

PSYCHOPOMP MAGAZINE

Issue 3 Spring 2014

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Cover Art

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Psychopomp Magazine is a quarterly, digital, nonprofit publication with an annual, print anthology. For more details and exclusive content, please visit our website at psychopompmag.com.

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Jennifer Clements

WE WILL BECOME DISCARDED TOYS

The day our elbows stiffened into cold rolled steel and our arms hardened into pipes, I took you down to the courtyard and we fell over in the wet grass and rolled down the hill. Cylindrical tin men with our rusted joints. And how strange it was that our arms could not bend, but novel too, and we walked like zombies and found a thousand silly uses for our hardened arms. We performed brilliant cartwheels; you a perfect X upright, akimbo, then still X sideways, and X again emerging from the flip. I applauded in straight movements, in flesh lines, with my unbending arms. *It must be the weather causing this*, we said. *It must be the state of the world*. And you took me in close to your body, your long arms outstretched behind me, mine outstretched small at your back. Together we were a magnificent double-winged beast, lovely and grotesque, the skin of our cheeks pressed together as though hoping to absorb the other.

The day our necks went limp and our heads dangled at our shoulders, you told me you would love me regardless of our condition. I held your head up between my stiff arms, and you held mine. We tried to convince them to remain upright: we bargained with our stubborn jelly-necks, we instructed them, we tried willing them into tautness. When we each let go, our heads lolled back and forth like buds of old dry roses. We, the most wilted of marionettes. We, despairing for our cut strings. But then you danced, a silly, stiff-armed, rolling-head dance, and I smiled. I thought I could feel my upturned lips pulling my neck ever so slightly into form again.

The day our ribs tightened into model railroads around our chests, you thought we could outsmart the process. *Breathe deeply*, you said, *it's as much in your mind as anything*. But the coiled train tracks followed each intake of air; the steam engine sucked from our lungs and propelled the locomotive on another binding rotation. We fed each other air in turns, silver spoonfuls of life, and tried to overcome the constriction. *It is beginning*, you said between breaths. *No—it's ending*. Never one without the other.

I wanted to ask you about disintegration on the day our insides turned all to mush, but still I didn't see the connection. I thought the bathwater had been too hot; I'd seen the same thing happen to plush bears and pillows after long years and a short scrub. The filling bunched together in uneven distributions, knotting and clumping and abandoning its intended shape, separating in places like oil from water, like attention from the aged.

The day our hair fell out you covered my head with a scarf so I'd stay warm. I covered yours with band-aids to make you laugh. I'd never seen your scalp so naked; I was nervous at the roundness of my own skull and the clarity of my bald-skin, a newfound adolescence of the changing body. Funny how there's always a next stage of undress. We scrubbed each other's scalp with a toothbrush before sleep, and reminisced about the shape of our eyebrows. *But we look so much better now*, you said, *than all covered with hair and artifice*.

The day our skin crazed like lead paint on aged wood, I asked you whether you knew this would happen when first we met. We had been so new, so polished then, with marbled eyes kissed by butterfly lashes. We'd been a matching pair. It seemed bizarre, exceptional, that we would wither so suddenly—when just before, we'd worn our faces smooth,

soft to the touch and to the glance. I handed you a compact and you tried to cover my crackling skin with pigment, but it just rubbed off on the lapels of my blouse, stained the shoulders, the lace trim. So then I handed you a tube of oil paint, but you refused to color me. *I still want to see you*, you said. *Even like this.*

The day our teeth fell into our mouths and our words became cluttered with small white stones, we laughed at ourselves and our inability to say the simplest things. We spoke in faces, in touch. Our eyes blinked magnificently at each other, marbles sheathing and unsheathing their glossy flecks. We crossed our eyes and flapped our hands and used the few statements we knew in proper sign language, a choreography of fingers meaning *I Love You* or *Pass the Milk*.

