

SHIRLEY



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FEATURING STORIES BY:
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BOUND TO BE
BY HELEN MCCLORY

Town's made of vapours, cold grey diction in winter— in the Black Beetle, the one restaurant-bar-café-hotel, at the sole occupied table, said occupant Albert sucks coffee through his teeth. The sky overhead is the sea, rising up at an uncanny angle. I thought, love me, Albert, tell me secrets of your knackered boat, the scuffed corners under the seats, the mouldering edge. The seals that hover in your wake, barking like boys at play. The never shoal gone out your net. The emptiness of your raw days.

*

Summer is all it should be, right up until it isn't. Drowse. Bees. The hinges of a final butterfly. The creak of a bough before the lightning gets it. They have never seen leaves so cocksure. The grass wearing away in desire. The children are loud in the street, their parents in the beer garden, clapping hands on pale heads and dark. Lovingly, then.

*

He sees the man before anyone else, and more than anyone else. The man walking on

the summer sea, on his own reflection. God told Isaac what his father intended. God warned Isaac, and Isaac still went. That's how children are. Open your arms, says the figure. Holes in the sleeves. Albert's beard flinty with salt. His little eyes. Yet he does. And is embraced.

That evening the townsfolk gather in the school listen with more credulity than you'd imagine, the church on the high street a carpet shop, the church on the hill pissed on by all rains. He was a good talker, Albert, then.

*

A flickering being; something angelic. Covered in eyes and soft bruises. Grey wings fifteen feet long, moving like dust. Terrible migraine. Musical tapping a finger against the sternum, making a circle that burned. He puts his own daughter out that very night.

*

Can you credit it? It's been twelve year, the greengrocer said. He was packaging carrots from his allotment in brown paper. Scattering dirt on the counter, something honest in it. I gave no response. Two boys, eleven and six, discovered 9th of November. And in any case with the cost of petrol, too much to ask delivery men from inland to come all the way out, there you are now. Smile.

*

Hot weather at first, a strain of champion atropa swarming purpleblack over the gardens. Most Beautiful Town in the Region Three Years Running. At night, feet against the tarmac. Sound of the shop windows shattering. Early morning camps furtively left, full of biscuit packets and spilled juice.

*

Some come back. Try to. It wasn't like Hamelin. It was, they barred the doors. It was, them sobbing. The way they tell it, the figure appears in every house, at the same time. His voice is white silk. The sea laps beside him, soaking into the carpets. His love is greater than any they had known. Community means all ignoring the same cruelty. And prowling procession up the skylit church and down the backlane, murmuring at the Black Beetle of the last fish caught just beyond the harbour, silvering and wide staring, large as a child, the very proof of succour.

*

Autumn and the girls are seen out eating beech leaves and pine needles. They slide them in rails on their tongues. Littoral, there's nothing to be found but the pressing of the horizon to the offing, black shale and slumped boy-children sticking their feet in the water for cut of the cold. Divisions strict; girls sent to the woods, boys to the sea, with those inbetween told to roam the cow pastures and the higher fields beyond in their kilts and stumpy boots. Parents bristle together in the Beetle or else in the empty, overheated school for the time when the doors can be opened and children come in. If, when, the angel, or Albert, says it's settled.

*

Autumn goes on until the ice in the hills says it's done. The children that first month into winter. Bags and beanie hats and mittens. Their fathers' faces the worse for not crying. Dreadful tugging, gouges of exhaustion under the eyes. I having no children. Believing the children. I watching the parents at their brutal coffee, tight knuckled. They'd have killed me, too. I watching longer nights from my back window at the hotel, smoking so it looks like my throat connects to the sky. The angel spaketh; do this, and be spared. I wanting to live, and finding only the reason of struggle. Anyway, the land at the edge of the bog bubbled. That meant there was time, yet.

