

# FICTION



*Vacuum*, Markus Hartel, 2008

# THE PLUM RAINS

John Givens

*“The Plum Rains” is one of a group of interlocking stories by John Givens set in Japan in the last decade of the 17th century. It is a modern re-working of the medieval Japanese haibun, a literary form which evolved out of headnotes used to set the scene for a poem and later became a basic unit for Japanese poetic journals and other forms of compressed prose.*

**She came back alone after first prayers and slid open her white paper doors. Misty drizzle filled the dense cedar forest surrounding the nunnery. The inside walls of her room were tacky with the damp, the tatami mats slick with it, and a faint gray-green dusting furred the brocade mat-bindings. It was a tired season, a time of melancholy wistfulness.**

**She had prayed that morning as she did every morning for the souls of those she had betrayed.**

**The rain shutters of the Image Hall had been fastened in place, and the rows of kneeling women murmured the wondrous words of the Lotus Sutra to the gentle thrumming of rain on the roofs and verandas, the huddled shapes of them like a manifestation of the weight of the moisture in the air. It was the season for listlessness and regret, for longing for what could never be recovered.**

**But the faces of her dissatisfied dead no longer came to her. Nor did her terror flood up at their fear.**

**The nunnery for women who although unacceptable could not be killed was located at the top end of a steep valley. A dry stream of raked pebbles separated Aoi's veranda corridor from the pressure of the trees of the hillside. It flowed past upright rocks configured like miniature islands and emptied finally into the absolving sea of raked gravel in the back garden. Most of the pebbles were the size of soy bean kernels – granite, ovoid, rolled smooth by centuries of tumbling in mountain cataracts –**

but some were as large as quail eggs; and she had brought one inside soon after her arrival and kept it for solace, for the sense of the small dry stone in the palm of her hand, of its being there as a specific weight and shape and texture that would never vary, never depart from the fact of itself. The pebble had possessed her as she possessed it, and although she had long since admitted to herself the foolishness of such thoughts, the pebble still had its place on her personal Buddha-shelf beside a small sandalwood statue of the Kannon Bodhisattva and the death plaques of the Hori family, their newness worn away over the years, the incised gold words faded, the once glossy black lacquer surface now matte, and with hardly any scent remaining.

Aoi had joined her voice to the voices of the other women who would never be permitted to leave, all of them bound together under the benevolent gaze of the Jizo Bodhisattva, guardian of children and wayfarers; and when Aoi prayed for the Hori, she made no distinction between the eldest son who had died for love of her and his parents and younger brothers who had died as a result of his death, for all of them would be waiting for her like wavering shadows on the yellow sands of hell, and she would hear their cries of torment and vituperation, for their lives had been denied them and the fault was hers.



*Even throwing out wilted flowers is burdensome: the endless plum rains.*



One of the novices was standing in her doorway, a weepy little creature who smelled slightly of urine and who still hoped for a different life even though the shogunate would never allow it for the simple reason that if one woman who had been condemned

unfairly were to be released then all the unfairly condemned would begin clamoring for it. Punishing the innocent, Aoi knew, was more effective than punishing the guilty. The abbess has requested your presence, said the little novice.

Now?

If it is acceptable....

Aoi was called in to receive devotional instructions occasionally although these interviews soon evolved into friendly chats, for like Aoi herself, the abbess was from a branch of the Imperial Family and her concerns with sanctity were perfunctory. She had been only a small child when her name had been placed on a list of those to be proscribed, its inclusion as arbitrary as it was gratuitous, and she had been proclaimed abbess on her fifth birthday and carried up to this nunnery. Her nurse had accompanied her, also shaving her head, but had died of loneliness after a few years. The abbess had never been permitted to leave the compound and knew of no other life. But she had seen men at a distance and understood in a vague way that they were in possession of distinctive if improbable anatomical characteristics so that Aoi had been obliged to share her previous experiences, describing in hushed tones events that had occurred in her presence, her own participation in them, what they had meant and why they had meant it; and the older woman would ponder her depictions of these dubious encounters like someone hearing reports of a remote land where the sun shines at midnight and fires burn inside ice.

Aoi was informed that an official from the shogunate was waiting to see her; and when she reminded the abbess that she was not permitted visitors, the woman looked at her as if she were a fairy-phantom whose true incarnation had finally been revealed then told her that the summons could not be ignored.

Aoi took one of the nunnery's broad oil-paper umbrellas. The day was too humid with rain for a cloak so she draped a white gauze shawl over her bald head like a loose hood and wore high

clogs against the probability of the forecourt being muddy.

The mopey little novice trailed after her. She asked where she was going then before Aoi replied, asked if she could go with her.



*The tedium of the fifth month rains: moss blooming on the old tombs also feels it.*



After her long hair had been brutally hacked off and her head shaved, she was left like a defeated prisoner kneeling on the dirt of an enclosed courtyard-garden, her hands tied behind her back with her wrists lashed to her ankles. The weird lightness of the sense of the air on her naked scalp had astonished her. What a thing it was to feel the absence of your life's hair and accept that you were no longer any part of what you had been. She felt where the razor had nicked her, where it had scraped her skin and left it raw. There was a constellation of blood drops on the layer of white silk stretched over her thighs, and she assumed there would be blood stains on the back of her robe too. She also assumed she was waiting to be killed. She wasn't afraid of dying although she was afraid of the pain of it. And the terror she would feel as it began to happen. But they had left her there alone in the sun with no one to appeal to, not even a guard. The ropes binding her were too tight and her hands had gone numb. She tried touching her thumbs to her fingertips but felt nothing.

