

Three Gothic Stories

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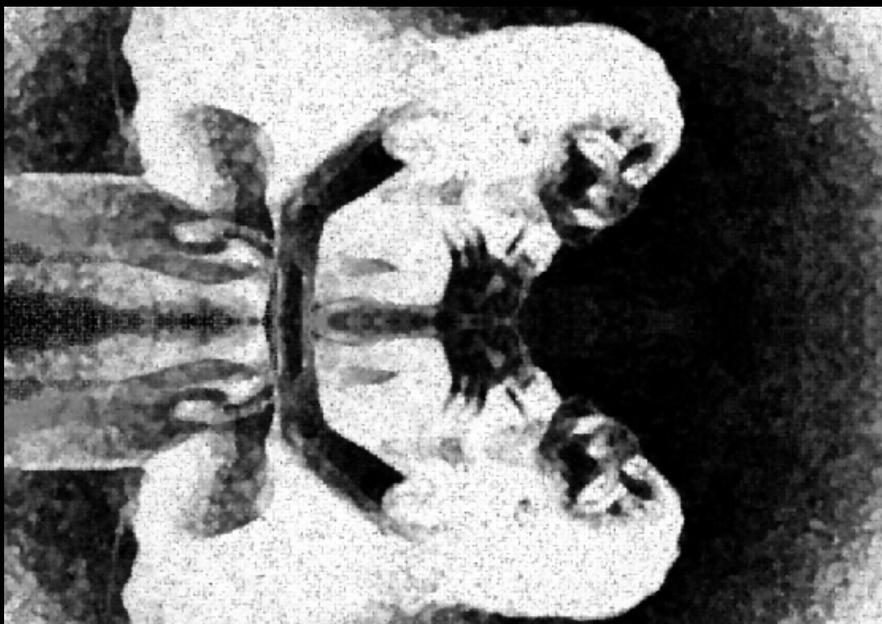
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*These stories are dedicated to Janine Reynaud, Ingrid Pitt, Lina Romay, Soledad Miranda
and all of the vessels they used.*

woman who is pure at heart



neon sign outside my shop is still on. I'm sitting inside at my desk and I can see through to the séance hall and the purple light is reflecting everywhere inside. I can't get enough of purple neon. My robe isn't purple, too much of the same thing is off-putting. My robe is teal. But my curtains at home are purple. Neon purple. The leggings I'm wearing as I finish my receipts for the evening are purple. This is something my customers don't see.

I don't know why more people don't become psychics. You get business. Especially asshole-drunk business. They get off on your moaning and all of the pretty lights and sounds and give you money. And everyone wants to go out with the spooky medium girl.

The main skill you need is reading people. You need to see what people want and then give it to them in a way that makes sense. It's easy to tell when someone is worried or horny. Sad older women who come in alone usually want comfort, sad old men usually forgiveness. You don't need a seminary degree and you get to dress fucking beautifully.

Tonight wasn't so bad. I always open at 6:30. People come in and tell me what they want and I prepare. I do have a very nice black and yellow rug outside

that my séance table sits on. A very beautiful table I found at an antique shop downtown. I buy tons of old books, sand the titles off and just leave them sitting around and they collect dust, make everything look authentic. I make people tea from leaves that sit inside antique containers.

My hair is about as long as I want it. Some people like to keep their hair short and give off the mid 90's dominatrix baby sitter vibe, but that shit isn't for me. I keep my hair long and know how to fight. You want guys to get hard, but not that hard. The no refund sign is right there on the counter.

I love the way it looks in here even more with the lights off. The old books, the smells, the carpet. The tarot cards. Tarot cards are so beautiful. I have a few of my favorite designs from the Crowley Thoth deck blown up as prints on my wall at home. One is right above my record player and the other is in my kitchen.

I'm thinking about Italy as I'm outside locking up. Still I want to be there so bad even if I am happy here. Things are easier in Italy. I believe people there would understand me. Accept me. I think of the colors in Argento and Fulci. Rob Zombie uses the colors especially in *House of 1000 Corpses*, but he's too God-damn sadistic in that film, it's almost unforgivable. And as he becomes more lyrical with *Halloween 2* and *Lords of Salem*, the Argento colors go away.

