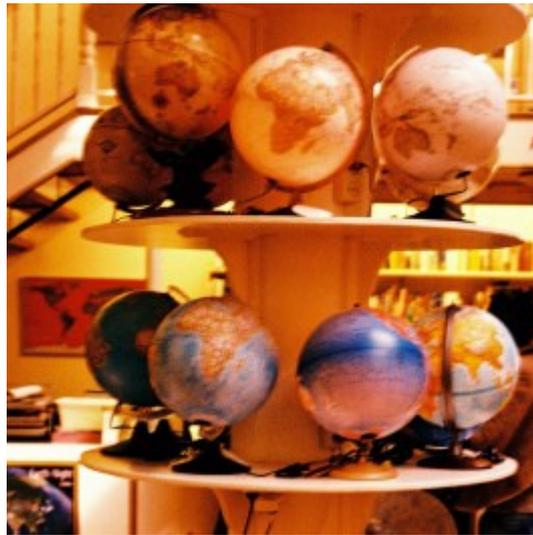
About the Author

Michael Wynne is a writer and illustrator. His works include *My Life in Masturbation*, *The Confessions of a Sex Addict, Part I*, and the forthcoming *The Bathhouse Hornbook*.

Image

by [Beth Maiden](#)

Horn Torus - A.S. Arthur



From: XXXXX XXX

Sent: 29 October 16:06
To: XXX XXXX

Subject: Seminars

Hi XXX XXXX ,

It's XXXXX XXX here from your Department office. I haven't been able to locate your attendance on either of the registers for your seminars on Thursday and Friday last week. As you know, official notice must be given for absences. Is there some reason you were unable to attend? You may come and speak to me in the department building any times between 09:00 and 17:00 on weekdays.

Many thanks,

XXXXX XXX

From: XXX XXXX
Sent: 01 November 03:47
To: XXXXX XXX

Subject: Re: Seminars

Sorry, I wasn't able to attend last week. Though my attendance had been slipping of late, on that cold October morning, I'd raised myself from bed to shave and shower early to attend my seminars. That time of day is one of the best, the air unspoiled by fume-spewing traffic known as the commute to work undertaken by office workers, manual labourers and all

others who need to be in the city at such an early hour. As I had so much time before my seminar, being up so early on that cold October morning, I decided to take the longer route, the one less taken to the university campus—whether longer or not I do not know, the campus is large, the object of debate as to which route is faster, depending on where one wishes to be. Without having timed the distance there and back, I usually took the route of my fellow students.

The route I chose to take on that cold October morning was chosen to avoid the majority of the fume-spewing traffic known as the commute to work. Instead, I followed a one-way street between a long, thin park functioning as a buffer zone between the aforementioned road and a row of houses built in a neo-fascist style. The houses echo aesthetics of post-WWII Nazi occupied Europe as might be imagined in some work of alternate-history fiction; the trees of the long, thin park coating the pavement with leaves, and various child-minders treading the ground, emerging from the houses built in the neo-fascist style, handling all manner of push-chairs, harnesses and other such contraptions.

Upon that road between the buffer of the long, thin park and the houses built in a neo-fascist style, my eye fell on a strange object in the gutter, the size of a child's beach-ball, but rather than spherical, the shape would be best described as that of a horn torus. As, on that cold October morning, I had so much time before my seminar, I stopped to examine this strange object, crossing the road to see it from a closer vantage point, when by chance or fate a car speeding the wrong way down the aforementioned one-way street (between the long, thin park and the row of houses) forced me to jump out of its way, landing on the horn torus. To my surprise, I did not land on the object proper but found myself falling in. All at once there was a loud, rushing sound in my ears and a searing pain above my right ocular orbit, and as I looked about, I continued to fall into what seemed to be infinite space. Falling faster into the horn torus, I found myself approaching a cloud of tiny clusters of light; super-clusters of galaxies, stars. As the searing pain above my right ocular orbit lessened, I understood that I was falling into a miniature horn torus replica universe of our own. I continued to fall into the miniature universe for years of subjective time, travelling at well beyond the natural physical speed of light. After who knows how long—for I had no way of measuring time—within the miniature horn torus replica universe, I spied the replica galaxy analogous to our own Milky Way, speeding past nebulae, stars, and globular clusters. It seemed my vector was carrying me to the direct equivalent of where I had fallen from.

