

Neuro Magazine

Issue #4

SURFACE
TENSION



Editors' Notes

Hello again,

Hard to believe we're on issue four already. Last year wasn't anything to write home about I don't think, it was a tough year, between a stagnation in growth, twitter being bought by a billionaire with the emotional and intellectual capacity of an amoeba and with our application for funding hitting a rather significant issue, I can say that 2022 was a demoralising year.

But we're back, this time with more realistic expectations about what we can achieve with the resources that we have. There is much to improve upon with Neuro Magazine but I have a firm belief that we will succeed in this endeavour.

Yelaina has been an absolute rock in this whole thing and while I say it every year with these things I thank her and the amazing work she does and for sticking with me on, what some may consider, a foolish venture.

But 2023 is a new year, we have exciting new plans, new ideas and new hopes! A big thank you to you, the reader for having a look through the amazing work that exists below. A thank you to those who supported us financially throughout the year, even the smallest contribution meant so much to us.

Most importantly, thank you to our writers who, year in and year out, continue to trust us with their impressive work. We are all too humbled to show your work to the world through our small site.

2023 is an important year for Neuro Magazine and one I hope you'll stick around to see. Enough of this feely stuff! Go down, read and enjoy, we know we did!

Thank you,

Iarlaith Cunningham

Let's start with an apology. This issue is late because I am a perfectionist and terribly bad at keeping track of time.

Now, I love this issue. The cover is a picture I snapped with my dad's old camera somewhere in Boston during my high school years. I couldn't tell you why I was so mesmerized by the simple movement of water meeting stone stair, but for a few minutes, I stood there, clicking buttons, adjusting shutters, meddling with angles, manually forcing the focus. It shouldn't have captivated me so much, but it did.

Surface tension. That's the name of this issue. What lies beneath, and what troubles you might find if you go looking there. Reality and unreality—yes, that's a word.

I haven't much to say beyond that. I think these stories speak for themselves, and I think we should listen.

Of course, many thanks to Iarlaith as always. He tolerates my nonsense far too much, and I'm not *that* much of a rock.

Enjoy,

Yelaina Anton

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POETRY

The Bar of Soap

George Espinoza

bares the alpine slopes and ridges

of sliding thumbs; my fingers ski under an avalanche of lather,

my palms are sleds on the miniature glacier,

and my sleeves are splashed by the slush of foam.

The cast-iron sink fills with bubbles and doubts.

Am I clean? Am I truly clean? I have to know—murmurs as loud as a spewing faucet.

I exit the bathroom, and rush to the front door. I peer through its peephole,

and probe the doorknob, like a stubborn combination lock,

hoping it withstands the curious hand. I continue rattling to confirm—to check—to be sure
of my seclusion. Eight exact tries, not a rattle more.

Pressing my ear on its chipped mahogany, and waiting for the faintest footstep.

To imagine the metal clicks of a reloading pistol, and hear nothing except my exhaling
breath.

Am I safe? Am I really safe? I have to know—phrases as incessant as a microwave's beeps.

Approaching the pantry, stocked and color-coded, I swivel canned peaches, garbanzo beans,
and diced tomatoes to read and reread their expiration dates. I shake boxes of cinnamon
oatmeal

and bags of brown rice to trust they're there. The refrigerator hums,

so I sniff the milk cartons, and poke salmon. Like an indoor mosquito, I can't ignore the whirl
of forehead monologue. I touch the denim of my pant pockets.

I continue patting to confirm—to check—to be sure of the supermarket's receipt.

Twelve exact tries, not a pat more.

Can I rest? Can I simply rest? Please, I need to—

Lovely Bones

Noelle Thomas

I stare into the mirror,
turn this way and that.

Caress my ribs
bone by bone.

I wrap my thumb and pinky
around my wrist.

Watch as my fingers
overlap.

I touch my collarbones.

Pinching either side,

I can't help but think
I'll miss them.

Recovery is hard
mentally, physically.

I watch as I morph
into a stranger.

Scars fade,
hair regrows,
bones disappear.

Am I still myself?

Myself who is obsessed.

Wants to be small,

wants to be sharp,

wants to be lovely.

Welsh Walls

Bernard Pearson

Today I am aware, like an animal
of the carcass of a school
part eaten and part
brought back to life.

Next a dazzle of wild dandelions
Nursery maid the dead
Who lie near the old plague pit,
but for them consecrated graves,
Marked as a gardener might
with name, date and when planted.

I sniff the air

A little further along the way
Where the church bells warn
The quarter hour
And the old dutch windows
Of the houses directly
in front of me
yawn like mouths
I pause for breath and consider
Whether it is worth going on.

