

# NEON ORIGAMI

## LITERARY MAGAZINE



PHOTO BY MARIO CUADROS

*Literary Fiction By*  
Patrick Hare  
David Horn

*Poetry By*  
Jesse Maggard  
Jordan Franklin  
Saba

*Genre Fiction By*  
Bri Hager  
Felix Bou

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# THREE POUNDS



Fiction

BY PATRICK HARE

“Three pounds.”

Ray watched the butcher scoop up the rusty chorizo with his hands and drop it onto the scale. It was a decadent amount of meat. He had no idea what he would do with it all. The butcher, his mind still in the kitchen where a chicken breast lay half-stuffed, added another ounce to the pile and formed it into a block that reminded Ray of an organ— an elephant’s kidney, or the spleen of one of his son’s video game dinosaurs (Did spleens look like that, or were they greenish yellow? If they were, would dinosaurian spleens be green too? Was spleen color conserved, like the deep brown eyes he passed on to his son?). Satisfied with the weight, the butcher wrapped the chorizo neatly in a sheet of his namesake paper, grabbed the printed price sticker from the scale without looking and slapped it over the seam. He handed the package over the counter to Ray and asked him if there was anything else he needed, years of customer service work handling the cheery attentiveness in his voice and while the bulk of his faculties were ordering his tasks after he finished with the stuffed chicken breasts. Ray’s hand only covered half of the chorizo bundle and as his muscles bowed from the new weight, he froze.

He already had buyer’s remorse. The woman waiting behind him coughed, the gift of a thirty-year smoking addiction that she no more noticed than the crack her knee made when she stood up or her habit of avoiding conflict by ending her every opinion with a desultory “is all I meant.”

“No, this is all I need. Thanks.”

Ray took the heavy package and danced out of the way of the impatient woman behind him, jogged out of her reverie when the man in front of her nearly collided with her. Three pounds had never been heavier to Ray, yet there was the weight on the label: 3.01 lbs., verified by yearly calibrated electronic scale. He slid the chorizo into his basket next to the green peppers, romaine, and broccoli that he bought at this natural-foods-focused store because this week they were cheaper (\$0.30, \$0.49, and \$0.25 per pound, respectively) than at the Food Lion. The chorizo muscled aside the vegetables and glowered over the other unplanned purchase in his basket, a pint of blueberries he had been unable to resist. At least they were on sale, unlike the chorizo.

With every step, the chorizo gained weight. Three pounds was an extravagance, especially at \$4.89 per pound.

Passing through the frozen foods on the way to the cash registers, Ray was stopped by a revelation: he hadn't paid for the sausage yet and he need not pay for it at all. The aisle was deserted. He could reach into his basket, lift out the mass in its crisp brown butcher paper and stash it in a freezer case. It could even be resold. Security cameras would undoubtedly record it, but he'd just be another weird, somewhat rude customer. A clerk stepped around the corner and Ray became engrossed in checking through his basket, counterfeiting a man mentally verifying that he had all he needed. It only took him four seconds to check his inventory.

Could he use some ice cream? He studied the containers behind the faintly frosty glass intently, waiting for the employee to leave so he could abandon his meat in peace.

The clerk interrupted his plan of straightening the egg cartons after observing the man in the frozen foods aisle pawing nervously through his basket. Thieves, perverts, terrorists, people who merely want to inject some chaos into the neatly and attractively aligned products on display; one never knew who would show up in the store. Everyone needed food, after all. The clerk walked past the nervous man, now browsing the lactose-free ice creams, ready to engage him, ask cheerfully if he was finding everything he needed, but the man never looked up. The clerk continued around the corner and up the adjacent aisle. Just in case, he'd tell the security guard to keep an eye on the nervous man. As the clerk passed the cross aisle, the nervous man emerged and headed to Jill's cash register. The clerk watched them long enough to make sure that the nervous man was not robbing Jill, then resumed his trip to the eggs, annoyed at the nervous man ostensibly for the interruption, secretly for not providing a more lurid distraction from his daily routine.

Ray took the vegetables and blueberries out of his basket. Maybe he could leave the three pounds of chorizo in the basket without the clerk noticing?

"Making something Mexican?" Jill asked. Mentally, Ray cursed. He was committed now. "I don't know yet." He lifted the chorizo out and deposited it on the conveyer, expecting the belt to falter under the weight of the meat. "It's funny, I didn't plan on getting it, but it looked so good in the case, I had to have some." Jill barked a laugh as she scanned. "I've been there."

Ray fumbled the basket into the stack on the floor, then dropped his wallet getting it out.

Jill could see that this man was a floundering ship. Other clerks wouldn't respond, they'd barely notice him, but Jill threw on the offering of a friendly bit of advice; it was why she was working the checkout and not stocking shelves. She could help this man.