My travelling vector within the miniature replica horn torus universe was so precise that as I fell from the sky, I noticed only too late that within the miniature universe there was another identical horn torus universe on the other side of the road. The searing pain above my right ocular orbit returned as I bridged the gap and began an intergalactic free-fall for a second time. After subjective millennia of time, I finally began my approach to the third Earth and the third miniature replica horn torus universe. This time I was prepared and managed to roll out of the way just in time to prevent myself falling through yet another. Having stalled my descent, I turned about face and began my ascent to the original universe, our universe, from which I had begun. It seemed to me that each miniature replica horn torus had nested within it another miniature, much in the manner of Russian Matryoshka dolls. I was so preoccupied with my ascent out of the nested universes, I overshot our own and found myself in a larger, outer horn torus. This was, however, to my advantage as when I was inside the horn torus universes of our own, time passed at an exponentially faster speed, and by overshooting into the replica horn torus universe above, my subjective experiential time had brought me back to the cold October morning on which I had begun.

At this point, on that cold October morning, as the searing pain above my right ocular orbit throbbed, standing between the buffer of the long, thin park and the houses built in a neo-fascist style, I had a realisation. The miniature horn torus replica universes were not separate, identical replicas nested within one another. The horrifying truth was that they were all one and the same, a Matryoshka doll both inside and encapsulating itself; the horn torus rotating through the nth dimension.

Attempting to discover if any others on the internet had stumbled across this horrifying truth, I found a series of videos on YouTube purporting to be state produced North-Korean propaganda. A closer examination revealed the majority of clips to be grainy footage from a variety of eras, of vaguely oriental looking soldiers on exercises set to militaristic, ominous and heavy-metal backing tracks. In many parts, what are clearly CGI flying saucers or computer generated concepts for impossible or implausible automated weapon systems are superimposed onto the background, and the videos themselves spliced with blurry home footage of a young blonde Caucasian woman wearing make-up that seems intentionally suggestive of Eastern Asian epicanthic folds. The owner of the account habitually uploads new videos and insults any commentators who question the veracity of the videos or the supremacy of North Korea, in badly broken English and nonsensical Korean characters.

Yours sincerely,

XXX XXXX

Visit infowars.com

From: XXXXX XXX
Sent: 03 November 09:17
To: XXX XXXX
Subject: Re: Seminars

Hi XXX XXXX ,

I will be in the office all of today, please come and see me at the earliest opportunity.

Thanks,

XXXXXX XXX

About the Author

A. S. Arthur put her biography in an email but it was eaten by the dog.

Image

by [Beth Maiden](#)

The Price - Ehud Sela



The TV flickers on. Grey, pale colors, anemic, ill. A horror movie on the flat plasmatic screen: splattered blood on the walls and evil walks out the door. I switch the channel, find soft porn: fake sensuality and bad acting. I switch again: a news channel where the anchors wait for disaster to strike, to justify their employment and constant chatter.

So many nights spent on the sofa. I can't sleep. Demons all around. If my eyelids close, they immediately begin their devastating task: floating restlessness to my cortex.

I walk to the kitchen and drink a cup of water. I stop in the bathroom to pee — it's happening too often. My cat wakes with a puzzled look, yawns and falls asleep again in an instant. What a lucky cat!

I have been lying on the sofa for three hours. It's 2am. I switch off the TV and pick up a book of poetry, an original: Edwin Muir, *The Labyrinth*. I can't concentrate. I stop reading.

Outside the wind picks up and the trees whisper to each other of the approaching storm. I see lightning in the distance deep within the darkness of the night. The Florida Everglades are buzzing with activity, a thunderstorm is just a matter of time.

For the last month it has been going on, these restless nights. I remember the sleep I used to have: smooth and consistent. But now my inward scenery has changed. Something is breaking in the trillions of wired miles of synapses inside my brain. I feel betrayed by my body.

