

SHIRLEY

ISSUE FOUR HUMORS



FEATURING STORIES BY:
LIBBY KENNEDY
ERICA McKEEN
LAURIE SMITH
EMILY KOON

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THEY EAT FEAR

by Libby Kennedy

My back yard borders on the United States of America, little tick on a big dog's ass. A line drawn in the sand, protected. Sentry patrol, snide; "What's the purpose of your entry?" Radiation detectors, cameras, radar, satellites, drones, droids, patrolling, ensuring safety. Always protecting. Invisible prison wall to keep murdering terrorists out. I've only seen my American neighbour a few times. At night, through a hedge, between raindrops. He's an Asian man and I wonder why he lives there.

There's a beach on my side. And there is a beach on his side. Mine runs south to north, his mirrors mine, north to south. I often rappel down the bank to the sand and rocks below, toss my towel on a gnarled piece of driftwood, slip my flippers on and plod in reverse into the water. The chill rushing my clotting blood deep into my core. I fan through the bull kelp forest, hover over flounder, glide to the cliff that drops some forty feet off shore. Here is another border, another wall. The killers lurk on one side.

There are pods of Orcas here. There's Jpod, Kpod. I recognize them by the notches along their masted dorsal fins. They have people names, like Granny who is 104 years old, Oreo, Pooka, Lolita the newest addition.

When I swim to the drop off they veer over to me. Usually the males come first. Like wobbly tadpoles curious to see if I may be something to nibble on, some helpless wriggling worm. They see I'm probably not food and back off, stare at me from a safe distance. I don't emit fear. They eat fear. Males in front, others hover behind. I've been

with them so long they know me; sometimes the wee ones sneak past their parents and come in for a closer look, only to be nipped and nudged by the elders to stay back. They have personalities. I try to identify them through the murk of salt and sea matter, weeds waving long whiskers, shooing me away, rubber drapes. There are few that are aggressive though I can imagine that is just a protective trait as not one has ever so much as nipped a finger. Most are playful, even some of the older ones. Like puppies, yet much smarter than dogs. There is a glint of sarcasm in their eyes, a registry of personality traits, moody or playful, but one false move and they'd pull me in two different directions with their razor edged teeth. Pure intent and focus, masterful surgeons performing intricate neurosurgery while playing a rousing game of badminton. I sometimes see whale watchers; the scientists, the tourists with guides, the locals, following the pods. I'm close to shore so they usually don't come near the shallows. And I see Jpod under water, hear their clicks change, distress maybe, curiosity? Who knows, these are highly intelligent creature conversations between them and I see each of them is aware something has changed. These whales are well researched, documented. Except one.

I name her Poptart. She's just days old when we first meet. My wet suit sleek as she is, her liquorice skin. The most curious of the whales I've encountered, somehow slipping past her sentry, face to face with me, I touch her nose. She pushes back with a gentle nudge before her mother roughly snouts her away. Our encounters become more frequent through the Spring. Eventually her mother allows her to approach me for longer periods of time, though Mamma is never far off, ready to plough forward in an instant, a tail wag away.

Most of my time with Poptart and her family is spent in morning hours, before the beaches fill with squabbling children and yapping mutts. Before the chug of power boats and their slime of fuel/oil mix filming streaks across the bay, 50lb test lines and weights, trolling back and forth.

My time with the whales begins prior to first light, we devour the glint of sun breaching the beach together, the flurry of crabs scurrying to the safety of deeper water, away from the receding hairline of tidewater. The orcas have rested and are ready for play. They warble and fin around me, a vortex of dark ink and flashes of bleached bellies, around and around in their water dance. I'm giddy as they create currents that waft around me, uncontrollable, I don't even try to flap my flippers, I'm part of the choreography, gymnastics, water aerobics, my heart bleeds happiness! Flailing scarecrow I swirl and swirl. The sun rises, I realize I must surface for air and they realize I must surface for air and they stop. The water churning slows, plankton dizzied, I flick my fins up to the broken glass, to the air above. Beside me Poptart nudges me to the surface. We breathe in together. Side by side. Sucking in the crisp pure air that hovers above the ocean, we cleanse our cells together, breathing deep.

When I'm not with them, I dream of them, the absolute beauty of evolution, I don't take their company for granted. A symbiotic virus invading my soul, their tranquility, their sense of family, their willingness to embrace me. And most of all, their peace. Oh the lessons we could learn!

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One early fall morning I rappel as usual to my swimming spot, fog wrapping my ankles as the cool air churns the warmer waft of ocean water. Frogs chirp from the terrarium rainforest, smokers cough but its cotton caught in their throats. I drop off the last knot of my rope on to the rubble beach. I feel a disconnect, something that's not as it should be. I can hear the fog horns yelling at each other in the distance, I'm here, I'm here and over here. Hide and seek in a goose down comforter. Visibility just a few feet ahead of me, not what people would consider a day at the beach. Swarm of cool mist, lace, frothing the air, pulsing. And for a moment the fog grows thin. I can see a man. He's hunched, kneeling ahead of me, praying I think. The air muffles my footsteps so he does not know that I have become his awkward shadow. I recognize his waterfall hair. The Asian man who lives across the border from me. He has a rope in his hand, I can't see the far end of the rope but he works the end he's holding, masterful artist, balloon twister. In front of him lays Poptart. The air in my lungs hemorrhages out. He is tying the rope to Poptart, a conductor, he's waving his arm. The hemp rope is rammed into her mouth and pulled through her eye. My brain can't reason why Poptart is on shore. What possible reason for her to be sleeping there on shore. Of course she's sleeping, she's not moving, she's still. I can't calculate how violent his action of shoving that rope through her eye socket is.