"Here's what you do," she said, looking him in the eyes while scanning the last of his produce and bagging it, "Sauté it up with a little onion, add some tomatoes and rice, stuff it in those peppers, toss some jack on them and bake it. My kids love it. 'Course, you'll have some left; it won't take three pounds." She cocked an eyebrow. "Even have some left for tacos." "Sounds good," Ray managed. He finished paying and Jill handed over his bag with a smile.

"Stay warm out there," she said, the glow of a good deed done suffusing her body and counteracting the chill that dashed in the front door as another customer entered.

"Thanks."

The cold rain that had been falling when Ray came in had changed to sleet as he made his way out. It cracked on the metal awning that shielded the doors and splattered on the blacktop. Ray stopped in the vestibule with the carts to zip up his jacket and gird himself mentally for the dash to the car. Two women were there, clearly waiting for the precipitation to lessen. The younger one, probably in her fifties, stood behind the second woman's wheelchair. They were mother and daughter, Ray decided, after stealing glances at them and discerning a resemblance. T

he mother nearly disappeared beneath a grey woolen coat, out of which wound an oxygen line. She wore a plastic scarf over her dark curls and clutched a reusable bag of groceries on her lap. The daughter wore a ski jacket and a pained expression. Ray sympathized; while not as cold as outside, the vestibule was uncomfortable, and to avoid setting off the automatic doors, one had to stand in the awkward space blocking the carts or balanced midway between the fields of vision of the two sets of door and in the center of traffic. The women having claimed the space by the carts, Ray took up a position in between the doors, settled his trapper hat on his head, and marveled at the sleet. The daughter took the opportunity to get a better look at him, assessing him for danger. Was he waiting because, like them, he didn't want to get soaked and pummeled by the sleet, or was he waiting for an opportune moment to rob them? He didn't look shifty, but who could tell, especially with his kind. Not that his kind was automatically dangerous, she corrected herself, while shuffling her body forward to better shield the purses which hung from the back of her mother's wheelchair. One never knew. The woman's mother fussed with her oxygen tube, jostled when her daughter fidgeted. They could leave soon enough. She wasn't about to get soaked just to let her daughter get back to whatever it was she did all day. The sleet intensified, making the vestibule roar like the metal bleachers had during the especially memorable high school basketball game when she, pigtailed and bobby-socked, had stolen her first kiss. Ray considered making a run for it before the storm got worse, but he could barely see the first car in his row through the sleet. His car, somewhere past the second cart return, was lost behind the walls of precipitation. It looked as though each chunk of sleet was dragging a cylinder of ice behind it, building a thicket of frozen pillars that bound the ground to the low grey sky. Ray shifted the bag of groceries to his other hand and waited, trapped in the limbo between doors.

Spectral faces solidified in the forest of ice, and Ray jumped before recognizing them as reflections of Jill and two other employees who had come to the interior door to watch the downpour. His motion took him into the cone of the front door's eye, and it slid open to the deafening storm. An eddy of sleet-chilled air seethed in and crested over them. Ray stepped back and turned around. Jill waved, trying to convey with the single gesture a mix sympathy for his impending soaking at the hands of the storm, rueful relief that she had a shift to finish and wouldn't be sharing the experience with him, and a wish that he wouldn't get too drenched when he left. Ray nodded at her, and, because it seemed rude not to, nodded at the woman and her mother before once again facing the onslaught of partially frozen water outside.

---

Eventually, imperceptibly, the forest thinned and the rate of sleet tapered to a slow, soft patter. "Looks like it's letting up," Ray offered, the odd camaraderie with the women engendered by their shared experience of the storm spurring him to a friendliness he would not normally have expressed. "Finally," the daughter replied as if she had been holding the word in since the storm stranded them in the vestibule, the word an exhale as much as her response in their newborn conversation. She started adjusting her coat and the chair preparatory to pushing her mother out. "Now you're bundled up, right? I parked pretty far away." "I don't want to go out in that," the mother complained. "We can wait until it stops for good." She saw no reason to subject herself to the last barrage of sleet just to return to her diminutive room in independent living a few minutes faster. "It's not that bad." The daughter's to-do list was waiting, devouring more of what remained of the day with every gust of ice. Soon the tasks would exceed her available time and spill over into tomorrow, like seemingly every day for longer than she cared to remember (but was in actuality two days).

Ray sided with the mother, but for his own reasons. Carrying his bag out to the car and driving home was the final irrevocable step. Once outside, Ray was on a path that would terminate in his having to explain the chorizo—a minor problem itself, as they could simply avoid buying meat for a few more meals—and confess to his lack of self-control. Panic sweat began to stipple his brow. He looked over at the daughter, remonstrating with her mother about their already delayed departure.

“I can wait with her, if you want to bring the car to the curb. There’s no sense in both of you getting soaked,” Ray said. “Really? That would be very kind,” the daughter replied, looking at him directly for the first time. She had seen the checkout clerk wave to him earlier, and Jill seemed to have a good sense for people. Still, she’d take the purses with her.