On the last day, the knuckles of our hands and feet seized up as new glass, and our jaws clasped to close the puzzle pieces of our gums down on themselves. One of us had started to speak, but did not finish. Your hand held mine, and we both could feel the vines of rigidity ensnaring our joints, locking us in place. I thought of the music box I'd owned as a child, with the porcelain figures holding each other by the fingertips, their painted expressions surprised to find their love immobilized by the tinkling notes of a song everyone knew as a lullaby. The sleep wasn't meant to be so thorough, they seemed to say.

Our eyelids closed last, the slow overgrowth of skin we knew to expect. A covering of vines and weeds. A baby doll tilted on her back, eased into sleep. Such an easy transition from day to night, so effortlessly subdued. Ours is a drawn-out process, and only little by little do we find our sleep. Someday, we might be discovered here, old and broken and cast aside, but holding each other, holding on to the parts of ourselves that cannot shatter or harden or close. We'd have

our own music box, and we'd be the figures: peaceful, together, undisturbed. I try to tell you this, without words or gestures or glances, the way I've told you a thousand things across our bed, from my sleep to yours, for so many nights over the years. And it must be for this, for this moment, that we've had so much practice. ♦

MEMOIR

Remember the nights when the feral people burnt their memories in the middle of the street to keep warm. How the colour of the fire changed with each memory. And the smell of them. Acrid, some, sharp and bitter. Tactless. Others, the soft biscuit smell of nostalgia. The soldering smell of lines and asterisks crackling in white and black. Remember the diagram of a woman lying in the bath of stars with her buoyant, naked breasts. Remember when we were feral, when we slept on a bus full of flowers and people. Remember the road across the ocean and this tempestuous bus riding it, some of us thinking it's a circus caravan. Remember the leap of indomitability. How it looked around and saw a mote, an idiosyncrasy, and paused. And then it was too late. The leap had left, and the indomitability was stranded on a cliff and turned into a misdemeanour. Remember how the reticent muse sighed, and then beckoned. Remember her white clavicle and her invisible claymore. How her lips smelled of peach Maybelline and ambiguity and disapproval. Remember how you warmed your back in the heat of a forbidden car. Remember the skyscraper in the field. That perforated building, how you could see right into its guilt. Its pierced walls soaked with a requiem of the most terrible beauty, the kind of thing you will listen to while walking through the desert without water. Remember the nude lying in that wheat field after the artist painted her, how she turned the wheat into fresh bread just by looking at it. Remember that we die after three days without water and after an unspeakably long time without the love.

Remember all the dead things. The dead lava and the dead Cambrian creatures and the limbs of soldiers from the great wars. The dead wishes. These ghosts are everywhere. They are the surface of the earth. This is what we walk on every day. Ride this rocking horse, this black dog. Follow it into the underbelly of the night. Write down the things you see. Write it beautifully and cover your mirrors with it. Use it as wallpaper. Tie it to balloons and let it drift into the haunted air. And you know why? It will calm these inclement memories. It will stroke their temples and let them sleep with their arms around you. It will pacify their doom. ♦

Christopher DiCicco

SO MY MOTHER SHE LIVES IN THE CLOUDS

The thing about my father is he tells stories you wouldn't believe. He says, "Simon, did you know there are dragons in these woods?" I have to shake my head because I don't, because it's necessary to admit I have no idea dragons live here if I want him to keep telling his story.

And I do. I want the story.

"Do you see this?" he says, pointing at what looks like a dead vine wrapping up around a tree. "Dragon tail. Don't touch it. Burns the skin, leaves a painful rash."

"Where's the dragon?" I ask, studying the furry brown vine traveling up the trunk.

My father points to the top of the massive oak. "You can't see him. He blends in with the clouds and the sky."

"Like a chameleon?" I ask. We've been learning about them in school. Ms. Kriggle says it's real magic what they can do.

"Yeah, camouflage," my father says. "You can't see him, but he's there."

"Where?" I ask.

"On top of the tree," my father says, "the very top. He's perched there like a gigantic bird."

"All day?" I ask.

"All day," my father says, "eating clouds as they float by."

"And you're sure he's up there? Right now, on this tree?" I ask attempting to touch the vine my father says is a tail.

"Don't do that," he says, stopping my hand. "Remember about their tails."

