

*Caput non impluviabile*



fig. 1





*pluvia*



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              **Joseph Reed**



Our father was a man about whom nothing was known. Nothing is known about him still. He gave us the recipes. He was not very interesting. A tree is more interesting. A suitcase is more interesting. A canned good is more interesting. When we sing the father hymn, we notice that he was not very interesting. The words of the hymn notice it. It is explicitly commented upon, in the text.

—Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*

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Sara Levine

## The Fainting Couch

*Three Stories*

### I

As she had devoted the larger part of her life to that piece of furniture, they had grown accustomed to her there: not dead but eyes closed and wishing fervently that she might be. It was no longer necessary to toe it around her; you could laugh, whistle, fart, rip a sheet of paper from a spiral notebook. In the midst of this activity she would lie, eyes closed as if she were sleeping, a musty odor of melon surrounding her body like a moat.

“Have you grown accustomed to the look of me?” she would ask the child and his father. “Have you tired of me? Don’t you think I know what a burden I am to you? Don’t you think I have tired of myself?” She might go on like this for days until the desire to provoke them dissipated.

The child didn’t go near her unless asked to bring a blanket or a tray. On occasion, he peeled an orange for her and had perfected a technique whereby he rolled the orange between his

palms to loosen the peel so that it came off in one large piece. After he handed over the fruit, he studied the empty peel in his hand, thinking how the pores of the peel were not unlike the pores of a person's nose.

Sometimes when she got up to go the bathroom, the father and the child did a quick search and found the oranges uneaten under the cushions of the couch.

"Your poor mother," the father would say. "She just gets so tired, doing for you and me all the time. She has been on the fainting couch for fifteen years. Perhaps if she ate more citrus..."

On hearing this, the mother would open her eyes and grab the roots of her hair. With a gust of wind her scream would raise the couch into the air, where it wheeled around the room, grazing the ceiling and rattling the glass beads on the chandelier, and all the while she rode, her body stayed rigid and her eyes stayed open and her scream was so relentless and terrible she speckled the walls with her saliva. She always landed a few minutes later and was calmer.

The boy grew up to be a very nice person.

When I am dead, lay me down on a fainting couch. Pretend, briefly, that I have bent like a branch in the breath of bad news.

Fetch smelling salts. (I will have them.) Fan my brow.

Sweetheart, I wouldn't dare pronounce judgment on you, and I hope you won't judge me. It frightens me that I might die in an unseemly position—with a grimace, on the toilet, in a posture that would embarrass us all. Promise to lay me down on the fainting couch, and I know I shall look dignified and peaceful. I shall look as I do when you come home from work and I'm down for a nap. What do you always say? Like your kitten!

When you have grown accustomed to the look of me there (dead on the fainting couch) call my mother. There will be a delay, even if she tells you she is dressed and will be right over. My death will creep into your heart and you will wait as she sweeps out the garage or removes the slick from the drain board. If you are out of your mind, just stand in the pod of the curtain and breathe. When at last she comes, open the door and take her arm. She loves that. Remove her coat and lead her to the fainting couch. Draw the shades, but do not leave her alone with me. She'll see the amethyst ring from Brazil and take it back.

If I am not wearing shoes, would you please put them on? Thank you.

I have a strong presentiment that I will die in the morning. I have a strong presentiment I will die and smell of lemons. It will be a weekday, I feel sure. Pick up the mail and deliver my

last letters to the fainting couch, and please see to it that I am not arrayed with any flyers from the electronics store. They keep sending them and sending them, because we bought a battery once. If you loved me, darling—*do* you love me, darling?—you will remember what for.

3

Outside the theatre a woman fell and turned her ankle. Her ankle turned like a key. In haste, in search of aid, her companion, a tall, bushy-bearded man, pushed his way through the crowd and knocked me over. My ankle turned like a key. As I fell I thought of the hand that had laid itself on my elbow, causing me to lose my equilibrium. It had been a long time since I had been touched. His hand, which gripped my elbow, had felt hot and therefore good. Not a caress, but a tactile experience. Then I found myself on the pavement, the ankle twisted below me in pain.

I have wanted to lie down in the middle of a crowd before, but there were no excuses.

A stretcher came for the woman who had fallen. Naturally, it came for her; she had fallen first. She talked the whole time they put her on the stretcher. “This is an indignity,” she said. “I’m sure I can walk. He’s over-reacting,” she said of her

companion. “I could hump along if I had someone against whom I could lean.”

She said it like that: “against whom I could lean.” Just the kind of person who goes to the theatre, I thought.