An ant passed before her in asynchronous articulation. She watched it out of sight. Her eyelids were crusted with dried tears, and gnats alighted there, drawn by the salty residue. She shook them away but they came back so she stopped doing it. There were other, smaller insects on the dirt, each walking

in its own manner and following its own purpose; and she began singing softly to herself the toddler's song that she had been taught by a woman whose face she could no longer recall although every word of the silly little rhyming ditty came back to her. She thought she could remember the brief flickering of pleasure that she had brought to the rejected palace women in their desolate chambers as she marched around on her fat little pink legs fearlessly singing in her baby's voice about the wind in the trees and the deer in the hills.

Except she wasn't remembering it, she was recalling having been told it. Her nurse's face, too, was not a memory but only a configuration of words that she had always accepted, as if the shape of the actual woman's face were nothing more substantial than mist burned off a meadow by the sun. How ungrateful she felt. Yet it was also certain that this was all she would ever have so she had better learn to cherish it. My nurse loved me, she said, voicing it aloud the way a person might toss a stone into a deep pool to see if its bottom could be detected. But all she knew about herself was what she'd been told. Her whole life had been made up of stories heard and remembered and repeated.

And wasn't what she had now, the phrases she was telling herself about herself, also self-assembled? The orphan's need for narrative? The unwanted girl's hunger for memories? Yet other than these configurations, she had nothing.

And it seemed ... paltry. But was it?

An ant like the one she'd seen before passed her knees, wonderful in the similarity of its ambulation, its path also like that of the other one except following a slightly different trajectory. Had they begun at the same place? Would they end up together? Aoi knelt with her head down and felt the warmth of the sun on her naked skull and the tiny caresses of gnats in her eyelashes.

The decision to conclude matters was made late in the afternoon. The white paper doors were removed, and Aoi was

confronted by a chamber opened like a pavilion and occupied by representatives of the shogunate. A personage too eminent to be identified sat on a dais behind a screen-of-state in the back half of the chamber. He would not demean himself by addressing her directly but spoke in a quiet voice to his steward, who listened with his head bowed then transferred his words.

It is instructed that you be told what will happen to you. The family that permitted your transgression has always been a loyal vassal of the Tokugawa. It is wished that some comfort be found for them. Your adulterous lover has been chastised. But his family has asked to be allowed to atone for his crimes themselves. This has been granted.

Old Hori was brought into the courtyard with his wife and his two remaining sons. They were dressed in short white robes. Hori was calm although his wife, a plump woman with her hair configured in a provincial style, had been weeping; and the two young boys seemed frightened. None of them so much as glanced at Aoi. The handles of Hori's short sword and stabbing dagger had been replaced with simple ones of paulownia wood, and the naked blades were wrapped in pure white paper. Hori's assistant, a young warrior from his domain, came in behind him, his long sword carried still sheathed.

The Hori family knelt in front of the veranda where the steward sat. They bowed together, the younger boy mistiming it by starting too late and ending too soon.

Guards brought out the head of her lover, Hori Ushimaru, affixed to a viewing stand. They placed it like a watcher on the edge of the veranda, and the younger boy cried out but his mother silenced him.

Old Hori stated his name and his lineage. He declared that the Hori family had always supported the Tokugawa Shogunate and would always continue to do so. He acknowledged he was at fault for allowing his son to misbehave with an orphan of the palace, and he accepted that this was unforgivable. He agreed

to atone for it. His wife would accompany him. But he wished to request humbly that his remaining sons be spared. Their lives had only just begun. More should be allotted to them. Old Hori bowed again, touching his forehead to the dirt of the courtyard and held it there.

The steward had listened to this plea with displeasure. Would your sons not remember your death? And wish to avenge you? How would your loyalty to the Tokugawa appear then? And if they attempted revenge and found success, then their actions would create more disharmony. And if they failed, then the shame of that would be an added burden to them. And how much worse would that burden be if they were unable even to make an attempt?

No, Hori, your boys do not merit such an uncertain fate. The natural flow of things is the better one.

The kneeling samurai lifted his head and observed the steward then bowed again in submission. He took up his short sword. He removed the purification paper then touched the blade reverently to his brow. His middle son knelt upright with his back very straight. For the life you have given me, I thank you. His knees were spread apart and his ankles crossed properly so that he would not topple over sideways. And for preceding you, I apologize. He waited with his head up and his hands on the tops of his thighs and his eyes fixed on the steward. His father took him across the throat quickly and deeply, and the suddenness of the blood-release came as a part of his folding forward at the shock of it.

His father held him until he stopped quivering then rolled him onto his back and straightened his garments.

The younger boy had to be soothed by his mother. He buried his face in her bosom. She shielded him and calmed him then shifted him around, still holding him in her arms but presenting his throat. The younger boy's blood soaked into the front of his mother's death robe as she drew him back into her embrace and

cradled him as he died then released him and allowed his father to place him beside his brother.