*

Wipe down the tables for the lunch rush. Wipe them down again after the lunch rush has passed without a single customer. Hang a sign on the door, back in five. Walk down to the pier and watch the only boat at mooring rise and strain and slack against the haar. The water is the same black. A seagull above it adds melancholy on slant wings. We come to this every year: this close and reminding cold.

*

Cells bound in ice swell, shatter, but don't look like it. Finding them here and there: in the hills the dog walker. On the slab of shore rock, two boys, hands holding. Two or three in a river. Until a late December day, when the white blackbird who overwinters in the park calls come see, you have done well. A tree downed in the storm has crushed the last few who were sheltering under it. Mud on their clothes, cheeks purple and sunken. What kind of God does it resemble.

*

When I come in, stubbing my cigarette in the metal grid, he's there at the usual. Has made himself the coffee since I won't serve him. I love you, Albert, pariah. The stink on him of a man too broken to wash. He is writing his memoirs, he says. I crane, see crabbed lettering, browning pages, he snorts and rubs his nose.

*

A few say they see the angel again. Before the funerals he rules against them in the sternest voice, says Albert. God likes to see them laid out in his lands. Unadorned that Christmas. Something petty to do, like a candle lit in a high place here, scratching the names from the records there. In defiance, at last, they bury their little ones in the cemetery on Rook's Hill. Albert not showing face, but rumour gives permission to put away his daughter, ten years old. White dresses, white shirts, hard scraped earth. No boxes, only white coverlets, sewn up, handed down together.

*

I sit on the marble side, listen to nothing doing. His pencil going over it. I smell the sea, and loss, which smells of soap, and toothpaste, sweet cereals, children's cold remedies in the dark brown bottles, I think, picked fruit pulped in the hand, new cloth nappies, mashed banana, gnawed pencils, and sodden clothing, and cold bodies, and the smell of hair on a head pressed to the nose, things already buried. Against the window, the hair making no statements but itself. The light gets too weak. Albert rises slowly, his chair a chalky scrape, and takes his bag and goes off unhurriedly, between the tables and away from me.

Helen McClory's first story collection On the Edges of Vision, won the Saltire First Book of the Year 2015. Her second story collection, Mayhem & Death, was written for the Lonely and published in 2018. The Goldblum Variations is out from Penguin and 404 Ink in October 2019. There is a moor and a cold sea in her heart.



OUR LUXURIOUS WORLD

BY CARINA MARTIN

I'm doing all this for Blaire. She comes back to the living room one night a little drunk, looking distressed, carrying a plastic bottle of water like she's just come from having her nails painted.

"It's not fair," she says.

"I know, honey," I say.

"Is my ass too small?" she says. She gropes forward to the bathroom, her adolescent legs brimming.

"It's fine," I yell. "I promise."

*

Blaire and I met on the belly slitting line during my first week in Ketchikan, and now I'm living in her apartment. She is trying to earn enough this summer to pay for her cosmetology degree, and I am just trying to keep my jeans up.

Blaire has taupe eyes and a shallow, mild face. I cannot imagine her doing anybody's makeup, but that's got to be an imagination problem. She keeps a cat in the apartment closet even though she isn't supposed to.

That cat feasts on smuggled eyeballs and yellowed, yellowing livers. Blaire picks through them with a paring knife to dig out any fish bones. She's afraid they'll splay like toothpicks in that cat's throat, narrowed by greed.

*

Blaire's a nice white girl and also a hopeless addict. On dark evenings, she always turns on this television program called "Luxurious Experiences." It comes on when nobody is supposed to still be watching. I guess it's when the guy who is running the tapes at the public access station wants to take a forbidden snooze.

In the program, which is a product selling program, two women named Cathy and Coral slink on stage in glittery tight dresses and show you the stuff all us miserable suckers are going to die without.