GRIDLOCK

John Grey

Damn the rush hour cars,
the merge from two lanes to one,
like jugular veins in a strangler's grip.
And damn that truck,
a half-empty behemoth
that won't concede an inch
to the Buick, to the Honda,
to the funeral creep of my Camry.
A Dodge tries to squeeze between me
and a row of orange cones.
Through tinted glass,
he gives me his meanest Darth Vader glare.
Sadly, "the force" is of no use here.
Lots of horn-honking of course.
Even the guy in the starched white shirt,
a mouse in his other life,
is pounding away on his overgrown beeper.
Meanwhile, the guy in the backseat of the cab
has his head down,
his eyes doing all they can
to avoid looking at the meter.
While others are angry at the city,

at roadwork, at the five o'clock hour,
a couple in an SUV are taking the opportunity
to argue with each other.
Maybe all that stalled machinery
hemming them in
reminds the pair too much of their relationship.
He's cussing so vociferously
I can hear him over his air-conditioning.
She grabs her Styrofoam coffee cup,
slams it into the side of his head.
He screams the word "bitch" so loudly,
I swear his SUV starts rocking.
And so does the Ford behind him.
And the Tesla ahead.
In fact, every vehicle stuck in that grind
hears the word,
and rocks and rolls in agreement.
But then everything quiets,
we slump back in our seats
as warm coffee drips down our faces.

How to Build a Chair

Steve Roberts

I've made hundreds of chairs, some took a lot of
effort and some were easy. Some took procurement,
or luck, or fighting against my fear of humiliation.
Some of them are so chair-like it's uncanny.
Most of them exist only in my mind. Some of them
were meant to be something else but ended up
as chairs. I don't have a problem with that.

There are so many ways to make a chair
I'm surprised you haven't made one by accident.
A pile of clothes to wash, are you sure?
The way your suitcases pile up in the attic?
My advice would be know when you
have made the chair already; realize,
without expecting it, what you're already sitting on.

Sometimes I'm working on a chair and I hear a strange noise
in the hall and so I step out of the mental space
of creating something. The mental space is a kind of zen,
but stepping out of it into the empty hallway is better
than being at peace. It's more like looking at yourself
from a few steps behind. It's more about liking what you see.

Here's my advice to you: Don't worry if you haven't built a chair.

There was a time before chairs. Natural indentations
in rocks and sand dunes probably worked like chairs for
our primitive ancestors and that's where they got the idea.

A need or a desire presented itself. This is what I love so much
about humans, they attempt to solve imaginary problems.

I did that. I was in an empty room. I had piled some wood around
me with some tools, and I decided I would build myself a chair.

I think sometimes we've already built too many chairs,

way more than we could ever need, and there they sit in warehouses
and St. Vincent De Paul Societies and some have had hundreds,
perhaps thousands of people sit in them and some will never have
a single soul. Here's my advice: know if you want to sit in your chair
before you make it. Know if you want to leave it alone.

It's good to measure things as well. Helpful to understand
in a general sense the proportions of your personal universe.

That way the chair suits whomever you want to sit in it, their feet
touch the ground and the small of their back fits correctly
into the indentation you made for them in the quiet of your workshop

or garage. After you've made a couple you'll probably
do what I do, and start building a perfect chair in your mind.
Maybe it's upholstered with leather or canvas or maybe it's metal.
Maybe you've been using maple and you want to be using birch.
Here's my advice to you: keep making chairs but never make
the perfect chair. The world will wear your imagination down

and the end result will only make you disillusioned
and angry, it might even break your heart if you're
especially fragile. Leave that perfect chair
in your mind where you can never hurt it by creation.

If you get really antsy about it, I say learn to play the guitar
or do some completely different thing away from chairs,
maybe start a relationship for awhile. After all
a chair isn't everything, and no matter what you make
or think about making you really live a life of constant
entropy. I think we build things as a kind of apology for that

but I won't deny it feels good, too, a kind of mastery
over the elements that is illusory but at the same time
real enough to sit on and not break, to suspend a resting
body above the ground. To work around gravity.

We all know chairs are the improved versions

of people and that they can function without arms
and have more legs. We all know I'm going to die
someday. I can plan and plan but no matter what
I do I can't predict the future of these chairs.

If you see one of these chairs after I'm dead you'll know
what I've done. Feel free to sit in it, I don't care who
owns it. I know why I made them. I was going to say
please don't break my chairs but I think I'd be happier
if you did. In fact, promise me you will before you go.

Metamorphosis (Or, Girlhood)

Hannah Montante

And just like that, one day, she is born

a shell of a life, an egg, a microscopic seed

taking root in the Earth.

She does the best she can

until she breaks.

Yolk dripping down the sides, rolling onto smooth pavement.

Stepped on by a passerby, crushed,

Transparent shards scattered

After months, no, years,

She emerges from her chrysalis, reborn

Slips on her best sweater, the one with the cozy insides,

But when she takes a seat at the vanity, gazes into the looking glass, she understands,

she's not fooling anyone.

Dark circles sit, refuse to go

Puffy, pink lips remain.