The daughter left and Ray stepped over to her mother, making small talk about how quickly the weather turned. He shifted around a bit, not sure where to stand. Behind the wheelchair? Next to it? Standing in front of the woman seemed disrespectful. He stationed himself next to the chair so that the woman could see him easily, but he wouldn’t loom. Together they looked out through the doors, watching the daughter diminish as she walked to her distantly parked car. The temperature had dropped further in the wake of the sleet, and a bank of billowing gritty white snow blew over the hill and directly at the storefront. The daughter strode into it and dissolved. Evaporated. Taken. Ray noticed the grocery bag pulling him slightly out of plumb and shifted it to his other hand.

# THE HOUSE WERE WINTER WAITED



Fiction

BY DAVID HORN

*There are places the living forget, not because they want to, but because remembering costs too much. The houses lean inward. The trees forget how to bloom. Even the wind holds its breath. But sometimes, the past leaves a light on. And sometimes, someone finds their way home. This is the story of a woman named Ana, who came back to a place she had buried in silence. A house where winter waited—for one final thaw.*

#

She'd stopped believing in mornings a long time ago. Not the light—day still came—but the promise it used to carry. That something might begin. That the ache might ease.

Ana hadn't felt anything but gray in years. Time didn't pass—it settled, like soot in the corners of a room no one entered anymore. Purpose had gone theoretical. Peace felt like something the dead got to keep.

The cab's heater rasped like an old man trying to clear his throat. Ana sat stiffly, coat zipped to her chin, fingers clutching a paper bag like it held something precious instead of aspirin and tissues.

The driver looked up in the mirror, waiting.

"Right here," she said.

Her voice surprised her. She hadn't spoken since O'Hare.

"Cold out here," the cabbie said, slowing. "You sure this is the spot?"

"It's not the cold," Ana murmured. "It's the memory."

The house was still standing. That surprised her. Paint peeled like skin from the window frames. The porch sagged. A storm door flapped in the wind; its glass long gone. Dead ivy clung to the gutters, brittle as wire.

Still, her feet moved. Not toward the house—toward the street.

She hadn't been here in fifty years. Not since—

The memory struck like a backhand. Sudden. Uninvited.

Part of her still stood here—fourteen, trembling, furious. That girl had run to survive, and Ana had spent a lifetime resenting her for it.

"You left her," Ana muttered. "You left me."

Her mother, barefoot on the porch steps, screaming through whiskey breath and bloodied nails. Ana, fourteen. Already half-vanished down the sidewalk.

She closed her eyes just long enough to bury it again.

But grief doesn't knock. It slips through cracks. Even the kind left by an obituary.

Margaret "Maggie" Elwood, 71. Died peacefully. No children. No husband. Just a name, a date, and a town that never gave her much.

She'd been the bright spot in that whole shadowed street.

She laughed in full bursts, like someone uncorking joy. She ate hot fries from the bag, always with too much salt, and her fingers stained orange.

She had let Ana sleep over when home got bad—no questions, no lights on, just the warmth of a shared blanket and quiet breathing.

They drifted apart for years, then reconnected—quietly. Maggie was never one for drama. Oh, there'd be a birthday message now and then, a memory in the comments, a photo of her tomato plants leaning stubbornly toward the sun.

She never mentioned being sick. Never hinted at dying. She knew what Ana carried—and wouldn't add to the weight. Now she was gone.

They buried her yesterday. There was no funeral notice, no last goodbye. All that marked her passing was a forwarded newsletter clipping—from a classmate Ana barely remembered.

The cab pulled away, leaving her at the curb.

She looked up. Snow was falling, now—thin, slanting, slow. The air smelled of rust, old paper, and wet concrete. Across the street, the corner store still blinked its neon sign, now half-lit: R A L P H ' S. She started walking. Each step felt like pushing through wet sand—guilt in her heels, memory at her back.

The old house she and Maggie used to sneak into after school—three blocks over, past the Lutheran church—still stood. Empty. Maybe.

She passed the church, now boarded up. Spray paint split across its stone like a warning: NO ONE SAVES YOU BUT YOU.

Next door, the liquor store still operated. A man lit a cigarette with shaking hands, staring too long. Curious rather than threatening. Outsiders were rare here.

As Ana rounded the corner, an old woman on the porch next door squinted at her.

“So. You came after all.”

Ana stopped. “Do I know you?”

“Didn't need to. But I knew Maggie. She waited for you—even when some of us thought she shouldn't.”

Ana's jaw tightened. “That's between her and me.”

The woman sniffed. “Well. She forgave you.” A beat. “That's more than most around here would.”

Ana didn't answer. She wanted to say something strong. Something that would end the conversation, confirm that she was in control. But all she felt was the cold pressing against her ribs, whispering truths she wasn't ready to face.