The thing we love about this show is that they don't have the guts to say no to anybody. Those girls will stick their gamey legs out in front of anything. Me and Blaire used to keep a list of all the things on that show we wanted to buy, and sometimes we did buy them. Like:

- A kitchen machine that looked like a stand blender, but accepted everything from unpeeled bananas to avocado seeds. (For the "woman who wants it all, like, immediately," Blaire grunted.)
- An LED color changing shower head: cool blue, yellow, lipstick pink. Broken on breath.
- A book of golden fake nails with real insects buried underneath, which we guessed was to simulate antiques trapped in amber.
- A do-it-yourself teddy bear stuffing kit, with a thick tube you shoved up the bear's backside to deploy his innards at breakneck speed.

Mostly they won't ship here, but some of the stuff from China arrives in two or three nights, express postage, padded cardboard box. And then Blaire would excavate it, throw the plastic peanuts to the side, cackling with wonder. "This is total trash," she would say. "This is utter, complete junk. Holy God!"

*

Sometimes other programs come on. There are lots of commercials for exercise equipment, vitamins and supplements, and a public access broadcast called "Our Big World." Which was hours of nature footage: lizards, elk, hyenas. Always some fish. Frogs boiling in muck, desperate black eyes. A regiment of elk horns divvying up the tree line.

I like this show, and I sometimes ask Blaire to put it on even though I know she'll smack her lips and groan. She hates what I call the "sucks-to-be-me" scenes, where cobras and coyotes gulp down some evolutionary lightweights. "How's it different from the bar, then?" I ask her.

*

I'm going out with Blaire this time just because she's begging me to do it. She says it will just be for a few hours and she doesn't want to be around the guys at the fishery anymore.

"It's more of, like, a validation thing," she says.

"I can tell you right now that it's not your ass that's the problem," I say.

"Oh, god," she says. "But that was a joke. It was a joke, okay? I don't care that much."

"All right."

"I just think it will be easier to chill out, relax a bit, if I'm not alone," she says. "And they've got this couple's deal on pulled pork." And yes, I love pulled pork, so I say yes, I will go, I will couple with you. She rolls her eyes; effervescent drama.

*

I haven't eaten a single piece of fish since I started working here. Some of the guys do, because they're used to it, but I can't get the brine past my tongue anymore. Those damn machines perspire like working men, heat and heat and water tumbling out of them and wrinkling your skin like a hot dog.

Understand: gutting a fish is an unfair business. First you grab onto its head and grasp onto its fatty back. Somebody else has already dug a knife into the swell of its belly and made a pretty cut from the back to the front. By the time they come to you the scales are already gone and the body is a wet gray envelope.

But that slit is just wide enough for you to plow out the guts with a few fingers. Until you sweep them onto the floor they are beautiful and cheap, luminous in the flooded light, like costume jewelry. And that smell. Oh, it's sweet enough to lick.

*

At work Blaire slides over to me and asks if I'm still going tonight, and I say that I am.

"Okay, good," she says. Then she starts wriggling the left end of her mouth back and forth, like she's having her own private talk. "I just, I don't know," she finally says. She has a blunt knife in her hand and is running it back and forth under her fingernails. "I'm just not sure I want to."

"It'll be fine, I'm sure."

"Like, what if it goes really bad?"

"Oh, it won't."

*

We look ridiculous, walking down the road to this tavern. Blaire pulls bleach through her hair for thirty minutes, putting each strand at attention, but she puts both earrings on at once. She isn't making me wear her jewelry this time; just a plain red button-up shirt and jeans I ironed this morning. She rubs a witchy concoction of water and sugar and salt on my cheeks, bringing up the blood.

*

Only one man says anything interesting to me the whole night. All the others are coughing and scowling at the dart board and tossing beer ice against their teeth to get them to crack. This man is holding a Styrofoam cup filled with cola, ice cubes, about a dozen gooey lemon slices. Blaire knuckles my shoulder despairingly and walks away.

You're supposed to start with a question like "How long have you been around?" or "Come here much?" Maybe, if a guy has a sense of humor, "You want some fish sticks?" Here's a fresh one from Lemon Man: "How much do you think a single life is worth?"

"I'm not so sure," I say.