Will I be able to fall asleep before my target of 4am? Will I wake up, startled at 7am as if I haven't slept? As if a train ran over me again and again?

I will not take sleeping pills. I refuse. They are a sign of defeat. I will find it within me to fall asleep. *You need to understand why*, I tell myself.

Yes, it happened again. 7am and I'm awake. I feel stricken as I fall asleep and beaten when I awake. The day progresses and things get worse. I'm short tempered. A chronic lack of sleep will turn you mad. There is a movie with Christian Bale. *The Machinist*. He withers away. I must not end up like that.

Bags around my eyes. I look old. So much damage in such a short time. I'm back home after a crowded ride in the subway. I dozed off a little in the train's car, standing in-between the bodies trapped with me. This was the first time in a month that I dozed off like that. Does this mean an improvement? Is this the bird that declares spring is about to come?

A thought... no, more like a sensation when I awoke, what was it? I can't remember, I know it's important.

Once inside my apartment I have something to eat. I live alone. Have a steady job. Make a good income. It's not financial stress. I go out to my balcony and watch the city turn its lights on. It soothes me. I sit on an armchair. I doze off again, this time for a little longer.

And again, the thought, or the sensation. When I awake, it fleets away in-between my wanting fingers. I must, I must capture it.

I'm on my sofa again. It's 2am. I can't sleep. But something has changed tonight. I feel a stirring inside. I don't turn on the TV. I'm listening. Listening to my body speak. The stir moves faster now, deep within my viscera, it's clawing me with bloody claws: my blood, my claws? The pain is real. The pain is my viscera screaming for help. The pain is the connection between thoughts and organs. All is connected. All is related.

I let the pain rise like a huge tidal wave. My guts are twisted. My stomach heaves. My entire body aches in ways I didn't even know exist. *Take a pill and make it go away?* I will not. I will let it develop and swell. I must know the answer. It feels like someone is carving my body with a knife. The pain, the pain. I stand up and pace. My legs are cramped as if I've ran a marathon.

Suddenly it stops. I was afraid my heart would give up. I look at the clock. It's 3:55am. I have five minutes. I must resolve it before the 4am strike arrives.

My cat is fast asleep. Usually, he's so perceptive to my moods and any shift will trigger a concerned look – not tonight.

It's 3:58am. *You have two minutes*, I tell myself. I usually hear some sounds from the street. Not tonight. Complete silence outside as if the world is holding its breath, waiting.

It's 3:59am and it just happened. A scream. A horrendous scream. I never knew I had in me. It managed to claw its way out my gapping mouth. It sounded like the prey's scream of death as he realizes the end is near. But once the scream is over, a sort of calm descends on me. It's the soothing calm of understanding, and I realize the scream's meaning.

Fast urban life has a price. Career, career, career has a price, and the price is heavy. That was the sensation I had to capture – that I'm alone. But more than that, I'm lonely and it's an ailment, not a choice.

About the Author

Dr. Ehud Sela is a veterinarian; he owns an Animal Hospital in Margate, Florida. Dr. Sela writes both verse and prose. His writings can be found online and in print.

Image

by Aleksandra Prokopiuk

Mania - Thomas Stewart



Clarissa unhooks the rope. Mother falls to the floor, next to Father.

'For fuckssake, Clarissa,' Dylan says.

She cries.

'I told you to do one fucking thing.'

'Why are we doing this?'

Clarissa and Dylan dragging the first body. It is a grey day. Dark patches, shadows sprawled in vines. The birch tree, the large monument, the family crest, stands at the bottom of the garden.

Dylan pulls Father along the grass, dirt ripping under his arms, against his head. Clarissa is saying they should call the police, people will be asking questions. He looks at her. His youth is in his dark eyes, his big nose—Father's nose. He moves with force, a determination she does not have and his stare is beyond cold, he is not a human when he stares. Clarissa stops

talking, he keeps dragging Father across the grass.

'Go and get Mum,' Dylan says.

'By myself?' Clarissa says.

'Yes.'