I let it go, my touching the vine, and instead imagine a dragon the color of the sky staring down at me. "Dad, are you sure? Because you said something like that about Mom, and now Ms. Kriggle is really upset with me."

"She's not upset. Don't worry. She's just a little mad at me is all," my father says. He puts his arm around my shoulders, stares at the top of the tree, up beyond the clouds, even a little further probably.

He's looking for her.

Except I don't believe Mom's there, not like how he tells it. I don't believe that story. Or the dragon.

"It's okay if there's not one," I say looking at the clouds circling the top of the tree. My father, he doesn't say anything. Instead he takes off his gloves, itches his hand like crazy.

"I hate wearing these things," he says motioning to the coarse workman's gloves he lets fall to the ground. "They drive me insane."

I smile, try to imagine he's not. "What would it look like to see a cloud swallowed by a dragon you can't see?" I ask him. "How many clouds do they have to eat to live?"

"The cloud you're looking at, it just disappears," says my father. "And eighteen a day. That's enough."

"Eighteen really? That's enough for a dragon to live on?"

"No," my father says, "It's enough to get them where they need to go."

"Where's that?" I ask.

My father becomes sad, stares at his feet before lifting his head to look back up at the clouds. "To where your mom had to go. They go there. And if you time it right, you can catch a ride with one. Sometimes, your mom told me, if the dragon's in a good mood, he'll take you with him. But cloud dragons,

she said, they're unpredictable, hard to control even for her, a cloud princess."

I look to see if any clouds disappear, swallowed up by dragons, but can't be sure if what I see is what my mind wants or what my heart needs.

"Are you going to be in trouble?" I ask my father, and I mean it, too. I'm worried. When I told Ms. Kriggle about how my mother went back to live in the clouds, she wanted to know why I'd think that, so I told her I didn't really, but that when my father tells me a story, it's so nice, so kind of wonderful I can't help but like it, even if it isn't really true. "It's just a really good story," I say to Ms. Kriggle whenever she cries and asks about my mom. "It's just better than thinking she packed up and left." Ms. Kriggle, she covers her face whenever I tell her something like that. She shakes big sad shakes. And that's why I worry. Because Ms. Kriggle, she wants to speak to my dad.

She doesn't believe him either.

Inside the classroom, my father waits for the last of us to filter out the door. He waits for Ms. Kriggle to stack paper. He waits in a child's chair. And the funny thing, the thing about my father, is he fits in it. Though the chair is meant for a child, he fits right in without a struggle. My father, he's not big guy. He's soft, small, handsome. Different. The kind of guy, he says, who a princess falls in love with but wouldn't sacrifice her kingdom for.

He tells her, my teacher, Ms. Kriggle, he's sorry, he shouldn't have told me that story. Ms. Kriggle says, "I'm glad you understand, Mr. Rulik, but it's not Simon I'm worried about. He seems to understand it's only a story, a story he likes. I mean, Mr. Rulik, he likes your story, but I'm kind of wondering why you're telling him it, if maybe you aren't you

yourself still having trouble processing what happened to your wife. And God knows, I'm sorry. I'm not even sure of the details. I don't even know what happened, Mr. Rulik, but maybe you should talk with someone. I mean, I'll never understand what you're going through. I'm so sorry. Don't cry. I just wanted to say it's a good story, Mr. Rulik. And if you ever need to talk or maybe want me to keep an extra eye out for Simon, anything at all. I'm here."

"It's a good story, isn't it?" my father asks. His voice cracks, and when he says it, I can imagine what he looks like on the other side of the door, seated across Ms. Kriggle. I can see his shoulders, the heaviness there, the heaving up and down, his breath slow, face wrinkled, eyes sad. I can see him.

And it makes me want a story.