How many tries will it take to become something other than what she is?

A misshapen thing, wings torn, halfway out, but folded inward

She puts on her best show, she must dazzle

She dabs paint under her eyes

They came from miles to see, to throw popcorn, to leer

And yet, there she is, frozen within her cocoon

When the next sideshow comes along
She hides away, underneath floral covers,
Curtains placed frantically, tacked to the wall,
Shallow air seeping in from outside,
Whispering, telling her it's time to transform
once again

A Warning About Beginnings; Which I Will Invariably Disregard with Pomp
and Aplomb

Abigail Sims

It will end.

Wineglass, evening kiss,

white moon sunk to a darken sea.

If it's good, it's going—

so, what's the point?

The warm back, bodied in your bed

didn't stick.

Not the first time, nor the second,

nor the third.

(By the fourth, you did start to suspect.)

Let us be bald about this:

You wanted a different life.

Yet here you sit. Again. At the end of another end,

of another end.

It goes on, this yearning,

intricate beyond articulation or admission.

How can we go on loving

like this?

FICTION

Deus ex Machina

Karen Walker

I need a god from the machine to suddenly appear and provide an artificial or contrived solution to you, my impossible problem.

An effective god or machine. Not the medical ones that promised, but failed, to create a child—a real one, not artificial like your Tesla or my fur-baby Mimi.

And not a household device, either. The radio in the kitchen once played songs you sang to me and I sang to you. All things seemed possible.

No, I need a deus defender to translate the Latin and legalese in what may be an impossible proceeding against you. The nice people at the help centre downtown aren't lawyers. They hug me and make peppermint tea.

And, hurrying home before you arrive, I'd appreciate a god in the building's lift: an animal pedalling madly to power it or a strong thread appearing suddenly. Climbing the stairs leaves me breathless, defenceless.

I need a deus ex machina to light me on fire or give me a can of petrol so I can do it myself. Finally scream and cry. Sounds impossible for you to process.

Go ahead! Go on the evening news to tell the world you didn't see this coming, now plan to donate to a mental health charity.

Despite the high likelihood of not surviving, I need more than smoke in my throat. How about an artificial source of intelligent words? I'm not smart. I didn't go to law school like you. I was just pretty for you.

And, while inside me, a machine may as well provide a sudden phenomenon to move my legs. Close them to you forever, free them from the constraints of silk sheets, set them quietly on the floor. I've tried. Impossible not to wake you.

Can a god bartend, serve liquid courage? I'd order Dirty Shirley cocktails heavy on the vodka. Deus ex maraschino.

And pour other liquid assets, too? Provide me with a specific, easy-to-swallow reason to be withdrawing more cash than usual. You make impossible profits.

The nice people at the help centre offered a plan, but better that a deus provide a list of what to take and when—a careful timeline so you won't notice sweaters and undies disappearing. I'd pack little Mimi on top.

I need a god from the machine that's literate. Help me write a note, and, after I'm gone, send it flying around the apartment to provide you with a contrived spectre to chase.

I'd ask the deus ex machina to accompany me down to the lobby and throw a whammy on the evil concierge who'd alert you.

And, finally—if it's not too much trouble—to come to the train station until I'm safely away. Maybe cause a pillar or a toilet stall to suddenly appear and serve as my hiding place because there could already be missing posters on the walls: "Emily is loved. Reward. Call Rex 074417599."

Close to You

Lori D'Angelo

Jenny wasn't sure when she fell in love with the homeless man, who panhandled on Greenville Avenue near the Lowe's and the Walmart, but she thought it was between Jay and Ray. He was sensible, that homeless man. He had chosen a good spot.

But it could have been after Barry and before Mark. After a while, all the men blended together like melting M&Ms. Jay was the guy who worked at GameStop and constantly talked about leveling up. It was cute at first, but after a while she understood why he was still living in his mother's basement and wondered if he'd ever leave. Ray, on the other hand, was a serious jazz musician who lectured her about why all the music she listened to was trash. One day, when she found him editing her workout playlist to include better quality songs, she knew that the music between them had died. But before they broke up, she changed all his car radio presets to Top 40 stations.

The homeless man wasn't pushy, but he also wasn't passive. Unlike Jay the gamer, he wasn't satisfied with his lot in life. But, unlike Ray the trumpeter, he didn't ridicule her hair, her car, her records. When she brought him a Whopper junior, he didn't tell her that her tastes were too mainstream. But he also didn't just take what she gave him and like it. He asked for fries next time. She brought them as well as a Coke.

Barry was a fitness nut who didn't believe in drinking soda, so, when she dated him, she drank Dr, Pepper four times a day till her teeth started to hurt. When her gums began to bleed, she knew it was time to pack up her sugar and move on. Mark was a single father of a 9 year old and the poster boy for wholesomeness. But he was so busy coaching Little League and helping his son earn merit badges that he didn't have time to see her. Unlike the homeless man.