Dylan drops Father's corpse against the bark of the birch tree. When he looks at it, he feels alive. He reaches into his pocket and reads the note again. A suicide note, combined. Love Mum and Dad.

Clarissa on her knees, stroking Mother's hair. Mother's body is cold, yellow. There is nothing white or pale or ghostly about it, just a stale, stuffy smell. Yellow. The colour of the rug. Yellow. The colour of her mother. Yellow. The colour of death. Yellow.

They work in silence. Digging, digging deeper, digging, digging together. Dylan stabbing the ground with a shovel, pushing it in with his foot and up again. Clarissa is slower, her movements bereaved. She draws her fingers against the shovel, down into the swelling dirt, then up again, throwing it, throwing the lumps, against the grass.

'What happens after?'

Dylan ignores her.

She leans forward and pushes him, thumping his shoulder so his body heaves. 'Dylan,' she says. 'What do we do when they're buried?'

'Then they're buried.'

'Then we've committed a crime.'

'Yes,'

'Dylan—'

'Don't defend them Clarissa.'

'I'm not,' she says. 'I'm on your side.'

As Mother is dragged her leg catches against the twigs, dead flesh cut. Her dress curls upwards, white underpants exposed.

'Clarissa, pull Mum's dress down.'

Dylan steps into the hole, it reaches up to his knee.

He grabs Mother, pulls her, into the ditch, climbs out, surveys everything.

'We need to dig more,' Dylan says.

'Why?'

'There's not enough room for Dad.'

Clarissa's face is blank, her eyes, heavy, stunned.

'I'm not digging anymore, Dylan.'

He doesn't reply.

She steps towards him.

'Clarissa—'

'No.'

She pushes him again, harder this time. He loses his balance, falls back, into the pit. Scrambles to get out; movements crazed, quick. Rolls over onto his front to push himself up, sees Mother's eyes—the dead white of them. She stares at him. In death, she still fears him and now he fears her. He screams. He feels hands under his chest, pulling him up.

He cries. Clarissa holds him.

It is nearly evening. They sit next to the corpses, looking at the rest of the giant garden, shovels by their feet. The sun is out.

'What do we do now?' Dylan says.

'I don't know.'

He wipes his face. 'We have to finish.'

'Do we?'

'Yes.' He stands up.

'Dylan.'

He stares at her.

'Are you doing this because you're angry or because you're sad?'

'Both,' he says. He picks up the shovels, one for him, one for her. He holds it out. 'Will you help me?'

'They didn't mean it,' she says.

'Will you help me?'

'They don't love me more than they love you.'

'Please.'

She stands, touches his cheek and places her hand over his heart. She takes the shovel from him.

The garden is quiet. The ground is loose. In time grass will grow over it and nobody will know where the parents are buried.

'This is wrong,' she says.

'Yes.'

'We shouldn't have buried them.'

'I know.'

'What should we have done?'

'Burnt them.'

Dig up the bodies. Bring up the corpses. Urinate on their uprooted graves. That is what Dylan is doing, this is why he is digging. Clarissa is watching, holding her own shovel in her hand. He's broken enough soil to uncover their faces and there they are, submerged in filth, worms in tow, two people barely remembered. They are not parents, they are corpses. People who wrote a letter telling their children they were afraid and that is why they had to go and here they are, non-people, un-people. Dig them up.

'We need to call someone.'

'You keep saying that,' he replies. 'But you haven't done it either.'

He rips the dirt, wheezes as he tugs the bodies. He prizes Father. The dirt shifts, grains roll. Father's chest is exposed.

'Maybe they're right,' he says. 'Maybe I do have a darkness inside me.'

She says, 'That's not true.'

'Maybe they were right to be afraid of me. Maybe you should be afraid of me.'

'I'm not afraid of you,' she says.

Her throat dry, her body empty. Neither have eaten. Neither will eat. The bodies, darker now, full of filth, on the grass and her brother wiping his hands, pacing. Afternoon and the sun still there.

There, dead bodies. There, parents. There, the people who made them. Love them always. Parents supposed to love no matter what. Children supposed to care. Parents caring for their children. Children caring for their parents. The way it should be.