He says that he wanted to be a doctor for years but had a religious experience in the embryology lab in the University of New Mexico, Santa Fe. "My first year. You have to take all these courses that go back over stuff from your undergrad classes, mostly you already know it, so everybody zones out. Anyway, I usually went to the lab to study. And they keep these embryonic specimens from all kinds of different species. They had beavers, chickens, pigs, different deer and things, they had some human embryos locked up in a cabinet there too. I sit and look at them, I think about all the people that have died in this country because some judges made a decision. I know you must have heard about Roe vs. Wade at some point. This was right after that happened, back in the seventies. I thought to myself, so this is what medicine is, now. Then I, well I hate to admit this, but I imagined myself — I had these big timber boots on, this was one of those lab rooms that's got drains in the floor for fluids — I imagined myself pouring out those embryos and gutter stomping them down into the drain, down into little bits. Smash, smash, smash. I carry around these little brochures, you can have one, they're really cheap for me — but I like to carry them around and hand them out because people, especially people out here, this stuff, it just never occurs to them. To you. But it occurred to me there, I'm telling you. I quit that day, I took all my paperwork back to the office and I told them I wasn't cut out to be a doctor. Didn't answer any of their questions, I just left. I knew — if they couldn't tell, then they weren't ever going to understand it. But women like you, they know how that is, for sure. But yeah, if I had to say it, that's when I just knew, right there in the lab," he says. This man's voice is the fish. He wants his breath to enter mine. He looks sideways and says, "Have you ever had an abortion?"

"Not yet," I say.

*

Blaire and I leave too early. She tells the guy clawing her neck that she needs to get back home to feed her kitten. "He's fed with a bottle, like a baby," she says. She presses a thumb to the top of her straw and vacuums up the dregs of her margarita, drains it onto his begging tongue. He is already nuts about her, but she's not dumb. "Let's kick off, girlfriend," she whispers to me.

*

I make tomato paste soup from an astronaut box, and float oyster crackers on its surface like rubble, and we drink it from coffee mugs.

"I'm sorry you got hung up with a weirdo," Blaire says.

"I handled it," I say. "I just hope you had a good time."

"Was he harassing you?" she asks. She turns on the television. It's good to have Cathy and Coral around, for such a time as this.

"Oh, I don't really know. It'll sure make a good story." And Blaire snorts and slurps, slumps into Coral's sequined embrace.

In my head, those embryos hang in the formaldehyde like egg drop soup in takeout containers. Their bodies are buoyant white, revolving in the yellow goo. But I'm (thank God) still hungry enough to finish my own soup.

*

I'm wrapping up my shift when the fish looks up at me and says, "This feels awfully bad for me." Its voice is warbling, weirdly cool, like its lips are two nubs of marbled glass.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Guess you're still alive."

"In fact," the fish says, "I'm only doing my best to stay that way. For as long as I can."

"I can appreciate that," I say. Then, "But do you mind?"

“Oh no, not at all.” That fish flops onto its back and shimmies down my knife, sighing out a cloud of guts. I sweep them off the table and they cling to my apron, desperate for the thrill of being used.

*

When Blaire goes back to school, which will be in the month of October, I’ll probably ask to keep this apartment that we share. It’s small enough that it doesn’t need to be dusted or vacuumed. I clean that place just by breathing in it.