The homeless was at the intersection on schedule Monday, Wednesday, Friday, noon to three rain or shine. She knew she could find him when she needed him.

Right Where It Belongs

Bri Eberhart

Five painstaking, miserable minutes left until freedom.

Loosening my tie, I methodically close out each browser tab, acting like I care, but I really don't. The desk fan continues to whirl as the lady in the cubicle eats yet another piece of candy. The crinkling wrapper is pushing me closer to the edge. Why do I have so many open browsers? I don't care enough to see what they say, knowing they all have something to do with work.

Three minutes.

Grabbing the backpack hidden under my desk, I pull out a warm Red Bull, hesitating before opening it. Do I need this? Yes. Piling all the useless papers together, I toss them in a bin with my pens and highlighter. I'm the master of looking busy.

One minute.

I log off thirty seconds early.

Slinging the strap over my shoulder, I tentatively stand and look both ways before stepping out into the aisle. The coast is clear; no boss in sight. Linda, the candy-eating lady from the cubicle over, begins asking me what my plans are for the night, but I'm gone before she can finish her sentence. I can't idly chat with anyone; it's too exhausting. The sweet smell of my energy drink wafts into the air as I hurriedly and carelessly make my way to the elevator, splashing it on myself and dousing my hand.

I'm in the elevator; I made it. Wiping my sticky fingers on the back of my pants, I dig for a cigarette in the side pocket, bite the filtered end, but hold off on lighting it. I've been busted before for not waiting until I'm outside.

The elevator doors open as “Fuck,” audibly slips out. My boss and two other poor saps are waiting at the garage door for me.

“There he is,” my boss chimes as if we’re good pals.

Groaning inwardly, I contemplate my options. I still probably have to be nice even though I’m off the clock, right? What would happen if I’m not? Can I walk past them, unchain my bike, and disappear forever?

I’m still standing in the elevator, cigarette dangling from my lips as he waits for a response. *Move, you fool.* Reluctantly, I lower my smoke and stuff it in my shirt pocket. “Here I am,” I mutter aloud to myself, stepping out with a perfect smile painted on my face. I’m also the master of faking insincerity. “Mr. Walker, I’m shocked to see you down here.”

Mr. Walker tries too hard to be one of the guys. He does his best to fit in and be included, although he’s almost double the age of every other employee here. The glaring difference between the two of us—I don’t *want* inclusion. I’m a life insurance agent by day and a fucking nobody at night. It’s great.

“Tommy,” he starts. I hate the nickname Tommy, but he doesn’t care. I’ve lost count of the times I’ve corrected him. “You’ve been here for a year now, right?”

“Mm,” I confirm while sidestepping to the glass door leading to the parking garage, planning my escape.

“I think it’s time we took you somewhere.”

I glance at the two others, Derek and Shawn. Not terrible people, but I still couldn’t care less to be in their presence. “Oh? Tonight? I actually—”

“Nonsense.” Mr. Walker cuts me off. “You’re coming with us.”

I argue my case, but they ultimately shoot me down. Here's the thing about office jobs, if you're not willing to play the part, you may as well kiss your job goodbye. And I've become reasonably comfortable with receiving a weekly paycheck. Mr. Walker slaps me on the back and leaves his hand resting there as he ushers me out to the vehicles.

The four of us pile into a pickup truck; sorry, I don't know the name; I'm not a car guy. As we back out, I stare longingly at my chained-up bicycle. Tension builds in my shoulders, and I have to remind myself to unclench my jaw. I can get through the night, surely?

We ride in silence for a while before I finally ask, "Where are we going?"

Derek and Shawn smirk at each other from the front seat while Mr. Walker punches me a little too hard on the arm. "You'll see."

The atmosphere seems to change; I'm buzzing with some unseen energy. Mr. Walker must feel it, too, because he turns to me and announces some rules we need to go over. Great. They're bringing me to a strip club, a fight club, or some other equally harrowing place I don't want to be at, especially with my boss, of all people.

Before his rules, though, the next question out of his mouth takes me off guard. He hands me a flask, and I swallow a small sip while he asks, "Do you believe in magic?"

Choking down the whiskey, I cough out a response. "Magic, sir?"

"Yes. Not like pulling a rabbit out of a hat but real magic? The impossible? The extraordinary?"

"Uhm..." I scratch my head, handing him back the flask, unsure how to reply. Do I lie? Pretend I do to fit in? His eager smile is telling me to buy into it. But instead, I say, "Not really, no."

“Well, Tommy, you’re in for a treat. What you see tonight... Well, we have to keep this world a secret so keep quiet.”

“World?”

“Things are different there...” He hesitates before adding, “Maybe you’ll never understand them. But why shy away from it? We must embrace it. I’ll show you.”

“I’m not sure I’m following.”