They don't speak for an hour. Each in a dazed silence, watching the sun fall. They are black figures, marks against the Earth. The bodies, dug up, beside them, covered in filth.

'We can't burn them,' she says, finally

'Then what do we do? They would have wanted to be cremated,' he says.

'This isn't about them.'

He faces away from her, to the trees, to the piles of dirt.

'They shouldn't be dressed like that,' he tells her.

'Then how should they be dressed?'

'In each other's clothes.'

'Why?'

He walks forward, starts unbuttoning his father's shirt. 'Will you help me?'

She hesitates.

'Please. It's nearly over, Clarissa.'

Dylan, young again. Dylan, her brother.

She goes to him, to her knees, pulls at Mother's dress.

It is hard to undress the dead. They switch and Father is in a dress, Dylan holding his arm, Clarissa pushing it up his body. Mother in a shirt, a tie, a suit. New people. Reborn. Reincarnated. Others. Man as woman. Woman as man. The mother, the father. The father, the mother. Their home is not their home and their parents are not their parents. These are not the people they were. They are only memories of who they could have been.

Wood is collected. From the fireplace, from the dining room. The dining table is dragged outside, hacked up, bits scattered. Wood stripped and rough. Wood to be burnt. Wood to make a stack. Cremate and burn them. Burn the bodies.

The bodies feel lighter to Dylan this time, he's used to them.

It is raining soft sheets. Gentle, patting against his forehead, his hair, his eyes. Rain on his sister, rain becoming her. She doesn't move, watches him only.

The fire dies, fails, several times. Dylan keeps trying, shouting at his failure. Keeps going, until it is alight. The fire starts. It is distant, slow, flickering under the rain. It streaks, launches, like lines of paint. Dylan, satisfied with his work, walks to Clarissa and stands next to her. Together, under the grey, dead sun, under the pin-blue-black sky, they watch their parents burn. And they know it is all wrong.

The fire starts dying again. The wood wet.

Dylan's body, the hulking, gaunt figure is weighed down. His shoulders, deflated. His head trying to stay up. His eyes stained. Water and blood and dirt.

'Am I what they say I am?'

Clarissa next to him, arms folded. 'I don't know.'

'I can work harder.'

'Then work harder.'

'We shouldn't have done any of this,' Dylan says.

'No,' she says. 'We shouldn't.'

Under the rain, under the dark, they pull their parents off the burning stack. The man in the dress, woman in the suit. They drag them through the wet, against the rain and mud and slosh, back to the house.

They tumble. They fall down into the mud and it feels like oil against their skin. Father lands hard. Clarissa bangs her head on his knee. Dylan hits his temple. There is silence after.

Clarissa yells, 'Are you happy?'

'What?'

Clarissa gets to her feet, pushes Father's leg down against the dirt. She's covered in it, filthy wet slosh. 'You. Are you happy with what you've done?'

Dylan grabs the body again.

'I wonder if they had a point about you,' she says.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning look what you've done.'

'What I've done?' he says. 'Look what they've done. They left us, Clarissa. It's just you and me now.'

'No, Dylan, it's you.'

Dylan looks down to his feet but at his feet is Father's corpse. Death. He stares past Clarissa, further down the garden—his mother's corpse in the grass.

He swaps their clothes, puts the nooses back around their necks, topples the chairs. Snaps his father's rope. Father's body lands hard on the yellow carpet. Clarissa watches him, watches their necks do nothing. When he is done, he goes to her. In the living room, where it started, in wet, muddy clothes.

'I'm sorry.'

'You keep saying.'

'Will we fix this?'

'I don't know.'

'What's going to happen to us?'

'I don't know.'

'Can I change?'

'I don't know.'

About the Author

Thomas Stewart is a Columnist for Litro NY and has had his fiction, poetry and essays published at The Stockholm Review, The Cadaverine, Storgy, Vada Magazine, Anomaly, Agenda Broadsheet, among others. His debut poetry pamphlet, 'Creation' is forthcoming from Red Squirrel Press. He has an MA in Writing from the University of Warwick and a BA in English from the University of South Wales. He enjoys folk music, horror films, suburban fiction, watches, cooking, patterned jumpers and beat poetry. He is afraid of the dark.