I want to run to her side, shove her back into her ocean, her home. Exactly what her mother would do, nose nudge, nose nudge, gentle but firm. I can't move, fog curtain closes in front of me, and it never happened. Then a whirring noise to my left. A machine, he is winching her body up his boat ramp.

A waft of warm and I can see Poptart again, bees are trying to nest in her open mouth. I crave honey. The man is nowhere as I see the line tighten then cinch with a sprong. I imagine I hear clicks coming from the water, the others, her family. I think of those Indian funeral pyres when they oil a body, massage with holy grease then place it on a wooden pyre, light a fire, sending the soul to some nirvana, some tropical place with clean water free of researchers, tourists and eye stabbers. The winch whirs her inch by inch up the peppered beach, a sharp jolt each time the rope laps the reel, she is humping her way to his boat shed. I smell her and for some reason I know the smell. She smells like warm concentrated piss, ammonia, the smell of terror. The smell of fear. Then it's over, the shed has swallowed the beast whole. The air is empty, fog begins to filter away in ribbons and I see a dorsal fin just off shore, and another. Her pod.

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I'm back at home and I try to make sense of it. I'd spoken to him once, in the market, bumped shopping carts in the seafood section. Clearly not knowing me he looked down at my cart contents and said, "My mother told me, if you're ugly you better be a damned good cook." He rammed his cart off in another direction while I stood stupefied. (Mouth open. Bees hovering.) And I thought of his words now. Was he cooking her, did he strip off her wet suit, slice a line with his talon along her gut, drain her innards in a tub. Filet her meat. I couldn't get the images out of me, the sliding body, sloshing sound of wet pebbles massaging her belly. Her eye socket void of eye. (Where the hell was her eye!?) Wet slug up the bank, slurped into the dilapidated old bunker. Fish smell, wet fern fog smell, blood. Smell. Fear. Fear. The obvious and expected smell of fear. Over and over, slow motion, forward, backward. The absolute absurdity of her slaughter.

I couldn't just step over the border, pound on his door and ask what the hell was he doing. I'd be picked off by border patrol, rubber gloved, permanently rejected, shot. No. I had to ruminate. Had to seethe about it.

Had this little man skiffed out in the dark early hours, harpoon in hand, baited the wee one with raw salmon tails? They'd have sliced their way to him, trusting a fist full of fish. They'd have nibbled the gift, nipping at the outstretched handheld heads, slippery oil greasing the water's surface, a rainbow trail of entrails. They'd have trusted.

He'd wait until the wee one poked her pretty little head up to take a bite from his offering, he pulled the harpoon back and lunged it deep into her brain, right between her black oyster pearl eyes. And she'd have looked at him, briny saltwater tear before she slipped from her family. He'd have tied her to the side of the skiff, a pontoon beside his boat, pulled the cord on the motor and raced away before her mother finished gnawing on her Coho. The water would calm. Too calm. A stale sour pond. Then Mother would thrash. Where is she? Where is she! The rest would pick up her cue. They know but look anyway, all directions, every way and again. Then again, circling. But he's long gone with her, winching the aluminum sliver of boat from the water. Baby latched to its side. Latched and lashed. He'd be giddy. He'd hear them out there.

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In the darkness I worm my way back down my cliff, releasing my hand from the rope knots. I hide in the cedars, my shadow moving as the clouds open then shut, curtain call. Did it even happen? Denial can be a siren. I want to pour wax in my ears, lash myself to the masts. Could I have imagined it? A lie? No. I can still smell her. Her

wetness. Her terror. The slime trail of her life fading into the pebbles, tiny crabs picking them clean. I creep, hunched up the bank to his house.

The forest, still, ancient, thick cedars wearing mottled moss coats over corduroy bark. Knee deep fiddle heads, moist with dew from rain that never stops. It's easy to hide, to become just another endangered rainforest creature. To blend in to the shadows along with the stern faced owls and crippled coyotes. Where the night smells exactly opposite of day. A light in his window, lace filtering. But I can still see. (Does he not know? I can see!) He's in the kitchen. Working. Working hard in the wee hours. Buckets. So many buckets and garbage bags. Filled, bloated. Black plastic filled with her rubber skin and blubber. And the blood, through the window it's black, I stifle an absurd dirty gasp, it's Exxon Valdez, oil spill, environmental catastrophe, endangering sea life, do something, quick. Do something before the planet is ruined forever.

It's too late.

And like this little man, I have tools. Not the cut saw he is powering through her with. No, mine are a bit more primitive. An ancient saw I excavated from my yard. Blade dulled from years of rain and salt air, rusted teeth threatening to fall out. And a hammer, worn wood handle, dimpled face. I feel like I'm there to assist my American neighbour with his renovation. A truly kind gesture. Love thy neighbour, oh love thy neighbour. He's left the door unlocked. I picture the border shack up the road, guard sipping a steaming mug, rereading his newspaper, unaware a killer is nearby. From inside his shack he smells coffee, newsprint, not the iron in the air. What's the purpose of my entry?