Being a rural area psychic is better than some people might assume. You aren't really fucked with as much as one might think. Only a few times concerned Christians have come to my door. Mostly everyone is just afraid of me, or interested.

I decide to go for a drink. This town isn't that small. Probably 60,000 people when students are around. Students are good business. Last year I dated a girl who studied biology at the university here. She was nice. She moved home after she graduated and we still keep in touch some. I wish she would come visit me.

Thankfully my apartment isn't far from downtown. I don't have the money to drink and drive and I can't make it to Italy if I'm in prison. This reminds me that I need to finish watching *Spring*. Becoming a criminal doesn't stop that young man from going to Italy and it shouldn't stop me, either. I like the young man in that film, just him and his father and mother. He reminds me of a guy I went to college with. Quiet and tough and nice. Not afraid to feed his mother while she's dying.

I'm not exactly young anymore. I think that's why I have such a crush on Lisa Ann. There are plenty of reasons to dislike porn, but Lisa has turned an entire generation of young boys on to older women with black hair and veiny hands. This has its advantages. I go home first and change clothes and then walk down to a bar with lots of these boys.

But I don't find a young boy tonight. Tonight I see something different. I'm sitting alone. I hear him say, "He's always fucking whining to his fucking mommy. Such a fucking bitch. Tonight she fucking worked late and he's sitting around screaming saying, 'Ohhhh my fucking Mom said I could watch wrestling,' and he's fucking sobbing, fuck he's a fucking bitch."

This goes on for a while. It's hard, staying patient. He gets up and I follow him outside. I ask him for a light. It doesn't take much else to get him back to my apartment which is thankfully not far from the woods. He doesn't tell his friends goodbye and he doesn't mention to me that he has a son.

I close my apartment door and ask him if he wants a drink. He says, "How about you suck my fucking dick instead." So I do. I look up at him and don't blink. He won't look down at me. After a minute he says, "Quit fucking looking at me like that. You're giving me the fucking creeps." I obey. I focus on his cock. His sweat smells like beer.

He comes in my mouth and I let it drool out and I ask him if he has much time. He says he can fuck in a minute. "But don't ask me to fucking suck your pussy. I'm no fucking queer."

I don't question his logic. He asks me to dance for him and I do. I turn on some music. I look up at my favorite tarot card and play the first Beggars Opera album. I'm on his lap. I feel him getting around again and he starts laughing, so I start laughing. He asks, "What the fuck are you laughing at?"

I lean over and whisper in his ear, "I'm about to fucking kill you, you stupid bitch." He barely has time to question this because above his chair is a very heavy granite teapot on a shelf. It's more for decoration than serving tea because it's so heavy. I hit him over the head with it and it doesn't even break.

When he's awake again he is nailed to my wall. I've never understood why my neighbors don't call the police. Men have very loud voices, but I guess they

figure the less cops are around, the better it is for everyone. He starts screaming. I kick him in his balls.

I've changed into bra and panties. Purple and black because I want to enjoy this. I lean my forehead against his and he tries to bite me. This time I punch him in his nose. I ask him if he has AIDS and he says, "Fuck you, I'm going to fucking kill you, fucking bitch."

"Wrong," I tell him and I kick him in his groin three times. He screams and screams. I walk into my bedroom and bring back a razor blade, he screams the entire time. "No one gives a shit about you," I tell him.

"Let me tell you about your son." He keeps screaming.

I cut his left cheek. "High school will be shit. College might be, too. But he's smart. It's obvious because you hate him so much. He'll find a partner who will feel sorry for him at first, but they'll make sure he learns to fuck well. Maybe a teacher, maybe his boss. And then after a few years of relationships like that he'll have to start turning people down just because he doesn't have time to fuck that much. He'll tell his partners stories about you. About how much of a piece of shit you were."

"You were," I say again in his ear.