As I waited for the stretcher to return, I entertained myself with other thoughts. But the stretcher did not return. The street grew empty, the sky grew dark. I had lost the feeling of the hand on my elbow, the hand that had been hot and good. At last, I got up.

I limped through the parking lot, which was empty, through the streets, which were dirty, and I came to a park where a man sat on a bench. Was he a strong man, I didn't know, a good man, I couldn't tell; a fat man, a sharp man, a blind man, a young man; judgments I did not make. I waited until I got right in front of him and then I swooned. I came down with a thundering noise because that's how people faint, not like a feather, like a sack of potatoes tumbling off the larder shelf. When I came to the man was leaning over my face and taking my pulse or my wristwatch, it didn't matter to me which.

D

Rhapsody. Mispronunciations. What is it about childhood that affects us. A plane homing in. The denunciation, the informant. Keep it close. The razzle dazzle. The dark authorial voice. Nose up. Arrow. Demolition, defrocked, demilitarized, Frankensteined. Lever up the shiny stuff past 10 o'clock. Entrance grants sanctity. *Duende*, demarcation. And the living doesn't portrait as well as you might think. D so close to the cusp. The confusion, the paradox. Devotion. The evidence against us. We fly our own way, though living has its possibilities. Desolitude. Desegregation of souls. Poor Pythagoras, except for your theorem, mostly lost. The antipathy, the feint. Appropriation of grief something natural here. I'm drawn to it like wings to light. Sharp percolations. Positive identification. Lifted windows like lifted skirts, the lock, stock, and barrel. The blessings are mixed. In bloom, call girls are asking you for paper to write it all down. We are forever writing with our bodies. I *can* make sense of it. Danger a mother lode. The grandiloquent, the dry eye, the seemings ripped, the fusion confused, the cheerful bruise, antagonism, desire...

All that negativity. D for prose. The letter I will never write. Eventually D knocks, we want nothing to do with it. The living are stuck with the living, dead to the dead. Now face the other. The evil wicks away (hardly at all). Bad fabric? D in the darkness D in the light. For words that begin with D in other languages. Where maybe D doesn't exist at all. Proto chango. Sediment, siding. The unilateral nature of anything, which is complete, utter denial. Blankets. Immeasurability that can be measured. Infinitely. Underestimation, priceless. The embitterment, pure power. Proximity on time. Lift off happened hours ago, minutes ago, now, futurity. The future full of maturity. Imminence. An image dismantled. Immense forgetfulness. We not that important and of the utmost, still proving our DNA. Prowling around. The idea to hold off. To aggress. Pursue. We've been underpinned, lifebloods of silence. We do not always choose the things we need to do. Alluvial, bright...

Yet bury me in time for dinner. Traditional measurements of time that I so desperately need. Don't get me wrong, I exist within the parameters. There are two ways at least this can go. You fill in the rest; it's a constant revision. The decisions we make, if we're lucky, are our own. It's an interesting conceit. The versus, the verisimilitude are remarkable. Enough is enough. No resurrection except in hushes, disbelief. Welcome to our

planet. Please buckle in. The iridescent flicker of wings. What season. Monarchs clinging. Our dues. No fleeing the outpost before too late.

I need the ghost word. Leaf prints in cement. Something there, weaving. And the bruising. The under sea level. Levees, pumps, dams. Who will we find above the gravestone, waiting. To survive is the only prerequisite, the final exam. I cannot complain. Not a matter of when, but how. How dapper. Delinquent. A small intimate concert at 8 p.m. Boisterous hummings coming clear. Compass points, libations, love sketched in pencil; it's emphatic! Clusters of photographs like strophes, bundlings of nerves, package deal. Is it erratic to write in one long perfect line so we feel all evening gown? Desire in fields, folds. The field notes say: each section of this is domestic, a magnet. A freezer full of good oaths, a bedtime story. Did you tell it? Did it find its lucky day?

Thomas O'Connell

## Death by Dreamt Birds

The sky is full of revolution. Birds at my feeder no longer mean what they once did.