I'm back at the water's edge. I'm not alone. It doesn't take long for them to find me. I'm chest deep now as they slip in around me. Brush against my thigh, squeeze by me, their interrogation. They can smell her on me. But they know I'm there for another reason. And they take my offering. Slippery oil glazing the water. From my outstretched hand. They trust me.

I see the news. A sneaker has washed up along the shore miles north of the Point. And another on a nearby island. Matching. One on your side, one on my side of the border. Suicide, they say, leapt from a bridge probably. They say. Feet still inside.

And a guard sits in his shack. Protecting. So they say.



GURGLE OF THE SWAMP WOMAN

by Erica McKeen

Emily stepped out of the shower and thought for a moment that she would call her sister, Kathy, to help with the baby that day, but then remembered Kathy was dead along with her three children—they had drowned in the lake on the other side of town—and no one would be home to answer the telephone but Emily's grieving brother-in-law, George. As her feet sank into the thick bathmat and she drew a towel from the rack to dry herself, she noted how soggy and huge the hot shower had made her feel. Her thighs stretched below her like two water-logged tree trunks, and her eyes appeared to melt into her cheekbones in the reflection of the dripping bathroom mirror. All of this was no surprise, though, seeing as everything these days made her feel heavy and slow.

The baby, Little Jenny, began to cry in the next room, her voice low and gurgling like the start of a siren passing through water. If Jack had been home from his trip, Emily would have yelled at him to take care of it, but he wasn't, and he wouldn't be for two more days. Little Jenny wailed and wailed and then began to cough, choking for a moment before Emily opened the bedroom door and reached into the crib. She hadn't bothered to put clothes on, or even her bathrobe, and she stood naked by the window

with the baby in her arms, rocking her back and forth. Little Jenny soon hiccuped and found Emily's breast. Together they sat on the floor against the wall, one in the arms of the other, and fell asleep.

Before Emily slipped entirely into unconsciousness and away from the room filled with drifts of steam still leaking from the bathroom down the hall, she imagined the heady scent of her milk was filling her eyes, as stagnant and soft as swamp water.

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Emily woke to Little Jenny crying again, trying to wriggle out of her arms and onto the floor.

"Shush, shush," she crooned to the child, pulling her back up against her shoulder. The air was warm and her skin was oily with sweat. She heard a sound coming from the bathroom, the pulse of running water, and rose staggeringly to her feet. Little Jenny whimpered into her neck.

The shower was running hot and powerful when she entered the bathroom. The curtain had been pulled aside, and much of the water had sprinkled onto the bathmat and the floor. Emily skidded on the slick linoleum and nearly dropped Little Jenny, but caught herself on the corner of the sink. She shut off the water and stood staring through the foggy air, finding her balance.

Hadn't she turned the shower off before getting out? She couldn't quite remember now. She could only remember feeling large and sluggish, and then hearing Little Jenny cry.

She held the baby to her chest with one hand and with the other held her head. Her skull felt like a bloated fishbowl, her thoughts darting away from her like minnows and disappearing. Hadn't she turned the shower off? She mustn't have. She thought once again of calling Kathy, as she always did when her mind got away from her, and frowned as she remembered for the second time that day that her sister was dead.

When would Jack be home?

Two days, too long.

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It wasn't until the next day, while standing in the middle of the kitchen, that Emily heard the quick, sloshing footsteps upstairs. She heard them in the same moment she realized she hadn't made herself dinner the night before, or breakfast that morning. Hunger struck her like an axe to her gut, and she wondered where she had left Little Jenny.

"Jenny?" she called toward the ceiling. The small, slapping footsteps stopped directly above her head in Little Jenny's bedroom. But Little Jenny was much too young

to walk, let alone run through the hallway. Emily shook her head. She had thought for a moment that her child was one of Kathy's, one of the older ones who could not only walk and run, but swim. Kathy used to take them to the lake to swim, where they had all drowned. Or maybe it had been a pond, she thought, sifting through her memory. No, definitely a lake.

Emily ran in a fog up the stairs. When she reached the top, the hallway floor pressed warmly into her bare feet, and the air was slimy with steam. Had she left the shower running again? Apparently so—hot mist poured out of the bathroom and covered the walls with large, rubbery droplets.

Through the bedroom door in front of her, Emily could see that Little Jenny was not in her crib or her playpen. Damp footprints, evaporating fast, dotted the carpeted floor. They entered the room and then retreated. Emily followed them to the bathroom and found Little Jenny sitting in the fast-filling tub, the shower pelting down around her. The drain had been plugged, the water had reached Little Jenny's belly button, but the baby seemed entirely unperturbed: in fact, she sat quietly looking upward, her large smile gaping toward the ceiling.

"Jenny!" screamed Emily. Her voice sounded far away, as if spoken from another mouth across the room. As she yanked her daughter from the bathtub and turned off the hot water, Little Jenny gurgled and laughed and spit into Emily's contorted face. The skin on Little Jenny's thighs and stomach was pink and raw, as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper. Emily rushed downstairs, where she placed the baby in the kitchen sink and ran cold water over her body. Little Jenny screamed.

"Shush, shush," said Emily, clutching the baby's writhing body. "Quiet now and wait 'til tomorrow. Jack will be home tomorrow. Hush now."