I make cuts all across his chest. He starts sobbing. I cut him under his arms. I tell him his son will live a happy life, in some ways, because he was abused. "He will get along better with his mother without you there. They'll go

to wrestling shows by themselves and have so much fun. They'll eat at Hardees on the way home and never mention you."

I make more cuts. I make sure his blood gets nowhere near my mouth or pussy. I can wash everything off later. I didn't swallow any of his come earlier. Fuck this apartment, anyway. I tell him that. "I fucking hate this place. I'm going to make a mess of you."

I take off his ear and then a finger. There is no difference between his sobbing and screaming. I tell him, "Your son and wife will be so much happier without you. The world is going to be such a better place now that you're dead. I wish your mother could see you like this. I wish she could hear what you said about your son back at the bar."

He starts to scream, but I cut his stomach and then he just cries. He's going to bleed to death. No one in this neighborhood calls the police, but just to be safe I slice up his wrists. I take a shower and when I get out he's dead. Another good thing about porn, so many guys want me to sit on their face. I even tell them what I'm going to do. They all think it's one big game.

This isn't so cleanable. Fuck it. Like I said, I'm certainly not getting any younger. Italy will appreciate a woman like me. I have many things to offer to many fine Italians. I book my flight online. I get my money from an ATM and I drive to the airport. Sooner or later my car will be repossessed. Sooner or later someone will report the smell and everything in my shop will be sold on public auction.

I want to meet an Italian graduate student. And maybe a boy who is barely legal. Italian men are abusive, too. But I'm also probably a racist. I'll teach them all how to fuck, how to have confidence. There are many uses for a razor blade. I'm on a plane. I'm drinking wine. I'm flirting with the man beside me. He is fine. Not quite kind, but still fine. There are many uses for a razor blade as there are many ways a woman who is pure at heart can make her mark on the world. Italy seems like a fine place to live.

Leather, black chords

“Haaahh-ahhhrrpps,

haaaahhh-ahhhrrpps for sale.” I still don’t understand how this broken-ass old man can hold those fucking things all day and those fucking notes at the same time. And every

afternoon when I come to work there he is, there he’s been. Holding his harps, chanting for a sale.

Our lights are blue and pink and green and purple. It rained today, I expect to hear electricity sizzle as the water comes down off the lights. I stop and look up at them on the way into the club and for the first five minutes while I’m talking and getting ready I see those purple spots everywhere.

Five minutes is all it takes to do something important. In my dressing room, after I take off my clothes, I balance my leg against the window sill and stretch out every muscle in my thigh. Then I take my leg off the ledge and do other stretches around the room, chanting to myself under my breath, “Haaahh-ahhhrrpps,” repeating in a whisper, “Haaahhh-arrhhps for sale.”

No one else is around. Frank doesn’t usually come till the shows are about to start. Once a bartender told Frank it was bad for business and Frank punched

him in the mouth. Last weekend Frank took me shopping downtown. He bought a new pair of purple trousers and a yellow vest. That was the only reason he wanted me to come, my opinions. To thank me he bought me dinner. I think wine makes a great dinner and Frank knows things about red wine.

Last night he had a party at his place. I didn't think I was going to go. Art imitates real life. It's written above the dressing room door and Frank's office, both. You have to believe in yourself, this is true. Two women I'd never met before were hanging from his wall. He had a blacklight going and a small combo playing jazz music in another room.

These two women were tied and spread, but they were actually standing on a table. Their arms and legs were just tied apart in an X and the knots were nailed into the wall. It kind of made me sad, both women looked so bored. Everyone was so fucked up they didn't notice how beautiful, how available, they were. No one went over to have a sniff or a good conversation.

After a bit I went over and danced in front of them, moving my arms around with the rhythm of the piano and drums. It was frustrating, no one noticed me with them either. I told them not to let this lack of interest bother them. I helped Frank clean up and I was the one to cut them down and they were practically asleep when I got back to them.

Tonight I work with Gianna and Carlo. They both have accents, which is probably why they're working here. Frank has an accent, too, but not like Gianna and Carlo. We practiced together earlier in the week, we were starting a whole

new set. I'm a little mad they aren't here already. It's not like we need to talk that much over, but it still helps when we're all on the same page.