“Keep your eyes peeled. You’ll see.”

My gaze drifts out the window, but there’s nothing but trees. Mr. Walker always seemed a little outlandish but never insane. I clench my hands, willing myself to get through tonight without being fired.

“Well, where is it?”

“Right where it belongs.”

My heart speeds up a tad, the newly found fire vibrating inside me as I continue watching out the window, waiting for something to jump out of the woods. Within minutes, the trees clear, and we arrive at an abandoned parking lot. Off in the distance, arcade games shine, and poorly put-together rides squeak. Flashing lights bounce into the night sky, music blaring from sound speakers.

“We’re at... a carnival?” I ask, perplexed.

“Not just a carnival, but *thee* carnival—where anything can happen.”

I leisurely get out of the truck as Derek and Shawn bound to the entrance like they were eight years old again. Then, giving up on all pretenses, I pull the cigarette out of my shirt and light it, following Mr. Walker to the gates.

My head grows fuzzy the longer I stand in line. I'm growing intoxicated, although I only had that one shot of whiskey. Stubbing out the cigarette, I rub my eyes to gain focus. I don't recall moving, but now I'm next in line. An attendee with a top hat, black eye makeup, and a shockingly red vest holds his hand out for payment.

"How much?" I ask.

"A tooth."

Shaking my head, assuming I misheard him, I repeat my question and get the same answer.

"I'm not giving you a tooth! What the fuck?" I'm shocked, but I can't seem to focus. Why is my head throbbing? The attendee doubles, and I squint to turn him back into one person. Mr. Walker comes back to see what the holdup is. "I'm not giving this guy my tooth!" I exclaim, my words slurring.

Mr. Walker waves his hands in front of himself, interrupting me. "Tommy, just give him a tooth. I told you, things are different here. Pick a molar. It's quite easy to pull out."

Standing there in disbelief, I realize I must be sleeping, or in a coma, or maybe I died. This isn't real life. A sudden power takes hold of me, and I find myself reaching in and snatching a tooth. He was right; it comes right out as if it was loose all along. I drop it into the attendee's hand, and he thanks me for my drug addiction.

"What?" I whip my head back to respond, but the sidewalk below moves, whisking me away.

Mr. Walker is on a different trajectory, but he yells out for me to enjoy the ride. I attempt to move, but my feet cement into the sidewalk. My body feels light, filled with helium, and I'm fairly sure I'd float away if they didn't tether me to the ground.

All around me is darkness—a circus full of nightmares. Exhibits display strange sights, and I’m slow to grasp the point. Men on unicycles circle past me, faces painted white with black circles around their eyes, masquerade outfits with long coattails dyed crimson, purple, or charcoal. Their smiles are sinister, and they’re all watching me. Women glide around with flaming hula hoops. They’re also dangling in the air, ankles attached to drapes. My brain is so foggy; I search for the correct word. *Acrobats*? Yeah, I think that’s it. They match the men in style, all painted to look like skeletons. Some wear flowers in their hair. They’re watching me, too. Sweat beads on my forehead, and my heart pounds steadily on.

The sidewalk slows at my first exhibit, my stomach clenching at the sight. It’s a cage filled with funhouse mirrors, all portraying different images: large, small, pulled long, or wide. A medical exam table is in the middle, with a tray of scalpels and needles surrounding it. A human is locked inside, touching their bandaged face. They wear a corset that digs into their flesh, squeezing them into an impossible size. Feet crammed into stilettos, giving them an unnecessary height advantage when they’re trapped alone in the enclosure. I want to say something to them, but I’m at a loss for words. Can they even hear me? Why are they locked up?

My heart drops as the sidewalk kicks back into motion. The longer I’m stuck in this place, the more my body seems to be rejecting it.

A man with the face of a tiger approaches me on stilts. Is that a mask? I can’t tell; it’s too lifelike. Horrified, I avoid him, but he taunts me in circles since I have nowhere to go.

“Jelly beans?” he offers.

I say, “No thanks,” as my hand reaches out and grabs the lot.

“French fries?”

No. “Yes, please.”

I continue to eat against my will as the pavement leads me past another case. A metal bar is locked firmly across the door as if someone is worried the creatures inside will escape. I hold my breath, waiting to get a full view, gasping when I see it’s all children. Struggling against my concrete bindings, I’m desperate to help them, but I can’t because fear freezes me in place. They can’t hear my screams either. Why are they locked in there? Where are their parents? I glance at the tiger man helplessly, but he doesn’t respond. Wires are connecting the children to television screens. Virtual reality has taken hold; they’ll never see the light of day again.

The man on the stilts is still feeding me, and I can’t say no. My body is relaxing. Distant thoughts wonder where the other three are, but I also don’t care. I’m almost yearning for the next attraction.