Hori's wife had worn two inner sashes, as befits a samurai's wife, and she removed the extra one now and bound her legs together across the thighs so that her skirt would not open indecorously. Her husband lifted the short stabbing dagger and removed the purification paper then touched the naked blade to his forehead in acknowledgment. He bowed to her. She returned his bow, both her palms pressing down on the hard earth that her forehead also touched. She straightened herself and regarded him. Well, then, if it must be so, she said and took the short knife in both hands. She held it reversed in front of her breast so that the blade was pointing upward. She was not a strong woman, but what strength she had would now be the gift she could extend, and she threw herself forward, diving onto the blade, driving the point of it up under her jaw for the death she would find there.

Her thrust cut off-center, and she lay shuddering on her side, the knife embedded under her jaw and her blood draining out over it but no easy death arriving. One hand had been knocked off the hilt and it grabbed at the dirt of the courtyard, scraping at it as if digging there, forming ridges the way the receding tide leaves wave-patterns in the sand, then doing that less and less then no longer doing it.

Old Hori smoothed down the hem of her robe. He let his hand rest for a moment on her ankle. Then he sat back and stripped off the top of his death robe by lifting his arms out. He tucked the sleeves under his feet to help keep his body aligned. His assistant came up behind him with his sword unsheathed. Hori wrapped a thick white hand cloth around the blade of his small sword so that he could grip it below the hilt. He instructed his assistant to permit him to finish the entire ritual. I thank the shogunate for this opportunity to redeem my son and myself, Hori said. He sat for a moment very still. Then he inhaled and with a shout stabbed

the blade into the side of his abdomen, gasping like someone plunged in cold water. Using both hands he dragged the blade across slicing deeply so that in the spill of blood slobber the first blue loops of intestines slithered out squirming onto his thighs. His face drained to white and his eyes locked. He pulled out the blade and stabbed it inwards a second time, jerking it upwards with his head pressed forward straining against the shriek of it and his attendant hit him perfectly so that his head landed between his knees and his corpse remained kneeling upright, blood draining out of his neck-stump, both hands still gripping the blade locked in his belly.

The steward leaned back to listen to the man behind the screen then turned to Aoi again. He stared at her for a long moment then signaled for her ropes to be cut. Aoi was pulled to her feet and held upright by her guards, her legs too weak to support her.

You are not to be given a buddhist name. You have no family name. You will continue to be called Aoi, but this word will be written with kana syllables only. You will stay all your life where we put you. No other activity will be allowed, no travel, no visits, no walks in the hills. You are only a thing waiting to die.

The august personage spoke again and the steward listened bowing then straightened up and said, If you violate any of these arrangements, you will be burned in a fire and twenty others living nearby will be chosen at random and burned in it with you. Men, women, children will be selected to die because of you, and their deaths will also burden your soul. Is there any part of this you do not understand?

Aoi said nothing at first then lifted her head slightly with her eyes still on the earth before her and said, I understand it.

You will travel tomorrow on your last road. You will take the Hori funerary plaques with you. And each morning and each evening you will offer prayers for the repose of the souls of the Hori. That is what you will do. And it is all you will ever do.



*An evening shower, on the veranda railing hang forgotten robes of silk gauze.*



The shogunate official stood waiting beside the trunk of an immense cedar, a tree older than the nunnery itself and girded by a sanctity rope, the sodden white paper streamers of which hung limply in the endless drizzle. The official said he had been sent by a senior steward of the Tokugawa family. He said changes had occurred which would affect her.

When Aoi seemed to have nothing to say to this, he explained that the new shogun had begun reviewing many of the policies established by his predecessor. It has been decided to rehabilitate the Hori Clan. Their death plaques would be moved to the family's mortuary temple. The official bowed his head in polite acknowledgment of the possibility of this news coming as a surprise to the incarcerated woman, rain-flow sliding off the front brim of his round hat, then he straightened up and said, Your own name will also be returned to you.

Aoi turned away. She began strolling around the edge of the forecourt, following a path that led up towards the nunnery's cemetery. A stream flowed beside the path, and the far bank was lined with irises, the deep indigo petals beaded with rain. A carved granite hand-washing basin stood at the back corner of the outer hall, and a file of flat black stones had been positioned where runoff from the eaves would drip.

I decline it, she said. I've been buried here. My body lives and breathes but my life has ended. I have no wish for a name to survive me.

Probably I have expressed myself poorly, said the official.

By granting you your name, the shogun is also restoring your access to the world....

Aoi did not respond, but her head tilted forward slightly under the amber rain-light of the umbrella, and the shadows on her face darkened so that the official hesitated then said, You can go wherever you wish. Do whatever you choose.

Aoi said nothing. But as she looked at the official, her face softened with sadness at memories of the past; and unsure as to whether or not she seemed about to reconsider her refusal, the emissary tried to encourage her, saying that she would be surprised at the changes she encountered in the world, for nothing she had known was as it had been.



*The rains of the fifth month: and within what has been lost, what remains.*

# THE GHOST OF JOHNNY SLICK

Jessica Bentz

The love of Susan's life died on the day she was married. The day was clear and windy and the guests sighed softly in admiration. Her pink wedding dress fell over her plump belly and trailed into the dirt. She closed her eyes and sang, "A-B-C-D, I am so pretty." She looked deeply into her betrothed's brown eyes and said, "You are the love of my life." The wedding guests sat murmuring in the back yard until her betrothed gobbled down two of them and puked on the rest. Susan showered a benediction of Kibble on the happy wedding party and went inside to eat a tuna sandwich.