*

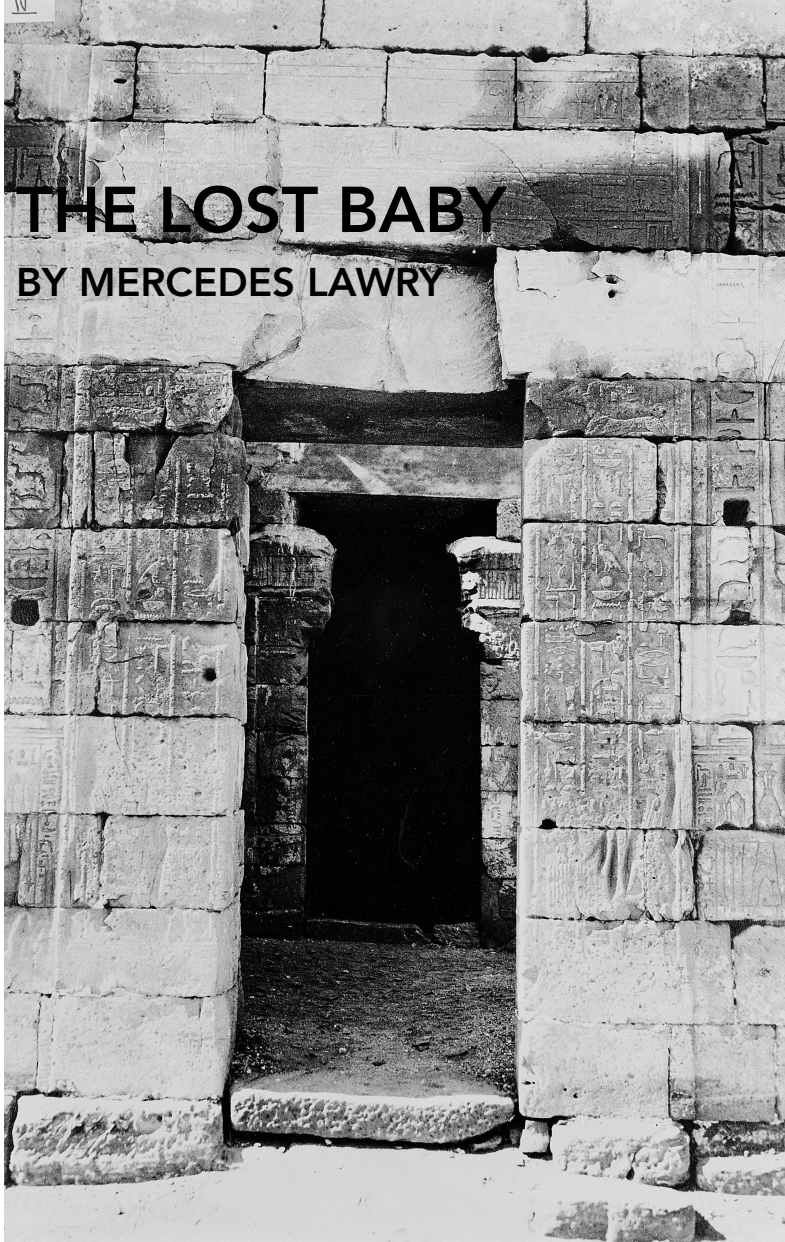
Late one night I find “Our Big World” on again. I am eating macaroni from a Tupperware lid and the cheese sauce leaks out of the pasta each time I puncture it with my fork.

This is a show about jellyfish. To the dripping techno music they flume in, out of frame, their white stingers made glorious with pearls. Swarms of fishes flare around this single jellyfish, and every once and a while one locks its jaw around those luscious stings.

In my mind I know that fish are half-blind and whole-stupid, that they are drawn to everything, that they are gainful to nothing. They sink quick and peaceful, and the school flows into the hole of their death, and the jelly glides on. And everything is aware of it all.

I’m just breathless, being this jellyfish. I know that, if I got the chance, I would throw myself into its grasp and delight in my high-voltage heart, made holy again.

Carina Martin is a nonprofit professional, a fiction amateur, and a 2018 graduate of the creative writing program at Houghton College. She lives in Pittsburgh with a cat named Sophie and a menagerie of houseplants. Her work has previously appeared in Okay Donkey. You can find her on Twitter @a_body_electric.



THE LOST BABY

BY MERCEDES LAWRY

One of the good things about Mama losing the baby was she didn't make us go to church anymore. Nadine wanted to ask her if she still believed in God but the rest of us told her to keep her trap shut. That was Mama's business. We should just enjoy the fact we could sleep in on Sundays and not be bored to tears by the pastor's repetitive drone.