The thing about my father is outside he doesn't wear gloves when he should. I can tell because his hands itch like crazy. They're red from not listening to his own advice. He takes the vine again, pulls, even when I ask him to stop. "Dad, it's okay. Really it's alright." He pulls again. "Remember what mom said, Dad, they're unpredictable. Right? You can't control these things. You can't even see them." He's crying now, pulling harder, more often. "Dad, stop. Stop it." He wraps some of the furry brown ivy vine around his wrist, yanks it, kicks the tree. "Come down here," he yells, "We want to see her." He calls her name, my mom, the princess. He yells, "Sara," up at the tree. He pulls the vine harder. "Goddamn it. Take us to her," he shouts. "She's in the clouds, you fucking stupid beast. Come down, please." I reach my hand out, put it on his shoulder. "Dad, for Christsakes," I say, "Stop. C'mon, please." When I grab his coat, when I pick his gloves up off the ground and say, "I love you, stop, c'mon, she's not up there, Dad, she's not," the thing happens, the thing about my

father and his stories, it happens because he pulls again, and the sky, it just kind of falls, just like that, clouds, blue, crashing down on top of us. And when it hits, it's heavy like an entire school building landing, like a father telling his son she's gone. It lands so hard, we fall, the both us, to the ground, and stare at the fallen sky in front of us spreading its wings. We watch cloud patches ripple across its chest. And when we finally stand, my father, he looks from his red hands to me and says, "Remember about the tail." ♦

WOLVING

"I'm getting gray hair," I told Emily. "It feels bristly, like the strands are thicker than normal."

"It's evil, old people hair," she said. "Seriously, though, it's just part of life. It happens."

It was a warm spring evening, and we sat on the balcony outside Emily's apartment, snacking on Cheez-Its and olives. She poured more white wine into my glass, and then into hers.

"I don't know," I said. "It doesn't feel normal. They're on my neck, too. My tweezers can't keep up."

She made a face and shrugged. "Happens to everyone. Welcome to middle age."

"Oh stop," I said. "You're not hairy."

"You don't wanna know how much I spend at the salon," she said. "I keep the waxers in business."

We drank more wine and I spent the night on her couch. I woke up feeling slightly less like a freak.

A few weeks later, things weren't so simple. Short gray hair had sprouted on top of my head, but my hair was still long and brown in back. The neck hair started coming in thicker, too. I bought a few turtlenecks and wore them even on hot days.

Soon my forehead began to swell, and I figured my stress had given me a massive pimple. I dabbed a sulfur mask on it before I went to sleep, hoping it'd be gone by morning.

I woke up in pain and discovered that the lump was even

larger—and shaped almost like a dog's nose. With no way to hide the deformity, I called in sick.

I sent Emily a text asking her to come over after work.

"Well, gosh," she said, under-reacting as usual.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Just give it a few days, maybe."

A few days and many glasses of wine later, I struggled to accept what was becoming clearer every time I looked in the mirror: I was turning into a dog.

Emily refused to believe it.

"Have you looked at me?" I asked. "You can see the snout."

The lump on my forehead continued to grow, and nothing about it looked human. A shiny black nose emerged, and an upper jaw with sharp teeth formed beneath it. The protuberance shaded my eyes, like a visor. Something new was developing beneath my chin. It felt bony and narrow, like a dog's lower jaw.

"I think it's a wolf," she said. "These mountains used to be full of them."

"Am I gonna get paws next? Or, oh my god, a tail? Am I going to stop being human at all?"

"I don't know," she said, "but if it's just the head, it's not that big of a deal."

"NOT THAT BIG OF A DEAL?" I shouted, "I have wolf parts growing out of my face!"

"We all have our baggage," she said. "We all have shit to deal with."

And so I tried to deal with it. I started going to work again. After work, I came home, made dinner, and watched TV. I craved red meat, rare and juicy. I ate it as often as possible.

Once the wolf head had fully emerged, it didn't hurt

anymore. A few clumps of my own hair remained, but mostly, I had wolf fur from the neck up. My human face was hairless, but hidden between the upper and lower jaws.

As long as the wolf mouth was open, I could see and talk and eat, so my life felt relatively normal. I scratched my wolf ears sometimes, and it felt good. Soon, I was able to listen through them, too. My hearing was better than ever.

I saw several doctors and plastic surgeons, but they all ran the same tests and came to the same conclusions. The wolf skull had fused with my own skull and there was no way to remove it. They weren't sure why it had happened, and theorized about environmental triggers.