The cold pressed in, slow and personal. She almost turned back.

Almost hailed a cab. Almost slipped into the life she knew how to manage.

But her feet stayed rooted. She looked up at Maggie's door. The house stood crooked, like it had been holding its breath too long.

She pushed open the gate. It groaned—like something waking up.

Inside, the cold wasn't just air—it clung to the walls, settled in the bones.

The kind of cold that remembered things. Dust coated everything. Wallpaper peeled like dry leaves. But nothing had changed.

The tea kettle.

The blanket folded over the armchair.

The record player by the window, needle still resting like it never got the chance to play again. A photo had fallen behind the radiator—Maggie as a girl, grinning under a sunhat. Ana picked it up. Her breath caught. She didn't remember this one. Why hadn't Maggie sent it? Or had she tried?

On the mantle sat a box, small and sealed with string. A note in Maggie's handwriting:

When you're ready.

Ana picked it up. Her thumb found the knot. She froze.

“Open it. Don't open it. God—just do something,” she said through her teeth. “Why does everything have to hurt?”

She turned toward the trash can. Stopped. Her fingers tightened. Then let go.

“You always knew how to say too much in too few words,” she whispered.

“Why didn't you ever let me say anything back?”

She set the box back on the mantle and sat. Not to mourn, nor to remember, but to feel.

It came slowly—like blood returning to a limb gone numb. Pins. Needles. Ache. Then warmth. She wept. She wept for Maggie; and she wept for the girl who used to laugh on this floor. The one who once believed in soft landings. The one who hadn't yet learned to close every door behind her.

Ana dreamed that night. She dreamed of a day so hot the pavement hissed after rain. She and Maggie were nine. They'd skipped class, ran barefoot through the alleys, chalk dust smudging their knees, laughter bouncing off brick. Ana carried a bruise on her shoulder—no questions. Just Maggie's hand grabbing hers, firm and small.

They hid in a broken shed behind the butcher's, light slanting in through warped boards. Maggie pulled a sandwich from her backpack; split it clean down the middle.

"You don't have to go back," she said.

Ana stared at the peanut butter. "Where else would I go?"

"Here. Anywhere. Just not where it hurts."

Ana stayed that night and slept in Maggie's room under a clicking fan.

She woke to pancakes and quiet. It was a good day.

Sometimes, that's all it takes.

She returned to 218 Leland the next morning. The woman from the night before—Cassie—opened the door, then stepped aside.

"You sure you want to do this?" she asked.

Ana paused. Then nodded.

"Alright. Second door up." A beat. "It's how she left it."

The apartment was small. Sparse. A faint whistle came from the other room—an old kettle refusing to be forgotten. Cassie followed her in, holding out a worn manila envelope. A yellow Post-it clung to the front; edges curled.

*For Ana, when she's ready. Not a moment before.*

Ana sat on the edge of the bed as she opened it. She found a letter inside, and something told her that what she'd find in the words was Maggie.

*You always thought you had to be strong. But love doesn't need armor. It just needs room.*

*You gave me room, once. I never forgot.*

*I wasn't waiting for an apology. I was hoping you'd heal. But there were days I almost gave up—days I thought you'd buried me, too. If you're reading this, maybe it means you didn't. That's enough. That's everything.*

*Don't let the cold win. There's still so much life in you.*

*Don't spend it buried.*

The tears came differently this time. Cassie touched her shoulder. "She never blamed you."

Ana flinched. "Then why do I feel like I did something unforgivable?"

"Because you haven't forgiven yourself," Cassie said. "That's different. She knew what this place did to people. She stayed because someone had to. She hoped it wouldn't be in vain."

Ana looked up. "Did Maggie ever talk about...regrets?"

Cassie shrugged. Then stopped.

"She had one regret," she said quietly.

"She wished she'd told you sooner. About the cancer. But she didn't want you to carry that too."

Ana exhaled. "Of course she didn't."

Cassie smiled—just barely.

"She always said you were stronger than you thought. But she knew you wouldn't believe it until you felt it."

Ana laughed—short, unguarded. It cracked in her throat, sharp as breaking ice. Then softened into something almost like relief.

That night, Ana returned to Maggie's house with a paper bag of groceries.

She dusted the countertop. Lit the stove. Opened the windows. Snow still fell, but inside, the air stirred.

She made tea for two. One cup sat across from her—empty. But that didn't matter. She was here.

The kettle hissed softly in the background, like it had waited years to be noticed.

She turned toward the empty cup. “You could’ve asked me to stay,” she whispered. Then she caught herself.

“No—you did ask. I just couldn’t hear it back then.”

The house, long frozen, began to feel like something near home. Winter had waited long enough. She rose and stepped onto the porch. Picked up the broom. The steps were crusted with snow and grime. She began to sweep.