Secretly I thought there was another good outcome of the miscarriage, which we learned was the medical term for it. We were poor – not dirt poor but poor, and any new baby meant less for the rest of us. I had nothing personal against babies – they could be entertaining, but we didn't need any more – we really didn't.

Grandma Leach came and stayed with us for a week and made us clean every inch of the house. It was annoying but she also baked spectacular desserts so we kept our complaining to ourselves.

"She's kind of a tyrant," Brad said. He was always showing off new words he learned.

"You mean bossy," Nadine said. "You could just say bossy so we'd all know what you meant. You're kind of bossy, Brad. Would you call yourself a tyrant?"

Brad just rolled his eyes and walked away which was pretty much what he did anytime things got sticky.

Mama didn't get all moony and sad and stuck in her bed like Aunt Phyllis did when she lost a baby. Aunt Phyllis didn't have any other kids so maybe it was a bigger heartache. Grandma told us it was for the best because something was wrong with our baby. What, we wanted to know, thinking of all the strange stories we'd heard about: a baby with its heart on the outside of its body? a baby with no arms? twins that were joined at the head or the stomach, which used to be Siamese but we didn't say that anymore? But no one gave us an explanation.

Daddy didn't show any signs that something bad had happened to the family. He got up, went to work, came home and spent the evening after dinner in front of the TV with his newspaper. Only when our fighting over the channel got too loud did he speak, telling us we'd all be in our rooms with no TV in 5 seconds if we didn't settle this peacefully. Once he took the channel knob off the TV but we figured out we could use pliers. Another time when the TV broke, he said he wasn't calling Uncle Barney to come fix it for two days so we'd better find something else to do, like read a book. We had a marathon Monopoly game instead which resulted in arguing anyway as that's what we thought brothers and sisters were destined to do.

We were told never to talk about the lost baby outside the house. Nobody ever said anything to us but we got a lot of those "sorry" looks. Mrs. Henderson next door brought over a casserole but that was it.

"If one of us died," Nadine said, "the kitchen would be overflowing with casseroles."

“Not if it was you,” chirped Brad. “Lima beans, maybe but no casseroles.”

After that remark, Brad had to run to his room, shut the door and push the dresser in front of it.

“Death is not a competition!” Nadine shouted and I thought that was the most profound thing I’d ever heard. I even wrote it down in my diary.

The lost baby never had a name. We didn’t know if it was a girl or a boy. There’s no funeral for a miscarriage. Nadine did make us all say a prayer one rainy afternoon.