In high school Susan could never understand the girls who waited outside hotels for a glimpse of Johnny Slick. They would sweet-talk his security guards, bat their heavy eyelashes, fluff their hair. Then they would slink, those weaselettes, into his hotel room to look for dirty socks, used glasses, chewed bacon. "Even his sweat smells good!" they would say through pointed teeth. They pressed their lips over the cloudy film on the hotel cups. "It's just like kissing him!" Susan shook her head in disbelief. Probably some fat froggy manager with a lip wart had taken the suite while Johnny was out partying.

Susan made a shrine to him anyway, plastering her room with pictures torn from magazines. Johnny's faces flew over her head every night in the dark, tiny birds in bright sailor suits, torn jeans, and leather jackets cawing, "Slick. Slick. Slick." She went to school with dark circles under her eyes and her mom patted her and said, "You sure do like that Johnny!"

The ghost of Johnny Slick haunted her in college. He sat shirtless and grinning on the edge of her desk and murmured,

“Hypocrite. Hypocrite.” She would catch a glimpse of a bronzed nipple between Chaucer and Cheever when she went to the library. He sat beside her leering at the women’s rowing team as she read on the banks. He was right. She was in love with her own Johnny Slick.

Her dissertation was two hundred and ten pages on the use of the word “twilight” with its moral and metaphysical implications in *The Hour When Twilight Dies*, George Sour’s first novel. She recited the opening lines of the book over and over in her small apartment. “One violet September evening in the gloaming...” she muttered to herself over dinners of macaroni, chanted half-prayers for inspiration over the gooey cheese, and tried to find a thesis in her roommate’s cheerful forehead. Her roommate began lighting candles with garish pictures of saints, and hissed “*Satanist*” when they passed in the hall. She typed “darkness signifies the metaphorical end of man’s...” and backed her Volvo into a lamp post twice that week.

When she began teaching, her Special Author Series 1258 class could not tell she was in love with the man she taught them about. The neighboring professor of medieval literature would mist over and long for the smell of strong horse sweat and plague, but Susan’s mauve turtleneck sweaters and plain white face did not suggest such passion. She read George Sour’s biography like a dry personal ad: “He enjoyed the myriad challenges of beekeeping and was fluent in both French and German.”

Susan did not enjoy the myriad challenges of beekeeping. She spent the summer of her second teaching year researching bees, sitting in the hot library scrutinizing its many apiological texts, leafing through yellowed pages on the construction of beehives, the collection of honey, their mating habits, Latin classifications. She used two paychecks on a beehive, and purchased *Bees for Fun and Profit*, hoping to hear the dark humming of furry bodies, a pleasure that George expounded on in *Dark Balloons*.

She sweated terribly in her beekeeping clothes and bruised her knees carrying the heavy wood into her small backyard. The bees died lazily, and she found them everywhere, little dead crunches in her sandwiches, her shower. “Well,” the doctor said, examining the puffy hands that bulged out of her turtleneck, “it seems you have a slight allergy...” She drove into the country and left the beehive by the side of the road with a cardboard sign. *Free bees to a good home. Neutered+first shots.*

Her attempt at polyglottery went no better. She sat in a classroom beside her former students and watched them smirk as she butchered simple words. “*Nooon. From-ag-eh.*” Monsieur Lambet grabbed her blushing face and tried to squish it into the right pronunciation. “*Lee...tay...RACH...ture.*” The creases around her mouth lasted for a day, little brackets of hatred for the French language.

After fifteen years of teaching, she received a love letter. “Dear Miss Brown,” it read, “We have read your dissertation and it is our pleasure to invite you to...” Susan suspected that somewhere Johnny was stretching his full lips to laugh at her. She was further gone than the Johnny lovers; Queen Weaselette. They were going to pay her for her obsession. They wanted her to be George’s third biographer.

Susan sat on the plane to Boston, her plain brown hair coiffed and her turtleneck ironed, dozing and waking with a start. She realized that somewhere a poor man or woman knew what Herman Melville’s favorite kind of sandwich was, or Emily Dickinson’s favorite day of the week. She guessed bologna and Wednesday and fell asleep again.

She met with Biographer Number Two in a small coffee shop. Number Two had given his class to a graduate student for the day. “And after all those green miles...” he quoted. Susan returned, “he reached the end of the day.” They smiled. Number Two leaned in and pushed back his gray hair. “His son is gay, you know. His son wasn’t talking so I hired a detective who saw

him holding hands with another man. Sour didn't know when he was alive. My angle is Sour's family. What's your angle?" Susan wrinkled her forehead in confusion. "My angle?"

One Friday the mailman delivered three thousand letters to her doorstep, on special loan from Stanford University. Each letter was sealed in a special bag, three thousand presents for her to open. She taped a picture of Johnny to her bathroom mirror and began to forgive his followers. She picked a shining packet at random. "Dear Raymond," the letter began, "You will happy to hear that we had a son."