But Little Jenny didn't want to wait until tomorrow, and neither did the wet footsteps on the second floor. Little Jenny cried and cried and wouldn't stop unless she was left alone in her crib, with Emily a safe distance downstairs. Then she would become quiet, and the house would fill with opaque silence. Emily would wait at the bottom of the stairs, listening for the pattering of footfalls in the hallway above. The more she listened, the more she found that they were strange, inconsistent footfalls; they began rapidly, almost tittering, like that of a small child, and as they moved along the floor they grew until they were heavy and thumping, like that of a large, grown woman. When Emily heard them, she would storm upstairs, only to find the top floor of the house empty but for Little Jenny screaming at her from the crib.

"You'll get tired soon enough," thought Emily, after repeating this routine five times. She sat down next to the crib, placed her hands over her ears, and waited for the crying to subside.

When she opened her eyes, the crying had indeed subsided, but this was only because Little Jenny had disappeared from the crib. Thick steam once again filled the room, and as Emily lifted herself from the floor and moved toward the doorway, she felt as if she were swimming through the air. Strange shapes of furniture and picture frames bloomed out of the semi-darkness of the afternoon. Emily passed them, dreamily, not recognizing them as objects until they were already behind her.

In the bathroom, the shower was running. A small, pink body struggled face down in the bathtub, the sounds of her splashes drowned out by the water crashing into the tub from the showerhead. When Emily lifted Little Jenny from the bath, the baby stared at her, unbreathing, her eyes shaking in her skull. Then she made a noise like deep choking, then she puked on Emily's chest, then she laughed and threw her arms upward, her round fingertips wrinkled like tiny brains.

A drop of dark green liquid landed on top of Little Jenny's head and rolled down into her eye socket. The baby giggled. Emily looked up.

A woman, or what used to be a woman, clung to the ceiling above the shower. Her hands and feet were spread wide like lizard's toes, and her head was at an odd angle, turned owl-like at the two of them below her. Her skin was a dull, soupy green and hung from her in large, doughy sections, as if it weren't skin at all, but a loose, liquidy bag that the woman had stepped her skeleton into. Sparse coils of black hair hung from her slimy skull, and a long string of drool swung from her bloated lips.

For a moment Emily thought she was looking in the mirror, upside down, but when she turned her head to the wall above the sink she saw her own face staring back at her with wide, sunken eyes and frizzy hair. It was just that the woman, the creature, on the ceiling seemed strangely similar to herself, with the same dark eyes and protruding nose. Then she realized it was Kathy, Kathy, her sister, Kathy, and as the woman detached herself from the ceiling and slopped onto the floor, Emily ran from the room with Little Jenny in her arms. She slipped on the slick hardwood and went down, managing to swivel her body in midair so Little Jenny landed on top of her, her head thumping softly between Emily's breasts.

Emily used her elbows to slide herself backward toward the stairs while the woman crawled out of the bathroom, her legs dragging limp and soupy behind her.

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Later, Emily called her brother-in-law, George, and told him Kathy was alive, but she was changed. George couldn't understand a word Emily said—she spoke in a guttural, bubbling language that made his stomach turn. He called Jack, who caught an early flight home from Toronto, and the police, who arrived at the house to find Emily sitting naked in the bath with Little Jenny, both of whom were fast asleep.

Emily couldn't speak for two weeks. Well, she thought she could—she told her story over and over again to Jack, to the nurses and doctors at the hospital, and finally to the psychiatrist, each time in overwhelming detail. The sweaty cloud which had invaded her brain had, ever since she spotted the swollen woman on the ceiling, dissolved. Sharp clarity had swallowed her up like a sky without precipitation, like a cold wind striking an open eyeball. What the medical officials heard, what everyone heard, was a series of jumbled gurgles spewing from her mouth along with her saliva. Only Little Jenny seemed to understand any of it: during visits to the hospital she was more attached to her mother than ever before, and she laughed when Emily made her babbling noises—sometimes she even spoke back.

When Emily did find her English words, she could do nothing more than explain that a woman had come out of the bathtub drain as a baby, smaller than a baby, a fetus, and had grown until she was Emily's size, until she was dead, but really still alive, and had wanted to take Little Jenny with her, like all the other children. When asked who this woman and the other children were, Emily had no response. She had remembered how to communicate, but she had forgotten the 'true words,' as she called them—the names and details. Somewhere along the way she had lost the story. Jack, George, and the psychiatrist were left to connect the strange and ill-formed pieces she provided, like building a body out of mismatched bone and flesh.

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Months later, after recovering, Emily would wake in the night and remember the whole thing, all of it, in a flash that wrenched her breath from her throat and pulled her torso up out of bed.

The woman, the creature from the drain, had dragged herself through the hallway and taken Little Jenny from Emily's arms. She had held her in the sludge between her swinging breasts and leaned back against the wall, her bruised and bulbous legs sticking out into the middle of the hallway. There she had rocked Little Jenny back and forth and fed her the green milk from her breasts and spoken to her in the strange language that Emily at first couldn't understand, but later came to know quite well.

When she had become proficient—this took maybe an hour of listening and trying the words in her mouth—Emily spoke to the woman, who was her sister, Kathy, and who also wasn't, about endings and beginnings and the fear of these things.

"You're afraid of me," the woman had gurgled.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Emily had answered. "You're a monster."

"I'm also your sister."

"You're also not my sister."

"True." The woman had smiled, her mouldy teeth showing between her lips.