The wind shifted. Sunlight touched the wood.

Peace didn’t arrive with trumpets. It came like Maggie’s voice—low, steady, warm. In the scrape of a chair. The hiss of the kettle.

The choice to stay.

This time, Ana chose her own morning. And it was enough.

#

*They say healing is slow. That it comes in inches, not miles. But for some, it starts with a doorway open not to let others in, but to let something out. Grief. Guilt.*

*Memory. Or maybe just the cold.*

*In this forgotten neighborhood, beneath the quiet snow, one woman swept away a silence half a century deep. And in doing so, reminds us that winter never truly wins—not if we can forgive the silence, speak into the cold, and come back anyway.*

# NOZUMI LINE



Poetry

BY JESSE MAGGARD

## (Omukae)

Tokyo's fever slid like fog across  
the carriage mirror's glass, dragging  
the warm sting of your nodoame  
twenty minutes nearer  
to my green car's gray light, piercing  
static-stained valleys  
from Nagoya to Kyoto,  
silence breaking— staccato waves,  
pitching sharper as they go.  
I rose while the train still hummed  
into Osaka Station, and  
Noriba flickered like tired eyes above  
words tangled in a taxi's tongue—  
and soon stumbled through reception  
to wince at my face echoed  
in green ripples of tea.

As twenty frozen minutes sprawled,  
I waited, etched  
in pained breath and nerves  
and the blur between arrivals  
that were always almost you,  
but never were—  
you shimmered sweetly past  
the reach of sound and sights  
I wished to cup in my palm,  
and hold through moments melting  
like lantern smears in night.

(Owakare)

I woke four hours early  
to watch you sleep for two,  
then split two more  
Under dim airport fluorescents.  
No anger in my voice—  
just breathing flesh beside yours.  
I clung to the twine of every moment until  
my fingers flayed like fish—  
The last of these— desperate—  
dwindling, like the memory of a dream,  
dissolving as you wake.  
I'm sorry I wasn't more than that.

But after those four passed,  
seconds dripped like  
iodine into silence.  
Words suffered stiff politeness,  
and couldn't leave  
your face to land softly on the tarmac.  
And Japanese decorum  
permitted me just one  
meek kiss.  
You waved—  
White scarf blanketing  
a face folded into smile.  
Framed in the wings of a glass divide,  
I watched you fade  
before the security checkpoint—  
pale breath on a blade of winter.

**(Tadama)**

Past the terminal,  
underground currents churned  
the image of your face—  
a blurring constellation of pixels,  
burning out with distance.

*Noriba.*

Pulling my husk  
like a marionette on wires of wind  
through the tunnel.  
*Not even our wires touched now.*

I surrendered to transit—  
Let it numb  
The weight of your trace  
and the luggage that trailed me

two weeks from Haneda

I nodded into a new wound  
in the soft wood of my doorway  
slumped and reeling from the—  
Stillness.

I had no more trains to take.  
Roads yawned and widened  
to horizonless cul-de-sacs,  
the air reeked of sour milk,  
and Nozomi was lost  
in the dying neon nothing of America.

# WHEN THE WORLD BLINKS OUT, POET HOPES FOR (MF) DOOM



Poetry

BY JORDAN FRANKLIN

Resurrected. Hungry. Glorious. Catch the grave dirt  
runnin' through the scars in his mask. He hacks a knot  
of worms from his throat. Decker out in soil-dimmed  
hoodie, the blood moon ignites a scarlet crown 'cross  
his bald scalp. In one hour, he gargles just enough  
sounds to make his name. Later, it's in all caps like his  
reanimator's thumb leapt on the caps lock of his brain  
and didn't release. It's the moment we learn that  
Death ain't the tv burning out for good as the house  
falls down 'round it. It's more a channel change. Blink  
and all the cartoons race like ferraris do miles and  
miles 'round the barrios of the skull. DOOM shakes  
cobwebs from his voicebox. Tilts his head back 'til the  
red moon runs down his face like Amityville  
sideburns. Pure horrorcore. His mouth opens up like  
Galactus, takes in no air but goes off regardless,  
freestyling at the very spot they left him to see his  
baby brother again. Moldy prophet with the last living  
truth: good rhymes weigh more than dimes or plots  
with fat headstones. Here sits Immortality. The parts  
for a death ray to build and disintegrate reality and all  
its stars. *The pen 'til rigor mortis sets in, poet, DOOM*  
spits, all honest tomb grit and coffin splinters. *The pen*  
*'til the cemetery's full. The pen 'til God digs us up again.*

# HOW IT FEELS TO LIVE WITH A SERIAL KILLER



Poetry

BY SABA

I didn't ask to be here, yet I am. I've found no way to  
escape. I came up with a plan. It failed every time. My  
results always ended in rape.

You may ask how I am still alive, how I get through  
the day, if murder is my landlord's peace.  
Well, like the other tenants, I found a way to survive, a  
way to get through this lifelong lease.