People say that it's bad to get high before you perform and I agree with them. But I'm bored, no one's around. Frank screws with my money all the time, so I take that as an open invitation to screw with his coke.

Eventually Gianna and Carlo get here and we start setting up. They apparently have friends coming to see them, which I find cute. Frank doesn't want to pay a crew and bartenders both, so whoever works on stage and the bar on any given night is in charge of setting up and tearing down and all other maintenance. If something breaks we're expected to fix it.

My ex-boyfriend served this exact purpose. I lived with Mike for about three months because he hung dry wall and I assumed he was ample with wood and cutting things and with razors and shit like that. As long as I blew him as much as he wanted and pretended like I gave a shit and didn't bother him he would teach me everything I wanted to know. Very smooth, unmessy breakup. Once I knew what I needed to know and couldn't take his semen that smelled more like plaster than come I just left one day while he was at work. Frank lets me keep a lot of my things either at his place or the club and I told Mike my name was Sarah. It's not risky unless Mike decides he enjoys S&M clubs and if he tries to start shit he will make a fine example of art imitating life.

Our stage set is pretty simple. I got the idea from another one of Frank's parties. Basically, we're paying a bunch of dickheads to wear purple robes and

stand around us in a circle, masturbating. I'm going to hold a knife to Gianna and Carlo while they fuck each other, the whole time describing how I'm going to kill them after my Satanic cult friends are done fucking them. Then while Gianna rides Carlo I'm going to carve a pentagram in her chest with my fake knife.

There's a little release button on the bottom of the handle and it lets out syrup at the tip. Very simple and straightforward as long as my fucking hand doesn't cramp. Then more or less after all of my cult buddies have come I'm going to pull Gianna and Carlo to me one by one and slit their throats and climax while I do it. Then the dudes in the robes around are going to close in on me while I moan and the lights fade out. Having fun, exchanging body fluids, making art and paying rent.

People arrive and buy drinks. It's always a different crowd, I never recognize anyone. And the show goes well. Nothing bad happens, the blood comes out of the knife when I press the button and Gianna and Carlo both do a great job. I say don't perform high, but it goes all right for me. None of the extra guys we hired for the cult do anything stupid, they are all very professional. Most of them even stay afterwards and help us clean up the stage, which is nice, since half the cleanup is their fucking come.

When he comes up to me I'm thinking of a film I watched a couple nights ago. A theater not far from my apartment was showing *The Blair Witch Project*, proof Americans are capable of making a good film. Even if the academics ruin it

by smearing their jizz around, declaring the film a hubris narrative. Fucking hubris.

It's not like anyone stands and guards the entrance backstage. I'm humming *Love Hurts* to myself and the lights from the show are still on. We performed in this wide purple, so beautiful and sharp. The carpet on the stage is blue and they both interacted so well. I look up and there he is.

"If you scream, I've got a gun." I don't scream. He sits down next to me on the couch Frank put in. I can't understand why anyone else isn't coming backstage. "I have pictures of you," he says. "Doing things that are very illegal. I have friends that are police. I'll bet you don't wanna go to jail, do you Linda?"

I take a deep breath. No one is coming back. Frank must be busy and this fucking creep knows my name. I heard people talking in the lobby before this fucker showed up, they must have left. I haven't seen Gianna and Carlo after they took some shit out back to the dumpster. The wire fence back there is torn, so they probably just left. I think they're seeing each other, they're cute.

"Come closer to me."

I get closer to him. "What's your name?" I ask him.

He hits me. "Just shut the fuck up or I'll fucking shoot you."

So I just sit there and try to look sad. He calms down and gets that "I have a hard-ass dick" sound in the back of his voice. "Why do you have to be so God-damn jealous? Bothering people all over the fucking city, you people make me fucking sick. You think I don't see you? You think I don't see your gutter-slut ass

coming into my building all the fucking time? You think people like me are fucking idiots, yeah. Just going around and being stupid. I have pictures of you selling, bitch.”