In that moment, though, when Emily would sit up in bed and remember the woman's face, her voice, her swampy milk which Emily had drunk solemnly and with fervour beside Little Jenny, Jack would lift himself onto an elbow beside her and say a word, softly, into the dark. The flash of comprehension and recollection would fade into the corners of the black bedroom, and Emily would settle back onto her pillow, finding her voice in her throat, and whisper to Jack that everything was fine, that they should go back to sleep.



THE FOUR HUMORS

by Laurie Smith

It is the second century, and we know – more than magic. At Pergamum the physician Claudius Galenus has investigated the colours of death. We assume they represent life as well. Blood is temperament, red sex and passion, red heat and emotion, it throbs in veins webbing within all the flesh, red, flame red, liver clean. The function of the heart is unclear. This black oil or tar is bile, from what are called the suprarenal glands, located just above the kidneys. Black bile carries adrenalin, energy when required, but usually it lays melancholic as sludge. The white juices in the body are phlegm, mucous, and sweat. They keep us calm and even-mannered but may congeal in the bronchia. If the throat is not cleared often, one may choke on one's own tongue. Yellow is more difficult than the others. Yellow is not the sun or yolks, or pollen. It is temper, the irascible, the brilliant anger unboiled, strangled and narcotic. This greasy secret, choler, fills a pocket we have named the gall bladder, hidden behind the liver, the lifeblood. These offenses churn within the choler, forming irregular stones; the body wants an arsenal. It will die heavily because they will never be thrown.

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You try to take the pain bravely, drugged for manageability, until one day the numbing wears and you find yourself bound like Prometheus. They are your own mad talons that

clutch and tear liver and heart and awareness. What fault, what sin, what fire? The disease is a kind of smoldering, sometimes quiet, often to the wail of Gahanna.

Then comes oral sedative #1 (for trypanophobia). Look it up. Apparently I've eaten opium, seen crocodiles writhing like busses, downtown arteries and veins swell, bruising and noxious. Intermittent strangers assume you're as easy as the others—just another routine poke and jab and strip and slice and gut; it should be so clean and bloodless. There is no heart to attack. There is no god to pray to. There's nothing to be afraid of, dear, there's nothing.

Now I lay me just down to sleep. Possible, only because (pray what lord?) someone is there. This is my will, here is the house key and if I should die I'll come to you in your dreams and tell you everything and if I should not die you will wake me.

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So let me tell you about the surgery as I saw it: you are swarmed, asked to take off the nail polish, all jewelry, even the elastic in your hair and they medicate you. There are green walls, and ugly orange curtains, and long hazy waiting. Smiling-eyed masks come and vaguely roll you down to the O. R. through a narrow place; square lights are the floor your eyes are pulled across, and grey faces bend reassurance along the way. In my fugue I sprang up, made the gurney-pushers STOP, wait, listen to my final delirious instructions. Does everyone understand? This is my absolute will. The masks all nod, as they should when they hear the word 'absolute'.

Another scene: two pleasant green females rouse me and I flounder onto the next table. They aren't talking about me, so I make my memory circle the room, note more, more green and lights, chrome everywhere. It is much smaller than I expected and over my left shoulder a male mask is injecting something into a tube; of that I have brief cognizance. A plastic cup goes on my face and the females joyfully check with me, that it's my gall bladder, right? And then, sweetheart, how old are you, just breathe naturally, do you have any kids? Yes, two, STOP! NO! I have to get to my kids! I scream and struggle with the plastic on my face, with the green nurses pressing down my instincts crying into black.

(I don't know how much black – there were no dreams, there were no voices or lights or stars or gods. And for that time I was not.)

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My own shrieks woke me, still pulling at the mask, still fighting for control even as a familiar face coaxed me from the undeath, convinced me it was over, and I live.

At the time I thought you loved me.

More than the 'graphic process, it was posing, a mating dance and I responded, became contained light reacting yet latent until you opened me in the dark, (can't look!) washed me in some chemistry. Rolled, turned, 'agitated' was probably the word you used and I was negative, black to transparent degrees of opacity. The lights come back on. Left clipped to a thin wire, dust-free, untouched until dry and you were ready to choose your best shot. Such expensive equipment to cut me down (cropping – slice away the unnecessary – make perfect your composition); bare amber is enough to see. Scraps, first testing for contrast, focus, exposure then set aside. Counting, counting eight by ten a timer indicates I'm ready. Floating shallow in three baths: the first – I come alive, glow, change before your eyes. Stirring the second is, you tell, me, something to halt the process. The last feels like Ophelia, face up or Atwood, "this is a photograph of me." Where am I, really? Now is the image you have. A print, rinsed thoroughly (all cool, the air, the waters) then, so gentle, by the edges you blow me dry like hair. You can be proud of this particular piece. I am to be framed. Hung. Looking down at the test scraps of myself still damp in the wastebasket.