The thoroughfare drags me through a jail-like building containing multiple cells. From the outside, it looks like a resort, but the inside carries an ominous feeling. Something dark and unrelenting has taken hold of these people, and there’s no letting go. Gliding past each cell, I can’t help but notice each locked-up person has a different addiction: video games, casino games, phones, tablets, and gym equipment. One cell is even full of designer shoes.

“Who are these people?”

“Lost souls.”

“How did they get here?”

“How do we all get here?”

My head swims as I try to process the information, but it’s all lost on me. “Am I like them?”

“You are them.”

Hit with sudden gut-wrenching fear, the jelly beans in my stomach twist painfully as sweat beads on the back of my neck—I’m them, and they’re me—a civilization brought to its knees by vices. We’re crutching our way through this world, and there’s no escape. Not unless we wake up; set ourselves free.

“They can change, can’t they? They can break free?” His lack of response tells me they’ve been here for years; there’s no changing now. He gazes down at me, and there’s knowing in his eyes. Without words, he’s telling me he’ll see me soon; he sees everyone at some point.

But not me. “I can change, I swear,” I promise to the man following me.

His mouth twists, doubting me and my sticky Red Bull hands.

“We’ll see.” He stilts off.

The path spits me beyond the gates, the energy slowly burning off. Derek, Shawn, and Mr. Walker are outside the truck, waiting for me like eager children, so happy to have shared their secret with me. It’s too late for them—glued in their ways. I wonder how long they have until they have a cage of their own.

The sun’s rising above the tree line, and all the flashing lights from before are turning off. The dawn is now eerily silent compared to when I entered earlier. Using my tongue, I search for the missing molar, and it’s there. Was any of this real, or was it truly magic? Glancing down at my watch, I’m stunned to find I only have an hour until my shift starts.

I take in the three faces watching me, expecting me to proclaim my love for whatever this was, but there’s nothing wrong with me. I don’t have an addiction; I’m nothing like these people.

Instead, I look at Mr. Walker and helplessly say, “I have to go now. I can’t be late for work.”

It turns out I’m the master of lying to myself, too.

Box and Thorn

Kenneth Gulotta

Elizeus Mans gave up on the paraphernalia: the glass jars for lightning runoff that made the hairs on his arms rise and travel against each other; the mortar and pestle, their stone surfaces stained, impregnated, no matter how he scrubbed them, with the ingredients for his tinctures—brown and yellow roots, red and blue crystals, green stones from the hearts of shellfish—leaving a mottled, opalescent gray that shifted when light fell on it, calling up memories of colors; the surgical devices, knives with which he had bled himself and pipes and filters with which he had extracted other, more ephemeral humours; even the books, both the forbidden and the exalted, ragged from his thumbs and prayers. None of it had worked. He was still mortal.

In the end, he simply sat in the middle of his cobblestone courtyard, under a driving rain, and turned all his attention within, slowing his breathing as he searched for some spark, thinking that if he could find it, he could sustain it, and if he could sustain it, he would sustain himself. He seemed to see it now and then, sometimes just a glimmer like a distant star, at other times stronger, blue like the tip of a flame, or red like iron in a forge, swelling toward liquefaction. Finally, there was nothing—just a void, punctuated only by the occasional tide of one of his own slow and rare breaths.

When he returned, spring was gone. He dug feebly upward through the mound of snow, piled a foot above his head. He was weak—his skin was ropery, as if he had spent a year under the inquisitor's thumb—but he was still alive, so he knew: something had happened. Now he just had to see if it would last.

In the ten months of his submersion, fourteen children were born in the city, seven boys and

seven girls. Fourteen people died, seven women and seven men. The symmetry of these numbers bothered Elizeus Mans. He was unable to discern the reason for it, if one existed.

After ten years, he left the village. He went to the nearby city, where his frozen age would take longer to be noticed.

It was a time of unrest. Rogue preachers dominated the squares, most claiming a link to one god or another, sometimes to pairs or groups of gods. The God of Stones and Sky. The Woman God of the Sun. Myra, the Goddess of Forgetting and Remembering. Os, the God of Future Things and Foresight.

It was in the Square of Martyrs, skirting a crowd around a preacher discoursing on the three laws of the Little God of Hunger (never eat more than once a day, never eat more than one thing at a time, never finish what you eat), when Elizeus Mans discovered the unexpected second effect.

The crowd was facing the preacher, and the preacher was facing the wall of the courtyard, where he had hung the flat stone image of his god, an outline of a face with eyes and a nose but no mouth. Just under the icon was a door that led out of the courtyard, into the street where Mans wanted to go. He wished he had some way of going through the door without attracting the attention of the preacher or any of his followers.

At that moment the preacher reached up, took the image down, and turned. His followers turned as well. They walked, a wall, toward Elizeus Mans. "Stop!" he shouted involuntarily, holding up his hands. Several of the men and women bumped into him, but they continued as if they hadn't noticed. He looked behind, and saw that they were all leaving by the doorway through which he had entered the courtyard.