The letters hummed softly to her at night, the spirits of dead bees filling her ears. "Mr. Sour," she told them in a mock country twang, "you surely are the first man to break my heart." Her stomach ached with the ghost of pregnancy, and she craved peanut butter and bratwurst.

Each letter had its own weather. They rained sandwich crumbs, sprinkled grass clippings, were spattered with hair oil. In one letter to a child she found giraffe eyelashes with a small note pinned to them in slanted writing. *Don't worry. The giraffe keeper promised that she needed her eyelashes trimmed.* Her own handwriting began to slouch, and her 'A' developed a limp.

In box 100498B Susan fell a little bit in love with the Dearest Mary, the little bunny, the lady whose breasts were like twin deer nuzzling, Miss Sweet to his Mr. Sour. She unwished the pinches to underarm fat that she had wanted for the Johnny fans. Now she was the one twirling her hair in math class and reciting, "His favorite color is blue. His eyes are green." She forgot the color of her own father's eyes and asked guiltily when he called, "Dad, did you ever write for mom?" Her tomato plants and goldfish died, and she begged the head of her department for another year's sabbatical. She got a postcard from Florida with one written line: *Take care of my father.*

She was working on the footnotes for the final chapter when *Sweet and Sour Quarterly* invited her to a symposium

in Europe. After a week of TV dinners with an elderly neighbor she said yes. She felt slightly seasick on the plane, and downed a rare vodka. The next morning her head pounded as a tour guide led her group to the cemetery where George was buried. She was blonde and cheerful, and Susan half expected her to whisper “Satanist,” but instead she began a canned speech. “And here we have the famous author that you might be familiar with. He was born in Stokesham, England on April 16<sup>th</sup>...” Susan mouthed the words, her lips dry and numb.

That night she arranged the notes for her speech, “*Giraffe Eyelashes: A Postmodern Approach...*” half-heartedly. Tomorrow she would stare out at blank faces and try to tell them about the man she loved while they thought longingly of the free sandwich cart. Her underarms would darken and her head would shrink into her turtleneck. She drank the rest of the vodka from the plane and walked out into the dark street.

She stumbled seven blocks to the cemetery and looked through the dark bars. Her voice slurred slightly, “You and me, Mr. Sour, we have ourselves a date.” She snuck around the side of the cemetery and began climbing the stone wall. She grabbed a stone gargoyle for leverage and heaved her stockinged legs over the ledge. Her sensible shoes fell deep into the bushes.

She took a left at the drowned poet and limped past the consumptive writers. He was nestled between two contemporary authors, a plain gravestone. She reached up and traced the arc between b. and d. Yes, she thought, *George Samuel Sour, born in Stokesham, England on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Died March 21, 1964. No. George Samuel Sour, born on a windy day in a small mining village. Married once, to dearest Mary. Died one violet September evening. Yes. And.*

*Harry Joseph Brown. Born 1930. His eyes were...and he liked jazz. His eyes were green.*

*And.*

*Susan Rose Brown. Married once, to a golden retriever,*

# *Wag's Revue*

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***at age seven. Divorced that night. Hobbies: Not beekeeping.  
Friend to the ghost of Johnny Slick.***

*Wag's Revue* is proud to award NAOMI KRUGER its Winter 2009 Prize in Fiction. With a well-dressed yet unpretentious vocabulary, Kruger renders space and character swiftly, spherically, with precision and subtlety. She finds richness in the everyday—simple details, natural voices, and quiet emotional turns. “Pottery” displays the same effortless, understated grace found in the works of Chekhov, Salinger, and Carver. It is one of those rare stories that, in its brevity and depth, demands an immediate second reading.

—Will Litton,  
Fiction Editor

# POTTERY

Naomi Kruger

Max laid the ingredients out on the dark granite counter. First the pastry, still in its packaging, then the mushroom stuffing he had chilled overnight in the fridge, and finally the beef. It was still fresh, he noticed—no pooling blood, no grey tingeing its edges. He was glad he'd made the extra trip to the butchers. The fillets were thick and dark, never shrink-wrapped or swathed in plastic. He lit the hob and cut off a corner of beef dripping. It slid cleanly into the pan. And then he waited.

There was a moment, a specific point between the fat being hot, but not hot enough, and the first sign of brown-ness around the edges of the pan. That was the time to sear the meat. The fat was supposed to smoke, but not for too long. He scanned the recipe again. *Let the fat get as hot as you dare.* Not exactly precise. He squinted at the edges, just beginning to bubble and hiss. He thought, suddenly, how ridiculous he looked, standing there, stooped over an almost-empty pan, earnestly waiting. *What would Linda say?* He glanced at the kitchen door, left slightly open: beige carpet, dim lights, distant voices from the television. She might pop in during the adverts, but not yet.

There was a TV in the kitchen too. The small one that Linda didn't want to throw out. It sat in the corner, next to the recipe books, *'Larousse Gastronomique'*, still in a protective case, and Linda's *'Cooking Express'* or *'Meals in Minutes'*, all the ones with bent covers, permeated with splashes and stains, the smells of haste. She couldn't stand making anything fiddly like this, skipping straight past anything that involved pastry or marinades, anything that took time to perfect. It bored her. She cooked with the TV on, stirring absentmindedly, spilling spaghetti on the floor, standing on the cherry tomato that had rolled off the chopping board, leaving a trail of skin and seeds on the slate tiles.