Don't talk to my mother. She will make me out to be the successor to St. Francis. This is because of my abuse at her hands as a child. I was forced to sit on the brick patio with my cupped hands outstretched. Seeds and pellets filled my palms. Birds came to trust me. They would swoop down to the low trees and trim grass surrounding the bricks while I remained still. Eventually they would light on my hands and feed and I would not move. The birds would gather on my shoulders, even when they were not hungry, and pull at loose strings on my t-shirt or the frayed threads around the holes in my jeans where my pale knees poked through. Birds with domestic urges built nests in my hair. I would wait with them, through rain and sun unmoving. I would see my mother at the kitchen window washing dishes or my sister in her bedroom listening to records when she was supposed to be doing her homework. When baby birds emerged from their eggs, I was there. As they grew older, their parents would edge them out onto my shoulders and push

them into attempts at flying. If the young birds were not ready for flight, they would drop to the ground by my thighs and I was not allowed to catch them. My hands were busy feeding other birds anyway. The birds were grateful for my patience; I was a warm statue for them. They wrote songs about me.

## Statue of the Spider's Web

from *Notes from the Committee*

As often as this statue is constructed, so it must be disassembled in pouring rain. Often, it goes unnoticed, shrouding the town in a labyrinth of invisible connections like the constellations. There are those who say only children can see the statue, and others who believe it is impossible for children to see, requiring the experience of years to first envision the possibilities a web invokes, and then to be able to bring that mental conception slowly and painfully from inside one's head, through the visual canals, to appear externally before the eyes. It is this kind of elaborate concentration that many say destroys the artifice as thoroughly as a heavy hail storm. On this side of the argument are those who believe the statue spontaneously emerges from the bodies of the town arachnids, those who believe it is charmed by minds who have no preconceptions, or is spun in air by notes played on a flute. The sheer size of the statue brings some to argue that a gigantic, prehistoric creature lurks in caves in the far mountains, and descends on the town before rainstorms, driven by an increasing moisture in the air,

and an instinct to weave a canopy of protection, although, alas,  
a permeable one.

Kristen Orser

## The First Is a Dig, the Second Is a Slap

On average we are thirsty. This consists in digging out from dry riverbeds and swamps large frogs that have filled themselves with water in the rainy season.

Exits and exhales, though the opposite may be winked at. To breathe on a woman, the neck, after eating oysters is mentioned frequently in the myths. It's the vehicle by which our ancestors and gods arrived: The nape of a woman's neck.

I prefer the clavicle, the canoe, the slender after-boom. More tendency to float and wind. Tendency to keel, kneel, knee-knocking loves.

But a few weeks ago a man gave 17,000 coconuts as a betrothal present. He was chastised, not chaste, a vulgar boaster. He took to an island out of public view; shame is a killing thing.

Ben Mirov

**Ghost of a Morning After You Left Me**

I hover in front of the chain link fence for hours reading signs. My day is a long protracted silence. I pour myself into a phone call to avoid a little rain. Wind comes through a crack in the glass. They put new lights in the basilica months ago, I didn't notice. I program a future version of myself to remember a face slick with seawater, ringed with red hair. The message is sent back with nothing inside. I can't believe my life was like this three years ago. I would have sex and just lie there, thinking about things I had to do. I woke up in a grocery store. I was buying broccoli.

Clark Chatlain

**A p p r e h e n s i o n** (*Sorting No. 2*)

no longer certain of my hands I approach low hills  
all the eyes watch from the distant with stalks of wheat  
no longer certain of my hands from the distant low hills  
all the eyes watch I approach with stalks of wheat  
no longer certain watch from the distant low hills  
all the eyes of my hands I approach with stalks of wheat  
all the eyes watch from the distant low hills  
no longer certain of my hands I approach with stalks of wheat  
no longer certain watch from the distant low hills  
all the eyes of my hands I approach with stalks of wheat  
no longer certain of my hands from the distant low hills  
all the eyes watch I approach with stalks of wheat  
no longer certain of my hands I approach low hills  
all the eyes watch from the distant with stalks of wheat

Bonnie Roy

**A u b a d e**

my skin breaks in flames that was pink. my flesh atinder begs  
me to go, my hair that was black is a smoke.

.

I can feel both my eyes where they seep. my eyes that you loved  
go brackish uncolored. remember them gemmy, remember  
them bright in a copse all darkened, leaflings slept still in the  
branch.

.

I loved your pearled, unapexed body. bedded of sweet leaves,  
alstroemeria, rose.

.

you were my beloved and I rose with you from gold things,  
from laurel shadows, and your body I loved as a jasmine

winding, loved pleating as lichens, loved roan.

.

my body you loved is flamed to alyssum, flashing tigers and  
calla till none. my eyes that were gemmy are flamed to the iris  
and dead.

.

my body you loved left the mark of a body, spent all the way to  
the bones.

.

I loved your pearled, unapexed body, body of marigold,  
spineflower thing. I saw you in cyclamen and spider mums,  
finer than captured, fluted in coral and bronze.