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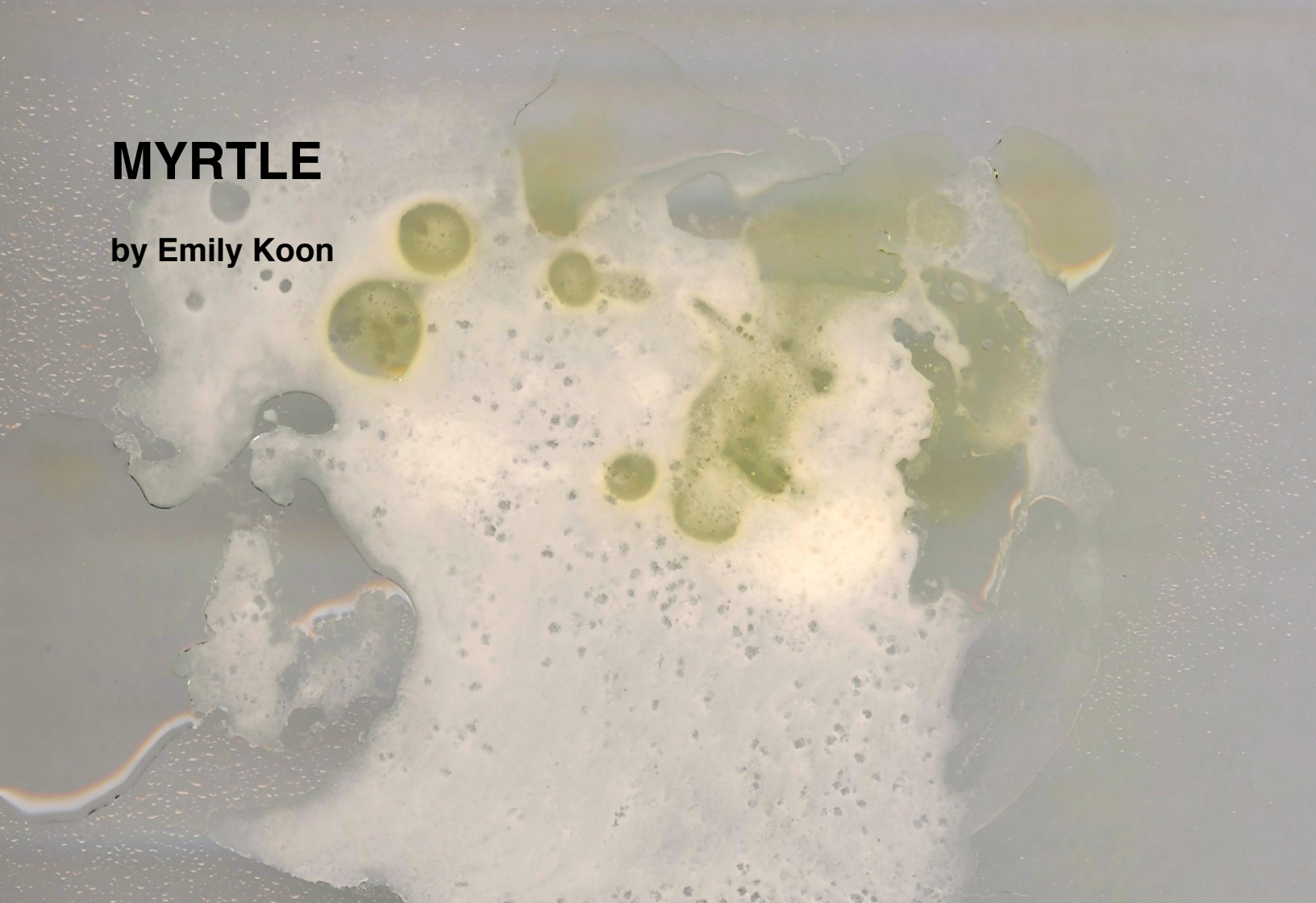
Here is a dream I had, verbatim: I don't know how it happened; I was still married, kissing and loving another man (I saw his face, high cheek-bones, long blond hair. I may have called him David but that was wrong.) My husband waited in bed then lovingly showed me his gums bleeding from root canals and multiple extractions and I said oh yah, look at this! Sucked back my tongue, spit out the lining of my mouth like a prosthetic. The muscle blob came to life on my shoulder reminding me of a miscarriage, placental, a small man o'war as it did tricks crawling silently down my arm, turned inside out in my hand, smiling, rested quietly on the bed between us. He said I think maybe you should put it back. I went to the bathroom to get it wet and comfortable enough to slide into place but it slipped out of my hand and crawled under the vanity. As I examined my naked orifice in the mirror another layer of secondary pinker diaphragm came loose, drooled down my chin and fell to the carpet where it went crawling with the first mouth. As I grabbed for it the live thing oozed through my fingers like jello-skins in dishwater. I remember the laughing panic and quickly stuffed the remains in my hollow face. In desperation I wrestled with the bigger tongue and tried to rinse off the germs from the bathroom floor. It too dissolved in my hands so I thought to myself, hey, use cold water. This only hardened my mouth into shale chips of broken crab shells, brown translucent and jagged. Silently crying yet now calmer I gathered the pieces of my lost voice, found a basket big enough to hide them in then carried the basket into my mother's living room where I motioned for my husband to follow me back into the bathroom. Showing him the shards of my broken voice I (somehow) said I think we have a problem. On the way to the hospital I dreaded

stitches in my mouth, hoped it would all grow back, considered the positive effects (I couldn't offend anyone) and I would be given ice cream although it would sting such tender flesh.

The doctor said this might take some time to heal. But I thought there were electronic devices for mutes? Yes, said the doctor, however they're not quite developed yet. But... but how will I communicate in the meantime? In the meantime, said the doctor, you're a writer. Write. What was the pearl but an offence; what is a poem but fondling? Unclench your fist and present the jewel.