Max rinsed his hands in the sink, working the antiseptic soap in between his fingers, under his nails. How long had it been since he'd cooked for her? He couldn't think. Neither of them had felt like going out to celebrate. Why go out when you could enjoy better food in the comfort of your own home? Last time they went for a meal had been a disaster. They had both agreed. Cold Yorkshire puddings sent out twice from the kitchen. How hard could it be? But he'd said it all a little too loud. Linda was squirming, he could see, couldn't wait to get her coat on, and get back into the car. Why pay someone for an experience like that? He picked up one of the fillets with swift tenderness, and placed it into the hot fat.

He began to trim the pastry sheets, brushing each one gently with beaten egg yolk, lining them up in a row; working as quickly as he could. They would look good on the platter, he thought. Of course there would be a little too much just for the two of them. But then it was better to have too much than too little. His mother had drilled that into him over every Sunday lunch as she peeled an extra carrot, and smothered endless roast potatoes with searing lard. Nothing worse than portion anxiety.

They had found the platter on a rainy Saturday in Richmond, pottering about in the antique shops and boutiques, passing the time, hoping the weather would clear so they could take a walk past the castle and over to the ruined abbey. It was exactly the sort of shop he dreaded going into, full of local crafts, lavender soaps, and candles. But Linda had pulled him over to the pottery and china, pointing it out.

'Isn't it lovely?'

He grunted.

'I mean, a little kitsch maybe, but really, really pretty.'

He had looked at the cream-coloured oval plate, hand-painted with tulips, all the colours merging fluidly, the flowers spreading out, a bending leaf almost crossing the rim.

'I'm not saying we should buy it,' she'd said, as if reading his mind, 'it's not really our sort of thing, it's just...'

When they got back to the car he told her he needed the toilet, ran back to the shop and bought it, concealing the thickly wrapped tissue-paper package in his backpack.

He had left it downstairs on her birthday, months later, lining it with nectarines and apricots, leaving her card propped up against the cereal bowl. There had been orange juice in a jug instead of the carton and *pain au chocolat* even though he hated the idea of chocolate for breakfast. He felt pleased, looking at the table laid out, hearing her moving around upstairs, anticipating her surprise. An expansive gesture, evidence of thoughtfulness and spontaneity. She had been puzzled for a moment, trying to place it. He moved the fruit aside to show her it was the same one, not just an imitation. *In Richmond*, he prompted, *you know, in that shop, you remember?* And she had kissed him and said *I can't believe you've kept it hidden all this time.*

But it hadn't been used for a while now. Max stood on a chair and felt for it, over the other casserole dishes and baking trays that wouldn't fit into any of the cupboards. He wiped off a thick layer of dust, and washed it carefully, before laying it on the side, ready. He scooped up some of the wet stuffing from the bowl, treacly, almost black from the porcini. But not too strong, just savoury enough. He hesitated. Was he missing something? He felt sure he was missing *something*.

'Lin-da', he called, hoping she could hear him above the television and the grease filter.

'Lin-da?'

'What's up?' she opened the door, glancing over her shoulder, in case she was missing anything exciting. She turned to face him and pushed her hair behind her ears.

'Smells lovely.'

‘Didn’t we have some nutmeg somewhere? I could’ve sworn I saw it somewhere.’ He was balanced on a chair, one hand deep in the top cupboard, packets and tins spread across the draining board.

‘Here’, she said, reaching across the hob and picking out a red-capped spice jar from the rack.

‘No,’ he said, his voice tinged with impatience, ‘whole nutmeg, not ground.’

‘Aren’t you going to grind it anyway?’

‘I’m supposed to grate it. It’s not the same.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he waved his hand towards the cupboard, ‘I’ll find it somewhere.’

She shrugged, and walked back to the door, he saw her smile and bite her bottom lip as she moved from the tiles to the carpet and was gone. They would just have to do without the nutmeg.

Things were coming together now. The vegetables were almost tender. He gathered the cutlery from the drawer, not the every-day set—the one with some weight to the handles. The phone rang twice and then stopped. He hoped Linda wouldn’t be on long. The food wouldn’t keep. They only had a ten-minute window before it started to deteriorate. He took the knives and forks to the dining room. The TV was still on, an advert for herbal shampoo. Gleaming hair laid out against pomegranates and milk. Linda wasn’t there. He heard her laugh suddenly from the hallway and walked over to the door, moulding his fingers into a phone, ready to mime hanging up.

‘No, no, I’ve got to go,’ she said.

He stopped behind the door. Her voice was saturated in mirth.

‘His Nibs is waiting to serve the culinary masterpiece’.

*His Nibs?*

He put his hand against the wall and his ear closer to the door jamb.

‘Yes I’m sure it’ll be delicious, and if he could award himself a Michelin star he probably would.’

She laughed again. ‘No, stop it, I’ve got to go...’

He tiptoed away; almost breaking into a run, skidding through the kitchen, posing himself into what he hoped was a natural position. He considered throwing the glazed chanteney carrots into the sink. He gripped the handle just for a moment.

It had to be her sister. He’d seen the way she looked at him sometimes, the raised eyebrows, the twitch around the mouth. He hoped it wasn’t her mother. Were they all laughing at him, then?