He pronounces the word like this: “tuuoo-pud.” That makes me hate him even more. He runs his hands over the matted couch cushion. A lot of things could have happened on this couch. A lot of things happen here backstage. I wait for him to tell me what he wants.

He stands up. “Maybe you don’t want to go to prison? You don’t want to go to prison, do you?”

I don’t say anything. “Answer me, bitch!” he yells, and he hits me again, but this time he’s surprised when I grab his arm. I pull him down onto the couch and stand up in the same motion. I force my leg against his chest, knee first. I reach down and grab his arm and pull until I feel his shoulder pop out of its socket. I kick him in his groin. He vomits. I take his gun and kick him in his groin, again.

I know what I’m going to do, but first, I kick him in his stomach and he vomits one more time. He starts crying. I get down next to his ear and whisper, “Haaahhhhrpps...good haaaahrrrps for sale,” and I look him in his eyes and keep whispering, “Haaaaahhrpps...good, cheap haaaahrpps,” and he cries and cries and I shoot him in the head.

I walk outside to the bar phone and everyone really has left. I call Frank and tell him what’s happened. He’s pissed that he needs to buy a new couch so

soon but says he will take care of it, just make sure to lock the door before I leave if I'm the last one out.

There's a lot of traffic outside, it's still early. It isn't even midnight. I know where Gianna and Carlo will be, but I don't want to bother them. Your first few weeks together are always the best. I see someone I like walk into a bar down the street and I follow them inside.

n opera of lyrics and saints

Living in the city



I guess it's a rite of passage, at this point. I had my room and I was in town often, so I guess it all was natural, the way things like this should be. When I first started coming to New York they still checked you out one by one at the library. And sure, you still have to sign up with a person first for a library card, but back then you still got your books checked out by a person, too. The first few times I checked out that opera it always seemed like the same girl checked me out each time.

The opening melody line can be so off-putting at first. I assume the man is singing in Italian, but I've never been sure enough to actually tell someone that. But I thought a lot. And of course I'm always thinking, but after my first few trips things changed. I would stay in for a while and stare at this gold lamp that came with my room and listen to the opera and feel this cold attractive air coming in from the outside. Besides the opera I also became obsessed with the lamp and the quality of light it gave out. It seemed to speak somehow in unison

with the heater, with the clothes I was wearing, with the way my eyes sting a little bit as each night develops.

The opera was written about St. Francis of Assisi. The memory I always go back to on those early trips is hearing that melody line attached to that one initial word repeating over and over. I listened to that one word and stared at my lamp and wondered who else saw light from this lamp. Other people stay in this room when I'm not around, other people know this lamp, this room, in ways I never will. Who came back through that door? Was there just one little piece of them still left in the room? A strand of hair? An overlooked note with dinner plans shoved under the bed? I've long suspected that memories are everywhere and for a while that thought was only metaphysical, but sometimes old opinions can be transformed in odd ways.

I wouldn't say that confidence is a strength of mine. Back home my apartment is just my apartment. And sometimes I have friends over, don't get me wrong. I like to have a good time and have fun, but one doesn't really need confidence for that. I was actually back in Baltimore the other day, this is a funny story in and of itself. How many artists in America currently romanticize Baltimore? We romanticize Alan Ginsberg but not the city he saw gleam in supernatural ecstasy. We love Poe and John Waters but not their city, we don't love whom they love.

Anyway, I was in Baltimore one weekend because I missed being there. I met someone and she happened to say, "Hey, if you aren't that busy, there's this

wonderful performance going on tonight. It's at this little theater a friend of mine works at. She is actually running the sound tonight, they've been putting in a lot of work this week trying to get everything ready for this violinist coming in. It's just gonna be her and a piano player. We don't know exactly what they're going to perform, but from what we've heard, she does a lot of 19th and early 20th century pieces. A lot of Ravel and Debussy, I think."