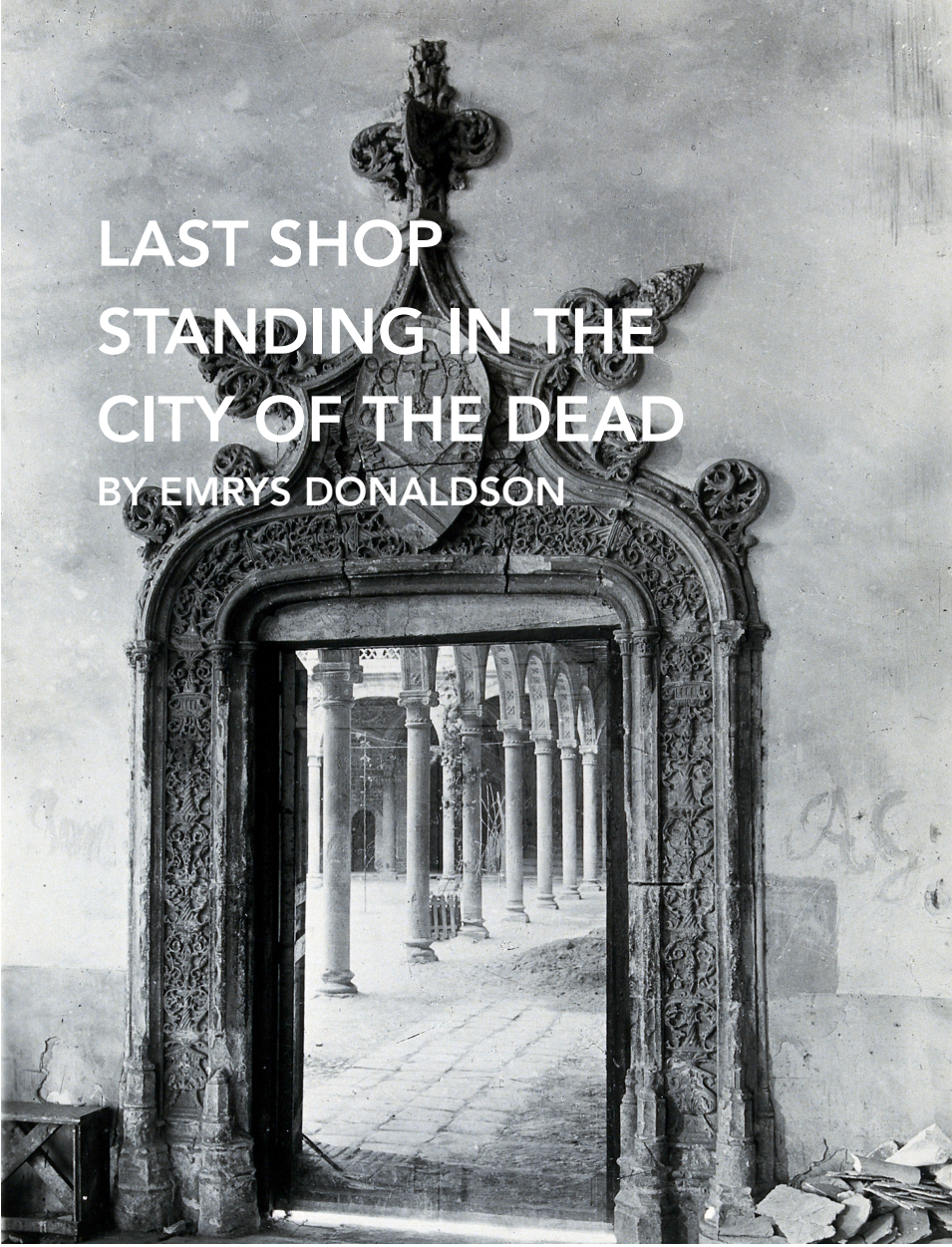
“We don’t go to church anymore,” said Brad, “so what’s the point?”

“Just in case,” Nadine said, poking him in the shoulder.

By summer we’d pretty much forgotten about the lost baby that never was. Other things preoccupied us. Brad had to get 14 stitches when he fell off his bike. Nadine entered the summer reading contest at the library. We were forever slathering sunblock on the little ones who were enthralled with the hose till Daddy turned the water off for the whole house cause we’d used up several days worth and we couldn’t even flush the toilet which grossed us out so much we promised to do better in the child-watching department. I wondered if I’d be a mother someday. It seemed an awful lot of bother.

Mercedes Lawry has published short fiction in several journals including, Gravel, Cleaver, Garbanzo, and Blotterature and was a semi-finalist in The Best Small Fictions 2016. She’s published poetry in journals such as Poetry, Nimrod, & Prairie Schooner and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize four times. She’s published three poetry chapbooks as well as stories and poems for children.

She lives in Seattle. Find her on Twitter at @mercwrites.



LAST SHOP
STANDING IN THE
CITY OF THE DEAD
BY EMRYS DONALDSON

It appeared one day in a vacant lot along my regular foraging route. Striped bunting with worn and tattered edges fluttered above the awning. There was no sign and the windows were tinted. No sign though the smell of cooking meat permeated the air for blocks, causing moisture to wick into the cottony texture of my cheeks.

Out back, behind the shop, two striped white Siberian tigers stared at me with their ice- blue eyes, rusty padlocks tethering their collars to a chain. Next to them, a group of juggler- guards tossed spines for practice. One opened his mouth wide, unhinging his jaw, and the length of the spine shot down his throat.