.

you are my beloved and I held you as my beloved thing, my  
sweeter than lupines, my smooth as a beech bough lovelier  
wildness than bluebells, coneflower, rose.

.

I loved your pearled, unapexed body. deeper than bedstraw,  
deeper than aster, a violet felt in the breath.

.

sweetest they left me in branches thrusting with fire. they left  
me staked to the body, full of the body, alone.

.

I never felt slighter. I never felt my skin through the ash of the  
face but I loved your pearled, unapexed body, staked to the  
body, breaking in coral and gold.

Jordan Sanderson

## The Dressmaker

Behind her house, she found a partially eaten rabbit and wrapped it in wool, then fed it to a wolf, which she had spent some time outfitting in shirts that showed its stomach. When her friend saw the wolf, she asked, “Where did you find such an elegant cage for that starving rabbit?” “This isn’t a cage, it’s a rabbit,” the dressmaker said. Her friend followed her inside, so they could get ready to go downtown. “I seem to have misplaced my studs,” the dressmaker said. “We’ll have to blanket the house.” Once downtown, her ears intact, she fitted her friend in a green gown. “It drags the ground,” her friend said. “I look like an unknown meadow.” “It’s perfect,” the dressmaker said. “It buries me,” her friend disagreed. “And in burying excavates,” said the dressmaker. “But it swallows me, dear,” her friend kindly objected. “I’ve always wanted to be happy,” said the dressmaker, moving on to other projects, “but I could never get my stomach around it.” From outside, her space looked like clothes heaped on a sidewalk, waiting for someone to come home.



can't recap the bottle-green of my long undone Ds  
the slipping fabric/cut on the bias/the tenuous grip

that adder had  
upon me

all along, mink's broad blue head upending

own mouth      ,own knee      ,oh

Kim Parko

## Symbiotic Beast

Everywhere there is dirt. Crumbs. Growing balls of hair. And the visitor is due any day now. Our family has read about the symbiotic beast. It will trail a person, an animal, any organic creature, and eat what falls, sheds, emits, and flakes off of them. The symbiotic beast arrives at our home seven days later. The symbiotic beast is well dressed, sleek, and handsome in a beastly way, not at all what we expected. The symbiotic beast becomes very popular in our home. All our floors shine. Every crevice is immaculate. When the visitor arrives, she is pleased with the order of our home. She stays well past her welcome. She stops bathing. She rolls around in mud and dribbles food down her breast. Every night she is filthy, but when she emerges from her room in the morning, she gleams like a well-scrubbed kitchen.

**Extensions**

In the mirror shaving. I find a long grey hair, hiding. I separate it from the crowd and pull. It doesn't budge. I exert a greater effort and again it refuses. With great pain I give it the strength of my manhood. It finally gives way. But it has not been torn out. It multiples in length, its expansion significant in size. I pull a little more. I hold the fine end in my palm, the long loop falling to the floor. I am afraid to go further, afraid of what it will do to me. I pull a little more. I could forget something vital, like a birthday or feeling. Its roots seem deep like a tree, unraveling from an unknown spool immersed in the soil of my skull. I pull a little more.

Anne Heide

**K a n g a r o o**

May the sand beneath me  
be wind.  
If it were lighter and carried  
eggs instead.  
I may have very well supposed  
it a bird.  
So it feeds me from its paw  
when I draw nearer, stumbling  
the underbrush  
beneath my stomp.  
I try to speak  
up, to make this animal work  
like me, against me.  
To hold me head again, down.

**L i n e s**

It seemed in the planning the kind of thing that we would want. Then, in its action we were—*unsatisfied*. A shock to us. The wanting promises so much and then, of course, of course delivers so little. Desire has a lot to answer for. Actors playing characters we loved as real told us that the wanting is so much greater than the having, but didn't show to us hardly enough sorrow when they were given just their way. We thought the truth was a pretty line. We said to all of us, You shall find the wanting is often greater than the having. But what did it mean? Nothing—it meant nothing—but that we watched television with chest split open so our heart might listen for the lines that would give us shape and meaning.

Our father was a wanter, but never had, so we cannot say if he would have found himself broken by the disappointment of a goal achieved. We would agree among us that he would not have ever known. His wanting was like Poe's vaginas, gaping, an eater of ships, a thing so great that if we gave him everything (And we did. We gave him us. We gave all we had. We are a clutch of Miss Saigons.) he would still believe he had nothing.

What can we do with a man like that, but break ourselves  
over him—waves to the shore.

Maybe it's the moon who has a lot to answer for.



fig. 6