MYRTLE

by Emily Koon



The ogre living under the bridge in the park, which is basically a forest with sidewalks running through it, wants me to know she means business. Before eating people, she listens to them beg for their lives, lets them tell her things about themselves, the reasons she shouldn't eat them. She eats them anyway.

"This one guy, he had a crippled dog named Peanut. It had an extra foot growing out of its front leg."

"Great," I say.

"I'm Myrtle, by the way."

She says it like we're in line at the DMV, like we've been chatting to pass the time. Later we'll Facebook each other and get cappuccinos downtown.

"Monsters don't have names," I say. She's just The Monster, the thing that runs out, teeth bared, if you use the bridge after dusk.

The park has other monsters than Myrtle. There's the goblin that lives in the creek, the hag who sleeps in the picnic shelter and spits at people. I tried giving the hag money once, but I learned the hard way she wants to be left alone.

"Actually, I'm an ogre," Myrtle says. "Monster is a generic term, like saying you're from North America."

Myrtle subverts all my expectations about ogres. For one thing, the floral print shift dress she's wearing looks like it came right out of the Coldwater Creek catalog.

"And I didn't think lady ogres existed, either," I say.

"Where did you think ogres came from if there weren't any lady ones?"

"The things that get left out of stories," I say, shaking my damn head.

"I'm going to eat you," she says.

★

Myrtle's kind of cute, for an ogre.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she says.

It's been twelve days and she hasn't eaten me yet.

"When I think of an ogre, I think of this awful hairy thing drooling all over itself, burbling gobbledygook."

Ogres of legend are always military green and smell of dead fish. No matter how hard you try, you can't make out what they're saying except the handful of words that matter. Catch. Kill. Eat. Myrtle is different. She's bluish gray and smells like a juniper bush and doesn't eat me.

"I'm done talking to you," she says, putting her palm up. Talk to the hand.

I could fold myself into Myrtle's warmth. I could smell juniper berries all day. I want to ask her if she really means to kill me, if she's just been fronting this whole time, but this seems like the fastest way to get eaten.

Frank wants to know, why give the ogre the time of day? Why give your destinies the chance to intertwine, Opal? "Opal, Opal, Opal," he says, as if I'm a child who's brought home a rabid raccoon. I talk about Myrtle every night over the vegetable lasagnas he unstacks for us out of the freezer. For months now, it's been nothing but vegetable lasagna.

"You got your mushrooms, you got your eggplant, you got your spinach, you got nutrients out the wazoo," he said once when I asked for something else. What else could I ask for? I wasn't complaining, just asking to throw a casserole into the mix every now and then.

Frank is a practical-minded man. He chooses the most straightforward path, keeping complications to a minimum, always knows where everything is. We're unlike in this, that I won't fold clothes when they come out of the dryer, that I'm content to live out of laundry baskets.

"Frank doesn't want you to be happy," Myrtle says.

"Frank is a good man. He doesn't want me to have to struggle. I don't want to talk about Frank."

We don't talk about Frank. On the way home from my job at Starbucks every day, I cut through the park so I can catch Myrtle up on the haps. She's always interested and never turns down food, and after a while Frank recedes into the forest.

"So, Stacey's seeing Eric, but she's still technically with Brian? Is that what you call 'an open relationship'?" Myrtle munches a shortbread cookie, working out the subplots of my coworkers' love lives. Starbucks is a TV show to her, like sands through the hourglass. "I don't understand human couplings."

In ogre relationships, things are pretty cut and dry. The male clubs the female over the head and says, "Let's do this thing," and she shrugs and says, "Ok, I guess." Two years later there's a baby ogre. Myrtle explained it all, the ogre gestation period being comparable to an elephant's. When I told her about me and Frank, she asked if I was sure he wasn't an ogre.

"Frank would never club someone over the head," I said. "He's a completely non-violent person." Violence would introduce chaos into the system, making things unlivable.

"I'm just saying, it sounds pretty whatever."

It doesn't take Myrtle long to figure out I'm sleeping in the park. The playground has one of those curly slides with a fort at the top, an excellent studio apartment for someone who isn't talking about Frank. The morning she finds me curled up in the fort with my Starbucks apron for a blanket, she lectures me about safety and making myself vulnerable to dark forces.

"There are things out here," she says.

"You mean you."

"I'm out here, yes."

"But I'm not afraid of you."

"I'm responsible for your safety while you're in the park. If Frank ever finds out..."

"We said we wouldn't talk about Frank."

"That was before you started living in the park. All contracts are void as long as you're acting like a crazy person."

"Go away, Myrtle. Go eat someone."

"Now you're just being a jerk."

I pull my apron over my head, but it's nothing against the force of Myrtle coming at me, relentless as rain.

★

"Would you be a love and bring me a flat white from Starbucks?" Myrtle asks one day. "And a biscotti? I'm hungry enough to eat even you."

These last few weeks Myrtle's looked thin and depressed. There's been a dropoff in slaughters since I moved into the park, and I know it's because of her, living off squirrels, and that she's done this as long as she can. I've heard her stomach rumbling through the trees. While I'm in line at Starbucks, she'll pull a couple of bocce players off their court and gut them, turning their entrails into kielbasa ropes. When they're found three days later, still clutching their balls, Myrtle will go underground for a few days, and I'll be alone.