I felt lucky to have friends and coworkers who appreciated me, wolf head and all. My boss didn't care what I looked like, as long as I got my work done. My friends knew I was still the same person on the inside.

The only thing that really bothered me was being thirty-seven and single. Would I be alone forever?

I asked Emily for dating advice and she told me what she'd been saying all along, even before I started developing the new features. "Be yourself."

"A woman who's part wolf?" I sighed.

"Listen, it's who you are. You can't change it, so why hide it?"

At Emily's urging, I set up an online dating profile. We did a photo shoot in the park. She brushed my wolf fur until it gleamed, and suggested wearing extra eyeliner, so my human face was visible inside the wolf's mouth.

A few of the pictures turned out all right. I filled out the rest of the profile and posted it. I used my real age, height, and weight, because I didn't see the point of lying about the little stuff. In the main section of the profile, I wrote: I'm not wearing a mask. My own skull is fused with a wolf skull. It

grew that way earlier this year. I am either a freak of nature, or a woman who likes to be scratched behind the ears. If you're interested, send me a message.

I got a few nasty comments, and some from people who assumed it was a joke, but the second day the profile was up, I got a short note from a guy named Leonard. He was 42, and in his picture, he was hiking on a tree-lined trail. He had glasses, and looked nice enough. We liked a few of the same bands. His message said he'd be happy to scratch me "anywhere I want to be scratched" and that he had a special appreciation for miracles of nature.

We met for a drink, and after a brief but pleasant conversation, I surprised myself by agreeing to go back to his place. He was an artist, he said. He wanted to show me his work.

I followed him home, and parked behind him in his driveway. He opened the garage door and revealed his studio. His art was creative taxidermy.

"I thought you might appreciate this," he said, "since you're one of a kind, too."

The walls and shelves of the garage were covered with projects. I saw a chicken with rabbit ears and a small alligator with deer antlers.

"Are these real?" I asked. "They're impressive."

"The pieces are from real animals," he said, nodding, "but this is my art, not nature's."

Then he took my hand and said, "I think you're very special."

I knew it was a line, but I hadn't kissed anyone since the wolf head grew, and I guess I missed it. I leaned in.

That's when Leonard realized that to kiss my human lips, he'd have to put his whole head into the wolf's mouth. He pulled back.

"How about some wine?" he asked. He showed me into the house, and invited me to have a seat in the living room. The couch was dark and shiny, too slippery for me to get comfortable.

The room felt like a hunting lodge, because the walls were hung with his artwork. A squirrel with parrot wings rested on the mantle, and next to the fireplace stood a young deer with a single white horn in the center of its head. I found myself wondering who had killed the fawn. Surely not Leonard.

He returned, handed me a glass of wine, and sat next to me. "Shall we toast?" he asked, "To romantic possibilities?"

I nodded, but as I lifted the glass, my wolf nostrils flared for the first time. I felt a rumbling deep in my chest and realized I was growling. "What is this?" I asked, "What's in my glass?" I set it down and took a closer look at him.

"Wine," he said. "It's a nice pinot noir." But he was standing then, and backing away, backing closer to what I suddenly recognized as a gun cabinet.

I leapt toward him. "You think you're gonna kill me?" I grabbed the unicorn-deer from next to the fireplace, and held its pointy horn to his throat. "Don't move."

He closed his eyes and whimpered, but he stood still.

I stepped back and picked up the glass of wine he'd served me. I held it to his lips. "Drink, Leonard."

He shook his head, with his mouth tightly shut, like a child who doesn't want to eat his peas. "Drink or this horn goes through your neck."

"I didn't want to hurt you," he said.

"Drink the damn wine, Leonard."

He took a sip and let it dribble out the side of his mouth. "I can't," he mumbled.

I pictured myself knocking him unconscious, teaching myself basic taxidermy, and leaving him in the garage with

the other creatures.

Instead, I made him kneel on the floor as I took all the bullets from the gun cabinet. Growling at him, at myself, and at life, I headed for my car.

On the drive home, I couldn't stop sniffing the air. I rolled down all the windows and opened the sunroof. I could smell everything for miles around . . . the trees, the birds, the road, even the sky.