A set of conjoined twins wearing a sequined jumpsuit washed the dusty front windows with old newspapers. As I approached, I heard the sound of their exertion, their ragged

breaths. They noticed me and smiled the sort of smile which did not reach their eyes, one where I saw their many rows of tiny, even teeth.

When the city was healthy and prosperous, I refused to eat animal products. Now that the city was dying of cancer, I planned the death of any animal I saw so that I might stay alive for another few days. I was grateful when the feral cats had stopped appearing outside my window, so that I did not have to decide whether to sacrifice those to whom I had given names. Fewer, thinner, two, one, none.

Most mornings I dug my fingernails between the soft boards of the porch in ravenous search of old fallen kibble. I ran out of everything even dubiously edible in the apartment, out of canned goods, expensive face soap, the glue on the back of the wallpaper, my own breasts. The awkward stitches I'd made one-handed strained and itched when I opened my arms. Though I never looked at my own naked body anymore, I felt the edges of the scar pucker. It was a relief, in a way.

The city planning software was supposed to auto-generate new buildings in underutilized slices of space and thus create a harmony of awareness, according to the advertising propaganda. Instead, it metastasized suffocating growths out of anyone's control, growths that shed a powder like mold spores which sifted inside our windows, speckling the blue tape we used to seal them.

"Opening day," the carny behind the counter told me. "Have a look around."

He wore clown makeup, a red circle around his mouth, cheeks covered in white paint which flaked away from his skin. Fragments of mirror hung from string on the wall behind him reflected the sun at exactly the right angle to get in my eyes and spangle the floor around me.

The shelves were lined with locked cabinets which held goods unseen in the city for months. Paper boxes of biscuits. Hard cheeses in wax paper wrappers. Dried meat twisted into links. Green waxed apples gleamed from a cooler case with a sliding glass door.

In the butcher section, the twins donned an apron and stood behind a counter where raw meat gleamed over ice. Up close, their sequins reflected my own distorted face back to me. Their eyes met mine as they sharpened a cleaver against a stone. *Chhh-wek chhh-wek* went the knife.

I bartered with the jewelry I kept sewn to the inner lining of my long jacket. The carny turned a pair of gold hoop earrings over and over in his hands. He removed the tinned anchovies from my small pile. I looked at the two green apples, fist-sized jar of olives, and thin slices of smoked meat of unknown provenance. The blood pounding in my skull said STAY. ALIVE. STAY. ALIVE. STAY. ALIVE. STAY.

“Please,” I said. “This is all I have.”

The twins each held a knife as they hacked pieces off a shoulder roast. The bone shone white, white. I removed the seed packet from my pocket, where I had been keeping it safe for planting after the last frost. Outdoors, with plenty of time in full sun, they would grow into head-sized plants with thick, edible leaves. I needed to eat now, and the seeds in their present form provided barely a snack.

“Come on back,” the carny said. He opened a trapdoor beneath the register and gestured downward, where a splintery wooden ladder fell away into the darkness. Pieces of malformed building jutted from the unfinished walls of the tunnel down.

A stray phoneme fell from the corner of my mouth. I wanted to refuse, but I was so hungry.

“After you,” I finally managed. As he descended, I saw that he was starting to bald on the crown of his head. Fine hairs wisped in an unseen breeze.

Downstairs, more meat than I seen in one place for years swung from ceiling hooks. A smoker filled an entire corner and vented out a window. The hocks spun against gravity. I salivated.

Above us, the trapdoor slammed, and four feet danced upon it. I was still very hungry. The clown came closer, and I saw that over his onesie with a lace collar and his big shoes he wore a plastic rain poncho new out of the package, creases forming a sharp rectangle. In my peripheral vision I watched his hand come up from below us as his face stretched in a big smile, a genuine smile, one that reached all the way to his eyes, the biggest smile I had ever seen.