He set the platter onto the glass table and wiped some stray juice from the edge with a tea towel. The pastry was perfectly golden, framed with red petals, introduced with a flourish of leaves. Linda put the TV on mute. A small man in a navy fleece gestured towards a cottage garden, high banks of waving delphiniums and yarrow.

‘This looks amazing.’ Linda smiled at him.

‘Who was on the phone?’

‘Just Eleanor. She was telling me about the girls, nothing new really.’

He nodded and cut into the beef. Linda held her plate up to him. He spooned her a generous serving of dauphinoise potatoes, carrots and steamed mange tout.

‘I could get used to this,’ she said picking up her fork.

He gripped the serving spoon.

‘It’s pretty isn’t it?’ she pointed to the screen. The garden was shimmering, lilac alliums filtering the afternoon light. But Max was looking at her plate. The beef, he noticed, was the perfect shade of pink in the middle.

# MAYFLY

Ben Rogers

Our mayfly wriggles up through the silt of the river bottom and into the water above, savoring the fresh flavors in his gills. Hibernation has left him groggy. With a gentle hop he joins the flowing murk and is carried downstream, glancing against pebbles slick and cool to the touch. He tunes into the murmurs and clicks of the river underworld. The muted colors could use some punching up, he feels, but no matter. *Carpe diem*. Our mayfly is happy enough just to be alive. A mayfly like any other. Except for the oversized cartoon eyes and the recognizable voice of a mildly Jewish comic actor with broad demographic appeal.

He falls in love right away.

She is clinging to a reed. It sways in super slow-mo. Shall he compare her mouth to a mulcher? It art more omnivorous and more economical. He grows to love this mouth. The way it scrapes and sucks fish shit off rocks. But she plays hard to get. She gives him the silent treatment. The cold pronotum.

He waxes anthropomorphic, praising her rock-hard abdomen, her no-nonsense charm. She stares, chewing, into the gloom. Often she just scuttles off. No nod of acknowledgment, no flip of the antenna. It is as if she doesn't know he *exists*.

Worse. It is as if she doesn't know *she* exists.

He names her Jennifer.

After a particularly fruitless afternoon of wooing, he takes three of her claws in his and more or less drags her across the riverbed to a sun-warmed shallow near the bank. *This* she seems to respond to. When she sinks her incisors into his mesonotum, it tickles a bit. Jennifer's a feisty one! And he's open to that. He runs his foreleg through her caudal filaments and she curls into a fetal, shrimp-like position, which at least makes her easier to transport. He rolls her to the water's edge and waits. When she

uncurls from an O into a C, her view is of a yellow buttercup, lit by a beam of sunlight, with snowy granite domes in the backdrop.

“When the hatch happens,” he begins, but her blank expression worries him. “The hatch. You know about the hatch?”

No response.

“It’s okay. So, when everybody starts sprouting wings, we’ll have just a few hours to live, and mate. And I guess what I’m asking is, will you do me the honor of—you know...”

No response. He thinks perhaps he has offended her.

“Not right this minute, of course. When the time comes. I’ve found the perfect place. The yellow chalice you see before you. Promise me, Jennifer. Promise me you’ll meet me there?”

Her mouth gapes. He considers this a positive sign. A “yes.” Maybe.

But it’s something else. It’s awe. Jennifer has never seen air.

“Jennifer!”

A figure swift and black glides overhead. It lands nearby and starts pecking in the muck. Jennifer curls up. Jennifer is plucked out of the water like a Cheerio. Jennifer is swallowed whole.

He crawls under a rock and there he remains for what would be two of our years, or about 10 days. The next night, a large female squeezes in next to him during a thunderstorm. She’s a generous listener. He names her Diane, and Diane doesn’t seem to fault him for droning on and on about the murder and ingestion of his ex. When next the sun brightens the water she ventures out and he follows. Yapping away, he bumps into her as they navigate a narrow passage between two rocks. He apologizes. Diane doesn’t budge. He scrambles up and over her body to find that it ends abruptly. The top third of her has been pulverized by a rogue twig.

A week later, he is at Sheila's side when she quakes, convulses, and explodes after eating some bad decomposed organic matter.

He reconsiders the practice of naming his love interests.

In fact, he wonders if he's just not cut out for romance. But the days grow longer and the water warmer and he knows he can't just give up, so one evening in early June he finds himself back at the shoreline. Different buttercup, same proposal. This time he really has to grapple. He pins her down with all of his legs, leaving his antenna free to point out the flower. Horrific grinding noises come from her hypopharynx.

"Listen. *Listen!* I, for one, am not content to be—hold still! Do we have to be opportunistic generalists like everyone else? Let's make a choice. Together. Stop it! I'm not letting go of you. Can I call you Caroline?"

She stops squirming.

"That's better. We can be humane about this."

He eases his grip. "It's my eyes, isn't it?" he says. "I know: they're *googly*."

She shivs him with two of her claws and disappears into a carpet of moss.

"Caroline," he gasps, "you heartless nymph."

Our mayfly stops eating and hopes to be eaten. Hour to hour, day to day, little changes. He spends most days just drifting. One night he is awoken by the dull reverberations of a fallen tree banging against the boulders. Another time he is nearly stamped flat by a clumsy set of hooves, only to endure gulp after gulp of hot, cascading piss.