Yes, I said lease. I actually pay to live here, awaiting  
my turn to be slain.  
I look for things to make me happy and things to keep  
me distracted. Yet my efforts are all in vain.

There is no sweet way to put it. I live with a killer,  
whose motive is none but to kill.  
I know this sounds fictional, but there's no happy  
ending here. This story is based on REAL.

Yesterday I watched him kill a baby, the day before a  
father, this morning, that same man's son.  
He gets a thrill out of this. His victims are selected.  
After he murders, he screams, "I Won!"

They're actually a group. They challenge each other to  
see who has the most innovative approach.  
The "intelligent" ones say, "Undercover is best, and  
deception is key. What if we let them "vote?"

But I refuse to participate in murder, no matter how  
it's done. To be complicit is to aid and abet.  
I chose not to be an accomplice. I spoke out instead. 15  
years in the basement my husband was kept.

This is how I feel. So now I ask you, a serious question,  
quite literally.

How does it feel to live with a serial killer? Because  
you live with him, too. Our address is "The Land  
Of The Free"

Signed,  
TheyToldMeNotToWrite(TM)

# SHADOW & SUNLIGHT



Genre Fiction

BY BRI HAGER

NO MATTER HOW LONG Cerelia moldered in the dark, she never forgot the feel of the morning sun. How it met the night's chill, setting soft flame to all the world below. Dew teased into ribbons of fog, which tended to curl about bare ankles, or bead themselves into silken hair. Flowers that blinked wearily at the rising light as great, slumbering trees swayed in the wind, loosing aromas of honey and pine.

She remembered, too, how it'd felt to convince the hills behind her house that the sun had never risen at all. To linger, and see how a shadow of a thought could swell in size.

Electronic humming permeated the darkness. Purring. Drowning out the sounds of those above. Scattering her, before she could reach up and into something else.

Her prison, quite simply, was a lifeless hell. Her only company the unfeeling chill of metal and machinery. A pit in the belly of some sprawling building that seemed to house only her, the blacks behind her eyes, and a lone shaft at the far side of the room. One that would produce a small elevator once a day, to offer her rations and water.

Her only means of escape.

Something she'd once obsessed over, but had since tired of.

The elevator, while it appeared quite weathered, a creaking and groaning beast-of-burden, was designed with some cleverness in mind. It would not bear her weight. Only the meals it brought. And once, in a fit of rage, when she'd yanked and yanked and yanked on its chain that spiraled up into a pinprick of light above, it'd not come again for three full days.

She'd left the elevator alone after that.

A FAMILIAR CHIMING woke Cerelia from the void of her thoughts. Metal on stone, and the metallic creaking of the lift descending the shaft.

Something was different, though she wasn't sure what. It took her a moment to push past the sticky fingers of her wandering mind, of the bodiless voices whispering in the dark. A low murmur that sometimes rose in pitch but had, strangely, in this moment, grown quiet.

The elevator settled with a rattle and a whine and, when the sharpness of those sounds peeled away, another was revealed. A steady, rhythmic thumping. A heartbeat.

On hind-and-hands, Cerelia crept from her place at the far side of the room. She held her breath, stilling her own pulse. Untrusting of herself, and suspicious.

But, then, she felt the familiar watercolor bleed of another's thoughts.

Warmth seemed to flood the room. A delightful hum of light and life. In place of suspicion, she swayed. The tension in her body fled. And, soon, she was swept up in it like rain returning to the tide.

Memories she didn't own rushed over her. A nexus, brimming with past and present and possibility. A web, from which to perch on, and bide. And, as always, that familiar tug—that draw—to linger rose up from within her. A curiosity. A need. To tug on threads of thought, and see what might become of them.

People were not so different from plants. 'Unreality', they called these powers of the mind, bent by psions who crept into the consciousness of others, planting small lies, ones capable of blooming into wholly new truths. It wasn't a perfect science. Unpredictable. Unknown. A psion could suggest a notion of flight and—in the right mind—true, flesh-and-blood wings might sprout in its place.

Creation at its most chaotic, yet not without its limits.

Only by tugging on the thoughts of others could a psion bend reality.

And, away from those external ideas, imaginations, or dreams... that same predatory mind might begin to feed on itself.

Like a starving thing, Cerelia pried at the mind before her, and sensed no resistance from its owner. Eagerness got the better of her, then.

She sank metaphorical fangs into the mind across the room. Coaxing. Biting deep. Come closer, she seemed to whisper, you need only come near.

A red triangle mark flared on her wrist, drawing a hiss from her that was sharp enough to rattle her teeth. She scrambled back. Light bled through her fingers as she strangled the brand. A dull red, but bright enough to blind after so much darkness.

"Play nice, dear," the woman said. "We have much to discuss."