Image

by [Beth Maiden](#)

Not Today - Ruvimbo Maria Kuuzabuwe



The sound of hurried footsteps through the mixture of soil and tarmac is masked by the strong winds. Dark clouds blanket the sky, concealing the stars that had been shining. It had to be tonight, they couldn't leave it any longer.

'Run, I know you can go faster than that,' Daniel says in a half whisper.

'I'm tired. I can't go any faster.'

'Yes you can, come on, we need to get to the other side,' Rut huffs and picks up the pace.

The crack of thunder wakes the baby and she begins to wail. Daniel gasps and pushes Rut and the baby towards the bushes, out of sight.

'You should have given her codeine like I suggested earlier on,' he growls.

'Well, I wasn't about to drug my baby.'

'Please just try to keep her quiet, we can't risk being stopped.'

'She needs feeding.'

He scours their surroundings, the route is clear and there is no place to hide. Their flash light shines a lone light in the darkness—it is dangerous enough.

‘Can’t you feed her while you walk?’

‘Really, Daniel? You expect me to hold her in place while I’m near enough running?’

‘Fine, feed her here but be quick.’

Rut unties the two knots she had made on the towel. Removes the child from her back. Places her on her small breast. The baby settles and drifts off to sleep.

Across the desert and beneath the stars they trek for hours. They can’t stop yet. It is too dangerous. With the heat steadily increasing, Rut feels her baby squirming on her back: the constant shifting propels her forward but she has to ignore it—walk on. With each step she can feel her legs quiver. She holds on to her hips, leaning to her left side.

‘Daniel, you will have to hold her,’ Rut says as she wipes the drops of sweat from her forehead and nose.

‘Give her to me.’

A large campfire flickers in the distance, they walk towards it. As they approach the fire, a group of men holding weapons: knives, machetes and pitchforks meet them. Rut pulls her baby tightly into her bosom and turns her head to look at Daniel and exhales.

‘Stay here. I’ll go first,’ he strokes her shoulder as he walks towards the men. Daniel stands tall with his strong shoulders back and nostrils flared.

‘What business do you have here?’ a man asks. The man wears a multicoloured checkered scarf around his neck—he is someone of importance.

‘We are on our way to the border: I have my wife and child, they are both tired. Could we please have a place to stay?’

The men lower their weapons and wait for the response from the man in the scarf. He nods and gestures for them to enter the tent. Daniel signals for his wife to follow him. As they enter they find four women shielding some infants. The women have positioned themselves to the far back of the camp, where they sit barricaded by sacks of sand from the desert.

‘I think those are the wives and children,’ Rut whispers in Daniel’s ears. Slowly, they come forward and greet them.

‘Drink?’ a plump woman with fair skin says, offering them two metal cups of water.

‘Thank you,’ Daniel nods in appreciation. Rut mouths thank you and carves a smile.

The group clink their silver cups and make plans for the journey to come. They too are on their way to the coast. Some speak of the tales of the horrors they witnessed in their villages, others speak of their reasons for wanting to escape to Europe. They have no exact destination—all they know is that they have to go.

The man in the scarf was a preacher, who founded a Pentecostal church in his hometown. He speaks of how they would sing and dance in their church, worshipping and praising their God. How one night the soldiers came and set their house alight.

How they just about escaped the fire. He shows them the scar tissue on his legs from when he ran back into the house to save his son. It was too late.

‘I recognise your face from somewhere,’ the man in the scarf says to Daniel.

‘I’m not sure where you would know me from?’ Daniel says, turning his face away from the light of the fire.

‘I’m sure I know you from somewhere.’

Their talk is interrupted by the sound of an engine purring from afar, two lights beam in the distance. The man in the scarf squints in the direction the beams are coming from.

‘Men, grab your weapons,’ he shouts.

Shooting up from their seating positions they grab the weapons they had previously handled. Daniel jumps to the other side of the tent, taking the metal pole he had brought with him for protection.