When one morning his guts empty out and fill with air, he attributes it to his hunger strike. He's disappointed to see other, healthier mayflies contracting similar symptoms. Newly buoyant, he rises. The river bottom recedes from view. He somehow knows he'll never see it again. This realization elicits

an unexpected and embarrassing little onslaught of nostalgia, which ends as soon as he pierces the surface and is blinded by sunlight, the river's murmur now a roar.

Others pop up all around him. Hundreds of them. Mayflies bobbing on the surface like life-jacketed survivors of some catastrophe.

He watches his neighbors unfurl glistening wings, gorgeous to behold, and stretch them out to dry. Soon the air thrums with takeoffs and landings. Mayflies skitter to and fro upon the water's cellophane-like surface. Some stay aloft long enough to reach drooping willow branches. Others fall back into the river, where they are met by rising bass—a sight that sends panic rippling through the floating multitude. Crowd-fed panic. Save-thyself panic. Hollow-out-thy-mother-to-make-a-canoe panic.

Our mayfly washes downstream around a bend. He eddies out over a sandbar and gets carried into a long, shallow riffle set between steep banks. Though his shuck has cracked, it is not open wide enough to let him out. He is stuck. As he struggles he sees, in a meadow beside the river, a passel of buttercups.

The river bends again. The flowers shrink from view. He is overcome with self-pity. His enormous eyes well up.

Exhausted nearly to death, he glances off a boulder in the middle of the stream and is flipped facedown. Once again, the world turns muffled and dim. He struggles to right himself. Looking up through the water, distorted glimpses of glinting gossamer against a cloudy sky, the new wings of those who've taken flight, heading sunward like little Icaruses.

He stops fighting and floats. He wants to give up, but as soon as he tries to he gets angry, and all of a sudden he's a raving lunatic, muscling free of a straightjacket. His eyes turn bloodshot. He surprises himself with his own strength and the shuck cracks. He takes a deep breath and discovers that he has soiled himself.

He squirms free of his former corpus and finds his bearings. The river here is slow-moving and shaded. His feet make little

dents on the water, but don't quite poke through. He starts walking on the lid of the river. He is Jesus H. Christ, only with wings, and two penises.

What would Jesus do with wings, two penises and mere hours to live?

Here's what our mayfly does: he darts upstream, hoping against hope that Caroline is still single. He follows the river until he reaches the buttercups. And that's when he first lays googly eyes upon it: a dark, shifting cloud of mayflies, slung low over the water like smog, scattering and rearranging with each passing breeze.

It looks like a happening little get together and he flies right into it. Once inside, he sees the swarm for what it really is—a quasi-consensual gangbang. A female that might be Caroline catches his eye and he tracks her as she zips among the groping throngs. She is approached by a pair of males, both of whom attempt to snatch her out of the air. Both miss. She picks up speed again, only to be nabbed and doubly penetrated by a third male. She goes limp in his clutch as they hover a few feet from the water, her wings no longer beating. He lets her go. Nearby males make half-hearted grabs for her as she plummets. She plops into the water, squeezes out a gooey cluster of eggs. Dies.

He wants to scoop her up and lay her fragile body to rest inside a clamshell jewelry box with white silk lining. A coffin befitting a fallen pixie. But there are too many—far, far too many—too many to count. The river is littered with fucked-to-death Tinkerbells. Fish and birds are gorging themselves. He sees a brown trout vomit up a paste of half-digested FTDTs, then start eating again.

Hovering mid-swarm, pivoting up, down, left, right, the mayfly takes it all in, this godforsaken fuckfest warzone Armageddon. The sun is blackened out. He hears the groans of the ecstatic and of the dying. He smells sex and putrefaction. The air is fecund. The river below a moving carpet of carcasses.

Caroline. He knows he is never going to rendezvous with her. He's known that all along. He wants to cry out. He can't. His mouth is merely ornamental, a genetic throwback to some classier ancestor. Back when adults were adults, who wined and dined, then made love.

He feels suicidal, which is awkward because he also has a handsome, matching set of boners. Like most everything, they have proven to be beyond his ability to control.

A hefty male rises up out of the frenzy and grabs him, hugging his metathorax. The embrace is a bit uncomfortable but also consoling, somehow. This is all he needed, our mayfly realizes. Just to be held.

The hefty male rapes him for a bit, then flies off.

Dusk falls on the river. Starving without a working mouth, the mayfly huddles under a slab of bark. He is spent, although his erections have yet to subside. He realizes this should embarrass him, but he's too close to death to feel mortified.

Then, out of the deepening blue...what? A light?

Yes. A glorious light. It wakes him as if from a dream. It shines from nearby and it is breathtaking. He feels compelled to make his way toward it. He *must*. It has *gravity*.

As he flies closer to the light, it gets bigger and brighter and then it separates into two lights. They are the headlights of a 1989 Ford Escort LX parked at a campground near the riverbank. Apparently, he isn't the first to be mesmerized by these lights, judging by the bumper-high pile of dead mayflies accumulating below each one. He spends his last few moments deliberating: Is it more meaningful to die in the pile on the left, or the right? He decides upon the left. Overnight, the piles get bigger and merge into one wide heap. The car's battery dies out, the lights dim. In the morning a snowplow is called in to scrape the heap off the road.