And so we went. It was December and very dark by 6 o'clock. There were people out, but they weren't paying attention to us. She took me to this theater and the carpet inside was very red. I would like to say that it was almost purple, but that would just be a personal fantasy. I thought the theater was pretty normal, but there was a feeling inside the auditorium that can hardly be mistaken for anything but the anticipation of something absolutely wonderful and deep that's about to happen. You never know when that feeling is going to come, but when it comes you notice it for what it is.

There were a fair amount of people sitting around. I didn't even know I was going to be spending the night with this woman, let alone spending the evening at this performance in this strange theater. I had on my longer coat, though not my longest (and favorite), and a sweater and some basic corduroys. Some of the other people there were dressed about the same as myself, but some were really going for it. Purple leggings, one guy had a dead fox draped around his neck.

The lady I was with took off her coat and sat there in this beautiful black dress. Her shoulders struck me, they were right next to me and I wasn't sure how appropriate it was to really study them and admire how beautiful they were.

Normally I didn't think people smoked in places like this and there weren't really that many people doing it, it just struck me that more than a few openly smoked cigarettes. I asked my new friend, "Isn't smoking indoors something people don't do now?" pointing to the ones with the cigarettes, but she said back, "This isn't history, they're here for the music. If you don't like smokes, I can go get you a glass of wine or a neat Vodka," she paused, "or anything else you might want."

How often was I going to be inside a mysterious theater with curtains as deep red as the carpet (still guarding against my "almost purple" fantasy, it's always so tempting), with a mysterious and beautiful stranger I just happened to meet, so I went ahead and got a Pinot Noir and drank it while I sat there in silence with everyone else and smoked one cigarette after another. I've always loved that name, just the word noir, especially when used to describe a grape. And too, you can describe a dark burgundy-lipped Mediterranean woman as being kind of "noir" just as easily as you can *The Postman Only Rings Twice*, but then to also describe a grape perfectly, that to me is interesting and very special.

The violinist and her friend came on stage and the lights were immediately dimmed. The person running the lights lit a very deep blue to envelop both the

crowd and the performers immediately as they started playing. And speaking of noir, this woman playing the violin was noir to the bone. It was the man playing piano that first set the mood. He was really only providing light chordal accompaniment, but those chords penetrated into places that only a piano playing like that can. But when the woman, whom I've started suspecting I've seen somewhere, began playing her violin I felt my stomach start to move around and the rest of my body tried to follow. My mind and body felt like getting wet and melting. Everyone in the crowd felt like that and we all knew it. My mind hurt because it couldn't melt and that made everything even better. Everyone was sitting essentially still, but there was a pull towards the stage we all felt and knew, the music did it to us. A little more and a little more and a little more. My teeth and gums tingled, I was so glad this was happening in Baltimore.

I looked over at my friend and saw two or three tears on her cheek. I reached over to wipe them away and without even looking at me she grabbed my hand and didn't let go. Her nail polish was also a deep red but a totally different deep red than the carpet and curtains. I thought she was going to snap my hand in two and stare at me the entire time, but she didn't even say a word. After a few more seconds went by she put my hands back in my own lap and then turned back towards the stage and continued watching and listening to the performance.

Confidence has never been my strong suit, but as things move along and one day follows the next and through the weeks and months I manage to have a

good time. But New York is always intimidating. I've never actually lived there day-to-day like I did in Baltimore when I was younger. Plus I loved my hotel so much I always wanted to soak it up as much as possible. The hotel called me to do that and I knew it was calling from the start. Some nights all I would do is wander the halls. No one was ever really around, every now and then I'd see someone getting ice, setting out a tray of half eaten food, or I'd meet someone down in the bar, but it was hard to really get a strong sense of any one thing in particular. If I was staring at a painting on the wall of a man walking through Greece, walking by the sea, and someone else walked up or walked by we would maybe wave or maybe say hello, but this was not a place for definite things.

And each trip after I'd settled in and showered and maybe taken a nap, the first thing I would do is check out that same opera written about St. Francis from the library. And whether or not I did manage to go out or get involved in anything interesting my stay would always consist at least at some point of hearing that melody line and those repetitious words come in and out of the melody. I tried to really digest the emotional sense behind everything that was going on.