# AUTUMN'S GETAWAY

Genre Fiction

BY FELIX BOU

The sun dozed high above, a golden coin on a bedsheet of blue, while the lake below caught every scrap of light and made a dream of it. From the shore, it looked like the world had spilled its autumn paints into the water: cinnamon reds, mustard yellows, burnt orange, and old ochers, all stirred into a smooth pane of glass. Then came the wind, gentle as breath, and the glass trembled, broke, danced. Iridescent rivulets spun together in unison like a boy's memory of a kaleidoscope held to a midsummer eye. At the farthest shore, the forest rose—tilted, tall, a cathedral grown wild. Each tree stood in autumn's final costume, crowned in its waning tincts. The air snapped sharp as flint, scraped cheeks raw, and whispered through the hollows with the musk of pine and the latent augury of a feral winter.

Finnigan Langley stood at the edge of the hidden world, boots swallowed by earth soft as old bread. It seemed he had wandered half a lifetime, chasing the ghost of a place that lived only in a sun-bleached Polaroid—its corners curled, its sky faded to a pale forget-me-not. He'd found it in the brittle belly of a book that smelled of cellar dust and candle smoke, bought for a pittance at a Halifax estate sale. No signs pointed the way here. No map claimed it. Just a scribbled note on the back of the photo: *Twin Moon Lake, 44.857082° N, -64.835358° W.*

Drawing a cool breath, Finnigan felt the rhythm of the water lapping the shoreline match the thump of his heart. He shut his eyes. The trees spoke in rustles and sighs, and somewhere, as if on the cusp of a fairytale, a wren sang a note so pure it might've split the sky. He had left behind the city and its blinking glass coffins, its headaches and its hurried souls, all in search of what the old photograph had promised: peace, stillness, halcyon. Finnigan drew the photograph from his coat like a priest might a relic, something sacred and secret. He lifted it to the light and lined it up just so—the lake in the picture and the lake before him merging, old dream meeting truth. The water threw back the light, brighter now, less faded than the photochemicals it lived on. Scrawled beneath the glossy surface of the photo, in the cramped hand of someone lost to time, were the words: *Here... I found myself. Can't leave.* No name. Only a smear where a name had tried to be, dissolved by thumbprint or rain or the long erosion of years. Still, the message struck true. Like church bells rung underwater, the words sounded slow and solemn in Finnigan's skull. He shook his head. Made a sound like a laugh. But the words were stubborn, and they came back. And the more he turned from them, the more it felt like treason.

He didn't know what he'd hoped to find. The lake wouldn't vanish. Maybe a day's rest. A fleeting escape. Some strange communion with the land. Maybe all of it. Maybe none. Yet the moment his boots pressed into the earth, something shifted. The trees leaned closer, as if they knew his name. The hills nodded. The wind skittered through boughs in an invitation. It beckoned him gently, this land that was held between the seen and the imagined, where two skies met upon the water and the world felt doubled, whole.

Loping along the narrow pine-strewn path, Finnigan let his thoughts drift as freely as the fallen leaves skimming the water, untethered like wayward skiffs. The sun's warmth caressed the back of his neck, countering the brisk air that nipped at his visage. Every forward step stirred the old world below, releasing the rich, loamy scent of damp soil and decaying leaves—an air that felt strangely nostalgic and comforting. He paused every so often to take in the silent sublimity of the encroaching woods. Around him, colonnades of bark soared like columns of a forgotten holy ruin, scored by the passing of ages. A canopy of hues overhead cut sunbeams into spectral shards, casting the thicket's floor in a shifting tessellation of shadow.

He came upon a secluded hollow where the trees bowed just enough to cradle a still clearing by the water's edge. A fallen log lay there, draped in emerald like a throne forgotten by its king. Finnigan swept away a few errant twigs before sinking into it, allowing the burden of his pack to slip from his shoulders. The release was instant—an exhale of the soul. As Finnigan's gaze wandered through the landscape, his eyes snagged on a curious sight: a towering, timeworn tree standing solemn among the others. Its hoary bark bore countless carvings, all reduced to the same two letters: **FL**.

A tremor of wonder danced up his spine. His fingers moved by their own volition, compelled to trace the faded letters and feel the grooves left by hands long past.

Maybe some wayfaring soul from the Florida swelter had once stood here, carving this memento as a testament to how far they'd come just to stand and marvel.

A silent nudge to hold onto this moment welled up inside him. Instinctively, he unzipped his pack, reaching for the dog-eared spine of his small journal. He leafed through the journal—lines bent with use, margins crowded with drawings, notations, scraps of mind caught mid-stride. Words were his alchemy, the only means by which he could distill the chaos of existence into something tangible—an attempt to capture the evanescent.