I knew if I wanted, I could close my eyes and smell my way home. I felt alive and full of energy.

Alone on a dark stretch of road, I threw my head back, stuck my nose through the sunroof, and howled. ♦

COME ALONE TO THE ALONE.

Come, true light.

Come, life eternal.

Come, treasure without name.

Come, Alone to the alone . . .

—An Invocation to the Holy Spirit by Saint Symeon

It was hard to tell if it was morning or afternoon from Anastasia's view. Out the sliding glass doors, a world of pink-lined clouds and reflecting water. She used to know the time instinctively by the light, where it fell, where it failed to fall, where it shadowed. There was such confusion now and she dreaded appearing foolish, best to be quiet, keep her noise inside, keep anxiety from detonating into livewire energy, cling to that growing sense that she was lightly tethered to the earth. And here beside her wheelchair was the same scattering of women. Always there, or so it seemed, as she remembered, back when she could remember.

They came and went interchangeably, what did it matter if their skin color was black or white or something in between? She was alone with The Alone inside a great, floating bubble. And when she spoke or seemed to speak, the bubble swelled its membranes, voices rocking through like the ocean down the street. When they spoke, she felt they were all under water. These faces, wide-angled and drifting in and out of her own, were unplaceable, untranslatable.

One face, she knew, belonged to her oldest daughter, the one who could never find a decent job, preferring to hide in her room painting flowers. Those of the darker complexion

were more familiar. They held her hands, fed her, dressed her each day, gently lifted her thin arms, her crooked elbows, through the armholes of sweaters and blouses. They spoke in a language of lilting music and their sounds reverberated, bouncing about her brain without meaning. She would smile and nod but mostly she was too tired to play along when memories swam into underworld craters, never clear enough to turn a corner. She couldn't completely follow their chatter, a kind of birdschat comprehensible only by its rhythm and lull that sang her in and out of a cradle-like sleep.

Where she was, why and how she got there fit together in her mind like mismatched puzzle pieces or frames with no interior landscape. Had it always been so? She thought she recognized those gauzy drapes, hadn't they forever veiled her world? Sometimes, one of the black-faced girls (was she a girl or a boy?) doused Anastasia's mouth in lipstick, powdered her nose and plunked a mirror in front of her. She couldn't refuse her own reflection but it was not the self she recalled. *When did my hair go silver? Why am I no longer blonde? What is that mushrooming growth on my forehead?* Sometimes her very self was enclosed in the glass—just another weird capsule she swallowed and found herself inside of.

Other times the faces fed her applesauce, drinks with colors like iodine. "Where is the boy?" She once questioned when she could still bully words into a sentence. "Anastasia, I am a woman, I have breasts, look!" the so-called boy protested, lifting her scrubs to expose a lace brassiere and two plump bosoms fully in their prime. "Why you can solve *any* problem!" Anastasia replied aloud, amazed this boy could also be a girl. But that was months ago. Now she no longer spoke. Now, her pills were crushed; now she no longer fed herself. But when she forgot, and she so easily forgot, the dominant thought roaring down the runway of her

overgrown brainpath was always a plea to be left alone.

And always the daughter's pale, freckled face, those stone-washed eyes hidden behind her large glasses. When had she aged? She was not as Anastasia remembered. The adolescent doll she'd dressed up for years. And was there another daughter's face occasionally buoying up and down. Were there really two? If she could only count, she might recall.

Days stretched along the finger canals, stretched under the bridges where geckos were hidden, stretched down from these dark waters into the Intercoastal and further into the sea where they backed up on themselves in foamy waves. But she herself was damaged with spillage blackening her mind. There were fewer synapses firing and deeper neuron ditches. Days were redundant. Nights, impossible. The long dream moving into evening blurred in her disturbed perceptions. Still there were meals to consume. Pasta or potatoes. Lucia fed her each day as the daughter alternately hovered and hid. But lately she had clamped her lips, the taste was so stale, the texture, beyond heavy. So much effort to chew and then she had to remember to swallow.