The lights draw closer and closer. A rusty red pick-up truck appears with plates half attached to the front of the vehicle. A man, a woman and two pre-pubescent children sit wide eyed at the front. They too happen to be on their way to the Red Sea coast. In need of a place to stay, they offer the group a lift to the coast at dawn.

The group pack what little they have onto the back of the trunk. ‘Hop in, and keep the tent close so we can use it as cover if need be,’ the driver says. The women create holes in the tent so they can breathe easier.

‘Everyone in?’ the driver turns to receive confirmation from the man in the scarf.

Cramped in the back, Daniel finds a spot in the corner sat next to a brown-eyed boy with hair that sweeps across his face. He grabs a flashlight from his pocket and starts scribbling in a small notebook.

‘What are you writing?’ the boy looks at him and waits.

Daniel continues to write. The boy taps him on his elbow.

‘Stories,’ Daniel says.

‘What kind of stories?’ he tilts his head at an angle so he can see Daniel’s face.

‘Stories about people, true stories.’

The response does not satisfy his curiosity, he turns away and begins speaking to the other children.

The man in the red scarf turns to Daniel and whispers, 'you're that reporter aren't you?'

Daniel bows his head.

'Don't worry your secret is safe with me brother.'

The smell of damp engulfs them as they walk into the one room that will be their home for the time being. Mold stained walls tell a story of the white washed paint that had been. Cracks in the walls have created a motif that extends itself over time. The carpet squelches as they tread carefully avoiding the rat droplets. Their eyes remain transfixed on the state of the walls. Rut begins to sob. Daniel takes her in his arms, stroking her hair and then caressing the baby on her back.

'I can fix it, I promise,' he says

She stares into his eyes then back down to the ground.

'We need nappies. Your baby needs nappies.'

He opens a tan, distressed leather wallet with the initials D.T. etched on the corner. He hands her 10 euros. He tries to caress her hand but she fiercely pulls it away and walks out the door.

'Go back to your home!' A group of white men chant as Rut stands in the shop. The small Asian shopkeeper stands quietly pressing the panic button behind the counter. He is used to this. Rut has the baby wrapped in a towel on her back, she puts her hand behind to ensure that her baby is secure.

'I have my papers, leave me alone!' she screams.

'Go back to your country you monkey,' one of the men shouts. The shopkeeper manages to get Rut and the baby out of the shop and helps them escape from the back door.

She runs back to their one room home, in hysterics. Daniel forcefully takes her into his arms and embraces her. Rut starts banging her fists on his chest crying.

'This is your fault,' she pulls away from him wiping the snot from her nose.

Her lips tremble as she repeats her words.

'This. Is. Your. Fault.'

He sits down, head bowed, as she erupts on him.

'I was the supportive wife to you Daniel. All you had to do was write, report and get paid but that wasn't enough for you. You just had to write that bastard article. Look where your freedom of expression has got us.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he mutters as beads of tears fall on the small wooden table.

The door slams, she turns and looks.

‘Any luck finding anything today?’ Rut says.

He loosens his tie from his neck, strolls over to the cushion the baby is laying on, kisses the baby on the cheek and plays with her fingers.

‘Hello princess,’ he places kisses on her tiny cheeks.

‘Daniel, I said did you find anything today?’

He pulls the baby’s bib up to her lips and wipes the spittle from her chin.

‘Daniel!’ Rut stands with both arms around her tiny waist. Face scrunched and wrinkled.

‘No, not today,’ he sighs as he undoes the top button of his shirt.

About the Author

Ruvimbo Maria Kuuzabuwe is an occasional blogger and writer. She recently graduated in Creative Writing and Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University and is currently studying towards a Masters in Gender, Sexuality and Culture at the University of Manchester. Born in Zimbabwe and raised in the UK her experiences have lead her to develop an interest in using storytelling as a medium to convey multiple realities; as a means to transcend the spoken word and allow the reader to travel to another place or time where they are able to think and see things in a new light. She is influenced by contemporary African literature and cites Chimanda Ngozi Adichie as one of her biggest inspirations.

Image

by Aleksandra Prokopiuk