He turned to a fresh page. The white of it blinked up at him like the eye of the universe, waiting. His pen met paper. And then he wrote:

*"I've come upon the lake from the photograph—and somehow, it's more breathtaking than I imagined. The air is impossibly pure. Autumn's colors almost too vivid to believe. There's a strange nostalgia here, as if I've stepped into a memory older than my own, where each leaf and every ripple hides a secret."*

He paused, trying to piece together fresh prose, yet the moment felt larger than words could hold. There was some ineffable sensation, something resisting his urge to define it. Language felt too small for such a feeling, so he set his pen aside, surrendering to thought.

Time slipped its leash. Afternoon yawned into twilight, and the sunlight flared like brass horns over a last parade. The trees caught fire with it, burning crimson, amber, and gold, each leaf a tongue of flame hailing the closing hour. Drawn as if by dream, Finnigan stood. He stepped softly to the lake, that watching eye of the world, and knelt.

His fingers broke the surface. Ripples laced outwards, undoing the sky's reflection, scattering clouds and light. The water's chill climbed up his arm, yet he welcomed it like a benediction that the lake's splendor was no mere trick of light.

The photograph resurfaced in his mind. Someone had stood here once, caught by the same stark beauty, moved enough to leave a note: Here... I found myself. Can't leave. The words had pulled Finnigan across an eternity of highway and serpentine backroads, far from the din of modern life. Now, standing in the same quiet, he imagined the nameless photographer stumbling upon this hidden enclave—too beautiful to be left behind. A gentle whisper drew him from the depths of his cogitations, shaping his name in the air. An ephemeral chill climbed his spine and came to rest at the nape of his neck. He turned to see knotted roots snaking their way out of the earth, curling and interlocking into an archway against the stocky trunk of an ancient Hemlock. At its hollowed center, a pale opalescence blossomed—light spilling out like liquid into the dusky air. It called to him, his name spoken in a voice he almost remembered. He stood dumbstruck, swaying like a man on a high wire. Somewhere beneath the surface of himself, a reel of memory ticked and clicked, and he knew somehow that he had seen this all before. Maybe in a dream, or a fever, or a bedtime tale told too late at night. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, sleep still sticky in the corners. And just like that, the vision slipped away like fog. The roots unwound, slinking back into the black earth. The shimmer dimmed to nothing. All that remained was the tree, mute and gnarled and still. “Too many miles,” he mumbled, voice heavy as wet leaves. “Too little sleep.” As twilight thickened into a velvety shroud, Finnigan made his decision—he would tarry by the lake, letting the night envelop him like a well-worn cloak. The air, humid with memory, swirled around him in silent eddies, tangling with the persistent buzz of critters defying the creeping cold. He found a little flat of earth beneath an old pine. Its limbs stretched wide and crooked, arthritic in their age, arching overhead like protective arms of a slumbering guardian.

He bent low, coaxing twigs and bark into a circle like a boy whispering secrets to fireflies. A match flared, sudden and golden. The flame took, shy at first, then dancing bold and warm, licking its way up into the dark.

The fire cracked and hummed, shadows capering at the woods' edge like children avoiding bedtime. The trunks of the trees glowed as if lit from within, as if they too had hearts remembering heat. Seated by the fire, thoughts drifted like milkweed. The lake's silken murmur. The copper leaves trembling under the breath of October. And that strange glimpse—the root-wrought archway, the glimmer in the hollow, a doorway perhaps, or a memory still being born.

Something began to bubble up in the forefront of his mind. A shape of meaning just out of reach. He fumbled for his journal, the leather soft with travel, and with hands still streaked in soil, he wrote—fast, urgent, as if the words might sprout wings and fly off if he didn't pin them quick to the page.

*“Here, the land murmurs in a language older than the first hands that ever sought to shape the earth.”*

He read the line again, lips just shaping the music of it. A gladness stirred in him, lit like the stars wheeling above, tracing old constellations.

As his thoughts dissolved in the pull of sleep, Finnigan looked out beyond the ring of firelight to the surface of the lake. Two moons cast distinct faces across the surface like pocket change tossed in a wishing well.

He lay back on the bedroll, the ground cool beneath him. The last of the fire sighed into embers, leaving thin threads of smoke behind. The lake sang its lullaby—water kissing the shore, again and again, like a mother soothing a restless child.

In the depths of slumber, a dream sought him out—a story from years long past. The lake was laved in argent moonlight, its surface a hymn of silver and shadow, hardly changed from the sight he had just held.

In his hands, an instant camera rested,  
ready to pluck the moment from the river  
of time, to press its perishable beauty  
onto film as if permanence could be  
chemically conjured.

Even as the camera clicked, his other  
hand found a pen, frantic with need. He  
scrambled to capture what had stirred—  
an image, a feeling, the fragment of  
thought not yet born. Time stilled as the  
photo came into its damp existence, the  
real drawn from the imagined in that  
ritual of chemicals and time.

He turned it over, holding his breath.  
“Here...” he began.

*The End*



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