Anastasia was annoyed at being watched. She could not admit it but her own daughter made her nervous, the way she gaggled about, always on the phone or fussing with money in her wallet or looking into that small TV she carried around. *Kids and their toy gadgets. Spoiled brats, all.* And everyone talked, and talked about her, in front of her blank face too. Just because she didn't respond to their silly stimuli, their baby talk and baby toys, didn't mean she missed the entire gist of the conversation. Denial was comfortable, a beautiful thing.

But a voice within insisted, *you are trapped in a body that no longer responds to commands from a mind with cracks and gaps*

and sticky tar balls. Come alone, come alone . . . The voice scared her. It was as if she were outside the three dimensions, crossing back and forth into some floating world with ghostly, transparent figures swimming about. The long gone husband, the seven siblings who had slipped gracefully into the heaven she couldn't find. Her elderly parents appeared in doorways smiling, reaching their hands toward her. From one spongy moment to the next, shapes grew large and then dissolved.

All of them, the flesh and blood ones, were looking at her now. A nurse had come and wrapped her arms in the pressure of measures. Anastasia knew enough to pretend she understood procedures; she recognized white lab coats from some clouded place far back in her brain. She still wanted to be seen as agreeable and aware. For all her disdain for boring reportage, she tried to listen. Half of someone's sentence might make sense then the latter part would cut the cord to understanding, clauses became loose words with no foundation, roots would rise and float among the other dirigibles, spitting alphabets of doubt. Time itself had time-outs.

She'd lift into the ethers for an extended stay like the big balloons the elder daughter brought over on her birthday. She was helium clinging to the ceiling. Round shapes gaping above the heads of grandchildren. She didn't know the names of these smiling boys but knew they were babies yesterday and today, almost men. She rode the moments that replayed themselves over and over. *Weren't these same people in the room yesterday? What déjà vu keeps rewinding? Why do they look at me with desperation in their faces, like starving puppies?*

It had become too busy. Doors opening and closing, people to and fro, trays of food, bright packages on the armchair. Anastasia saw that the daughter arranged the confusion and she looked quietly for her aide, Lucia. She

couldn't remember when she'd ever had a black girl in her house. Just the same, she wanted Lucia to sit by her and Lucia to take her away into the bedroom, to lift her atrophied legs onto the bed, tuck her stiff arms into a nightgown, remove her from the din of confusion. Her favorite moments were sitting alone with Lucia, each of them with her magazine. She tried to read though even the pretense lost its meaning soon enough.

In her head she spoke to God. Anger arose though she couldn't articulate it. Sometimes she was insulted seeing her daughter fawning over her, the others cooing. Embarrassed by this much attention, she felt a stone would go hard in her stomach. When she felt it, she closed her eyes, kept them shut through journeys to different daylight. This intense focus streaming all around her. Too much. All she'd asked was not to be a burden. And they'd made of her a burden. How could she ever forgive them?

She expected to expire, but how? How to die when the sun came through the curtains each morning, a lady appearing ready to bathe her? Life with no memory—no regrets—what was the point of death when she had all she needed with these patient girls who came and went? She had once loved her daughter, though, of course, she was inept, and definitely now, she preferred Lucia.

She remembered "Our Lady of Fatima" framed on the wall and liked when the daughter prayed but now words were so much dust brushed off the knickknacks. Whatever happened to her purse, her money? How nice to no longer care. Perhaps living was not so bad. The aides handled her like glass, and her daughter meant well. She wanted to see her daughter succeed at whatever it was she did that appeared to drive her crazy. Living even now, in this condition had to have some purpose. She sought

understanding as if she could trace it out of the photographs she barely recognized. Sometimes a space would clear in her mind like a camera brings figures into focus, and for a short time she would remember.

It had been a life of travel and comfort, children, graduations, vacations. But they would never know how she suffered when her husband passed away so young, how something shifted inside as if she'd swallowed a rat and it slowly chewed through her abdominals. Only now they'd become nodules in her brain, dense matter like meat one cuts open to assess temperature and toughness. She became an actress, a gracious hostess, the matriarchal monument whom all seemed content to believe in. But after the tragedy something shut tight and never opened again.