No one's ever starved herself for me before. It fills me with gratitude, to think I matter that much, but it makes me feel bad. Squirrels and biscotti are not her true nature. The doughy body and sweet underbite and her care for me do not add up to Myrtle. Myrtle is more than the sum of her parts.

"I'm not going to be your errand girl anymore, Myrtle," I say when she comes back from wherever she goes after she eats people. Later she eats the Tai Chi class, out of hunger or to get back at me, who knows.

*

Forts are for waiting things out. Mine is for hiding from Myrtle, the mom voice she'll use when she tells me to come down, let's talk about all this. I've just curled into a perfect ball under my apron, thinking how hard it is to be friends with ogres, when a dad and his kid climb the ladder up to the fort and bust up my pity party.

"Oh, no," the dad says.

"Who is that lady?" the kid says.

"It's a hag, son. She'll scratch our eyes out if we don't get out of here."

"I'm not a hag," I say. "I work at Starbucks."

The words must come out rarble rarble death because their faces break apart the way people's faces do before they run from Myrtle.

"Climb down faster, son."

I guess Myrtle followed me here to make sure I was okay. I guess she watches me when I'm in the park, in case the other monsters mess with me. I've seen them circling and can only imagine what she tells them. She's mine, like the park is a used car lot and she's going to sell me a Corolla. At any rate, she's right there, teeth bared at the dad and his kid, a fell roar uncoiling out of her gut.

"This park's gone to pot," the dad says as they run.

"I don't know about this," I say.

"You make a choice every day to be here. We all do," Myrtle says.

I've still got my job at Starbucks and my Y membership (how I shower). Threads to follow back if I want. Maybe I'll set things right with Frank, make up a story about a kidnapper. He made me hand out religious tracts, I'll say. It will offend his sense of order, and he'll fold me back into our life.

What would I do about Myrtle, though? Leave her in the park to pick off joggers and old men with metal detectors? I wonder if I can abandon her to such a life, if ogres can be mainstreamed, enrolled in community college. I could try taking her back to the apartment, where I'd keep an eye on her for a change. We'd snuggle under a blanket and watch Grey's Anatomy, shaking our heads at the folly of young, sexy professionals. I'd teach her not to eat people.

"That would be coming back the wrong way. You know that," Myrtle says.

*

Myrtle thinks it's time we had a talk.

Until now, she's refused to let me see her hovel. I'd beg to see it, and she'd tell me to step off.

"I want to see your bed. I want to see where you go to the john," I'd say, and she'd bare her long incisors, a warning to back off. I thought she was embarrassed by her home's poverty, the one cardboard box and rusted barrel she must have had to her name. Turns out, her digs are nicer than mine.

"Don't put this on your Tumblr," Myrtle says.

Her house is a cavern accessed through the storm drain under the bridge, with cool, damp rooms labyrinthing off each other. In the walls of the cave are notches she's filled with the skulls of her victims.

"Myrtle, this place is a hot mess," I say.

A pair of pantyhose is draped over an armchair like the skin of someone's leg. When I sit down in it, I see it is the skin of someone's leg sucked right off the bones.

"Take it or leave it."

Myrtle's in a mood all of a sudden.

"I was invited here," I say.

"I've spoken with Frank."

"You talked to Frank? We agreed we wouldn't talk ab—"

"He doesn't think it's prudent for you to come home. Not right now. He needs some time to think. Do you have any friends you can stay with?"

My only friend is Myrtle. I had friends. Stacey and Eric and Brian from work, but they're busy lately.

"I've got my own place," I say, gesturing up toward the playground.

"That's not a life strategy, and you know it."

I could be happy here. I think of Frank and the taut, spare life we had, the endless lasagnas unstacking, and feel no regret.

Myrtle takes me to the kitchen, cracks a tin of Spam and shows me her pets. Not live animals, but the strung-together bones of people she's killed. She's tied a bunch together into the shape of a dog.

"Her name's Peanut. She's got an extra foot growing out of her front leg there. You be a good dog now, Peanut," Myrtle says, petting her. She puts a half moon of the pink meat on a plate for me, ringed by a Saltine cracker fan. "Hey, are you on Facebook?"

"No."

"Me either."

We have our own Facebook down here in the cave. It's called talking.

"I love how Spam is always served en gelee, like we're Rockefellers," I say.

Myrtle clicks her index finger in the air. Like.

The Lifetime original movie playing on Myrtle's television is called *A Date with a Madman*, in which a divorcee played by Dixie Carter answers a personal ad and the guy turns out to be a killer.

"People really shouldn't leave their houses," Myrtle says.

"You ought to know."

She says it's easy to kill. People don't take precautions, or they trip over themselves looking for the good in others. I say some people are good, and she says I'm lucky to still be alive.

We don't talk about Frank, who isn't looking for me. The next day and the day after that Myrtle pulls more Spam out of storage and I make the joke about the Rockefellers every time. She laughs of out politeness because politeness is an easy gift, like not sucking the bones out of my skin.



A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

These four fluids that exist within the body, one of the first codes we used to explain ourselves to ourselves: for the fourth issue of Shirley we were thinking about the four humors, the liquid body. The stories in this issue bring their own mysticisms & mysteries to the body and the world it might find itself in. Fluids aside, they shed light on the language we use about bodies and what they do, how close we're willing to look at ourselves and what might be slipping around under our skin.

Thank you for reading and writing,

CB & LP
Editors