He followed them, shouting, “Just run over an old man like I’m not there, just keep on going!” He turned to a woman drawing water from a well. “Did you see?” he asked, but she just continued filling her pail.

He wandered the city, touching people, calling to them, “I am here! Here!”

Finally he went back to his room and sat in the big leather chair before the fire, wondering what he would do, now that he couldn’t be seen or felt or heard, apparently. For instance, how would he order the wood for his fire from the man who came with his cart three times each week? Would he now have to cut and haul his own firewood? Did he have the strength for that?

He looked at his hands. He was right there.

He stood and left his room. He walked down the hallway.

“Evening, Dr. Mans,” the landlord said. “We have venison tonight. We’ll see you in the dining room?”

Mans blinked. Then he nodded. He walked outside, basking in the gazes of all the passersby.

But the old curiosity remained. He couldn’t leave it alone; besides, he had to determine how it worked, in case it happened to him again.

He practiced disappearing from the presence of people, before their eyes, but they expressed no surprise. They still saw him.

Later, he stood alone in his room, peering into the silver mirror on the wall, trying to disappear. His face floated there still, frowning, tight-eyed.

The door opened and the maid came in. She pushed past him and bent to pull the blankets from his bed. She took them from the room. Then she came back in and looked around. She stepped over to the wall and straightened the tilting mirror. He grimaced at her in it, sticking out his tongue, but she didn't react. He willed himself back into her perception, but she just kept moving objects—the poker, which he had left on the floor next to the fireplace instead of in its stand; his slippers and robe, which he had thrown in a corner rather than stowing in the closet; several candle stands; and a stack of books (one volume of poetry by the tower troubadours, two collections of engravings of fantastic animals and monsters, and one pamphlet about the alleys of the city) that he had left on the floor next to his bed. Then she left again.

Elizeus Mans willed himself into the world, and then he stepped into the hallway.

“Os!” the maid yelped. “Doctor, were you in that room the whole time?”

“I was asleep in my chair. I woke just now when I heard you out here in the hallway.”

She fanned her face. “Well, I should be examined. I didn't even see you, and I was in there ten minutes, it must have been!”

“I suppose I must have been sitting very still as I dozed.”

“Well. I will have to learn to pay attention to things. Good day, Doctor.”

“Yes.”

So: he could make the shift to and from perception at will, but only in those moments when no one might observe him doing so.

The next year he inquired about the births and deaths in the village. (He thought about getting the figures for the city as well, but its size made them harder to obtain with any accuracy.) Twenty children were born, ten boys and ten girls, but eight people had died, four men and four

women. The numbers still bothered him, but at least one of the axes of strange symmetry—that of corresponding births and deaths—seemed to have disappeared.

Years passed.

He didn't often use that strange and precarious offshoot of immortality, the ability to exist undetected. In other circumstances, he might have been tempted to use it for financial gain. But Elizeus Mans had never wanted for money. The hoard passed down by his dimly remembered great-great-grandmother was so vast and continually growing that his meager needs could hardly hope to dent it. As long as he had his family seal, hidden within the ring on his index finger, his letters for funds would never go unanswered. He didn't even have to make up a false name to sign; the seal, its two stars connected by a tattered fragment of spider web, was all the authorities needed.

True, he did have one vice: listening to secrets. He sometimes walked the squares and temples, standing a foot from whisperers who couldn't detect him. When he felt a particular need for the innermost secrets of his fellow citizens, he walked beneath the tunnel-forming branches of the confession oaks, pausing and tilting his head to capture the words whispered to the knots of bark, to the trembling dark leaves.

I thought of killing the premier, but it never went further than that. There was no reason—there would have been no benefit from killing him. It was just that for two or three years, thinking about it brought me pleasure and helped me sleep.

I want my wife to leave me, but I don't have the courage to ask her. I don't even have the courage to ignore her. I'm as attentive as the first day we joined. But I wish she would just flee, just leave me and the children behind.

I stole from my mother when I was twelve. She never found out. She thought it was my cousin; she banned him from our house. Once a month I put a coin in her purse. The debt has long been repaid. More than—paid four times over, I'd say. But I continue sneaking the coins into her purse. I can't stop.

These secrets sustained Elizeus Mans. He felt that the men and women who spoke these words were conversing with him, particularly—that they were, on some level, his friends. He had so few actual conversations, you see.

More children were being born, and fewer people were dying. The numbers went up and down, but the definite trend over the last two hundred years had been toward life, beginning it and continuing it.

Mans wondered about this rising percentage of the living. Mainly, he wondered if it had something to do with him.

On the other hand, perhaps his journey inward had allowed him to tap into something that would happen to all people, sooner or later, as long as they didn't die before they encountered it. Who knows? Perhaps, every day, he was bumping into other people who were undetectable to him as well. Perhaps, after all was said and done, he wasn't so special after all.