Why were they all speaking at once in another language in a register she'd never heard? If she closed her eyes maybe the sounds could clear. Still one would imagine the bubbles above their heads with words in them, and she couldn't depend on those designs entertaining her as the melodramatic daughter emoted loudly, like her husband had, always on the verge of manic-panic. How could she die in the midst of the repressed hysteria tightening around her? How could she leave when she was needed?

No one had known. Stoic, and proud of herself for that, even as she saw the life she'd had as the Doctor's wife, parties, country clubs, new cars, family photos . . . drain into an abyss of disappointment. There had been so much hope. He'd been a good man until the end, but no one in his family would help when she'd asked, each one turning away. In those days there were no "twelve steps," no support groups, just the elephant squatting in the living room. She needed to spare her kids the truth, save them from what no one was strong enough to bear—no one but herself. Yet without

grieving, she never really recovered her own ebullience and life lost its luster.

But she'd stood up tall and raised those children, watching every penny. She'd put them through college, into cars and marriages—until she could sell everything and move to Florida, travel the world on her own . . . Eventually the lies she told them about their father's death took hold and stuck. The picture she painted could have hung in the hall next to his own self-portrait. A few martinis and Johnny Carson made all the facts go away.

Wasn't it bed time now? Why wouldn't they undress her? She tore at buttons, rustled material through her fingers . . . why did they snap her back up? She sat rigid in her wheelchair and after a minute or two, the irritation in her brain snagged and pulled until she was back at it, all thumbs . . .

Before bed, she must check the house; it was highly probable the daughter would leave lights on, doors unlocked, windows open. She rocked the wheelchair back and forward, got it up on one wheel when her aide stood and forcefully straightened her and pinned her foot. A nursing home wouldn't allow the much needed restraining belt that continually saved her from a fall. She thought she could buck out of the wheelchair unharmed on her own but she was too angry to be grateful. She looked around the room at them all. How could she leave the chores to others, sleep without double locking the patio doors? Would they remember to close off the porch, turn on the alarms, set the thermostat, check faucets? How to sleep, how to ever go to eternal sleep when her daughter might burn the house down?

Something is exploding in her head. Not pain but a cacophony in color as if a flower truck hit a building head-on. They surround her now, wring her arms, words of a prayer

askew, skidding over the air. The girl must have laid her in bed. The priest's finger on her forehead. *Hail Mary* . . . She can't find the lines . . . something . . . something . . . and . . . "the hour of our death." She pleats the sheets with her marbled fingers. There are tears in the daughter's eyes. Anastasia sends forth a breath, and with effort, the smallest bud of a smile, while the rest of her, what's left of her—tumbles—tossed like a bridal bouquet, fresh petals for them to scatter. For them to catch where they may. ♦

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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Deborah DeNicola wears several writing hats as a poet, fiction writer, memoirist, critic, essayist, editor and blogger. Her most recent publication is a full collection of poetry, *Original Human*, from WordTech Communications Press and her spiritual memoir *The Future That Brought Her Here*, from Nicholas Hays / IBIS Press, which reached #1 in Psychology and Social Sciences on Amazon.com. The memoir, concerned with medieval history, dream image work, travels to Israel,

and Jungian thought, contains a sequence of poems to heal her relationship with her deceased father. The poems won her an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Christopher David DiCicco loves his wife and children—not writing minimalist stories. But he does. Work in *Superstition Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Nib*, *Litro*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *The Cossack*, and other fine publications. Visit www.cddicicco.com for more published work.

Wilna Panagos writes (occasionally it is published somewhere [*New Contrast Literary Journal*, *Gone Lawn*, *Otoliths*, *Museum Life*, *Medusa's Laugh Press*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Undertow Review*, *Ditch Poetry*]), illustrates things (biology mostly), does web design from time to time & so on. She wrote and illustrated a few children's books and is currently writing something which may or may not turn out to be a short, odd novel. She's convinced that reality isn't fit for human consumption and should be avoided at all cost. She believes in orange and pigeons and has an imaginary dog. Oh yes, she lives in Pretoria, South Africa.