People were everywhere. Standing in the doorways. Looking out the windows. Looking *in* the windows. It was growing more and more difficult to find some private place to make the change. Why, there was no village anymore—it was all just one city, spreading out, swallowing all into itself, like lava.

One day, he decided: Elizeus Mans had to remain present. He would never make the shift to the undetectable state again.

The jutes grabbed him right on a crowded street, people jostling against each other, yelling, everybody watching what was happening. They didn't care, though. They laughed and tore out patches of their own hair, the way you saw on the floating reports at night. Elizeus Mans had never believed those stories; they seemed haint tails of a sort, myths to encourage everyone to use electronic transaction cards rather than gold. This lot had seen him paying with coins at the market. Perhaps they were modeling themselves after the stories in the reports. Maybe the reports had created what they were supposed to be reporting.

Their mistake was throwing him in the cargo chamber alone. When they opened the hatch, he climbed right out, using their arms, necks, and shoulders as handholds, while they dipped their heads into the yawning, empty box, wondering how, where he had escaped, and then wondering what they had been looking for at all.

When Elizeus Mans found his way back to his room, the new tenant had already moved in, the locks and scanners had already been changed. How long had he been in the cargo chamber? It had felt like hours to him, but his sense of time was loose. Perhaps it had been days; perhaps longer.

He wandered the city, looking for dark spaces. Each step he made was watched. Several times he found closets, trashcans, other cargo chambers to lurk in and try to change, but each time, when he left, people still bumped and jostled him without noticing any impact.

He ate half of someone's supper. The guard didn't notice the missing food as it left his plate. However, the morsels didn't seem to have an effect on the hunger that Mans was feeling. It was as sharp as when he had awakened the morning after his first night of meager slumber outside, when he had hidden beneath a stone porch at the back of some person's house, and it was still growing, slowly, consuming more and more of his own attention.

Three centuries passed in a haze of crowded inches about him and gnawing emptiness within him.

He found out why he couldn't make the change even when he hid in cargo chambers and other dark places: the sky sights had been activated. Floating above, they penetrated every pocket below, every inhabitable space, even those underground, underwater. It had happened right after the attack, apparently. From that point on, there was no space on the globe that was not under some form of observation.

He wondered idly at times if anyone at all was still dying, but he never worked up the will to search out the information.

He walked the city miles. He didn't know if it was the same city or another city that had stretched out to greet him. They were all the same streets, bridges, waterways. Nothing was different from anything else.

He remembered glass tubes bending over the lips of fat-bottomed flasks. He remembered honing a flame to a blue point beneath a beaker of liquid so clear that only faith could prove it was there at all.

Faces. They helloed to each other, turned away. What had his been? Grim, thin, two deep lines at either side of his mouth, dark circles dripping under dark, wet eyes.

At times he wanted to weep, but he was unable to, for some reason.

There was talk of leaving the globe, exploring other worlds, but it never came about. Perhaps, if it had, he might have stowed away and found some unmapped, unsighted territory, some unknown bolt-hole that would allow him to return to discernibility. But he was grounded,

tethered to an endlessly scrutinized terrain. Perhaps such travel would happen in another century or two. He couldn't say he would still care if it did.

Finally he sat again and closed his eyes. He didn't draw within this time. Instead, he let himself drift out, away from himself; growing ever sparser the further he got from his one still point. Sparks of him wafted into others around; they walked with faint sparks of him. Further, out, out, he drifted, until he no longer remembered his name.

He faded into all the people. They carried him from place to place, and he continues. His spark is in me, in you, in us all. You carry a spark of the man who once was Elizeus Mans. It is fading, growing quite soft, but it is still there, and if you could look into yourself from the corner of your eye, you might catch some glimpse of it.

glow

Charlotte Amelia Poe

Fuck -

By the time you read this, I'll already be dead. They gave me three months, you see. God, I remember when my sister was pregnant - at twelve weeks she hadn't even told us. Now I'm never even going to see that kid grow up. I haven't told him. I haven't told any of them. How do I even begin to? How do you tell your family that you're haunting them, that there's something in your brain that's eating you alive? Fuck.

I wanted to do so much. I wanted to be beautiful. I wanted to be remembered. That's human, isn't it? To want to be remembered? Do you think there's some kind of glow that lasts, afterwards? Like some halcyon bulb that lasts a little longer than it should, blinks out a few seconds after the switch is flicked?

I'm flickering out, I can feel it. But I'm not gone yet. Not total annihilation, not total demise. Oh, by the time you're reading this, it's all over. But darling, time doesn't flow so steady these days.

By the time you read this, I'll already be dead. But when is that? Is it now? Or now? Or now?

Fucking neon demon hell bound choking up sulphur but not quite ashes, oh no, baby, not quite yet.

Bibliography

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