I even had a girlfriend in New York, for a while. After I left an opera featuring Anna Netrebko early one night in October with a woman named Rosalie, she told me afterwards her name was Rosalie, she said that she was glad we were able to have that one moment, but I shouldn't go looking for her. And of course I did. And of course she was right. I didn't find her, but I did meet

Maggie. She took me to the bar where she worked and I talked to her while she tended the bar. I didn't want to drink a Pinot while I was there, so I drank one Cabernet after another. Its leather taste was very appropriate. She didn't charge me at the end of the night and I asked her why. She said, "You're fun." I asked her, "Isn't it the dick-head that's supposed to do that kind of thing?" She just laughed and told me her schedule for the week.

I had a few more days in the city and I went back and she gave me more wine and I kept talking. A visit-to-visit routine developed and it was almost kind of funny. We only really saw each other at her bar, but that's still a relationship, right? We knew each other and we met when we were both in town and I guess we enjoyed being around each other.

Only once did she take me back to her apartment. There was more wine back there and she had black hair, too. She put on a record and tied me to her radiator. Thankfully it wasn't a very cold night. She read for a while and made me watch her. She wore jeans and a sleeveless top with a thick neck. She kept her clothes on but kneeled in front me, asking questions like, "Would you like my armpit or asshole first?"

Eventually she was leaning against her wall drinking tea and I was curled up on her lap also drinking tea and she asked me to tell her a story. I told her that out of all of the different creation myths I knew, the idea that human beings are created by Water so that Water could further spread itself over the world and the universe was the absolute most likely myth to be true. "Think about it," I said,

“that idea makes so much more sense than Genesis or Marduk cutting some extra planet in our solar system in half.”

“We’re so much like Water. We can be so gentle and relaxing and we can drown and kill and wash everything away all in the same basic movement. The same Water you’re watching at the lake can be the same Water that drowns a child. And if Water did create us for its own purpose of self-expansion, that completely explains evolution and social Darwinism. Water wants the strongest of us to survive and grow so Water can always continue to survive and grow. Also, nothing actually bad happens if you don’t go to Mass and take the Sacraments or the same with any other religious rite. But if we don’t drink water we die.”

She had her hand in my hair and she told me, “I don’t know, Adam was made from mud. If we’re going to use elements as a form of creation, why wouldn’t we be Earth? Mud can do all the same things, or Earth, or whatever you want to call it.” And I purred back at her, “You’re probably right.”

When I went back to her bar on my next trip apparently she had either moved away or moved to a new bar, so I went back to my room and spent the night with the St. Francis opera.

Still the city is always fairly new to me. How the city could become familiar to anyone I don’t know. I don’t know if everyone wants to know, I don’t know even if people now think they want to know. I remember sitting back in my old apartment in Baltimore and sitting in my old tan chair that I’ve still

managed to keep since being a student, there was a small restaurant you could see from my window while you sat in that chair. I watched every original broadcast of *The X-Files* sitting in that chair. Most often I sat with my takeout from that small Indian restaurant with all my strewn out work everywhere, covered with a blanket and bathed in blue light and letting the steam from my green tea soak my tired eyes savoring every moment of my night off with Chicken Makhani and *The X-Files*. Everyone thinks they want to know until there is a knock on your door that you aren't expecting.

Still, I don't know if I'll ever learn my lesson. This city intimidates me. If only I knew the train schedule a little bit better things might get easier. Not too long ago I decided to just go out for a walk and see what all I saw. I stopped in a second floor record store that hadn't been in this neighborhood the last time I was here. After walking up tight, dusty stairs the place was filled with large pine crates full of records that were sectioned off with pieces of white cardboard and black writing. Up behind the desk I noticed they had a couple of what appeared to be original pressings of The Talking Heads 77 and the Banana Album. I like The Velvet Underground as much as anyone, but I've always thought it a little bit unnecessary to think one has to go to Venus in Furs to, "feel the deep and beautifully dirty and oh so existentially painful world of masochism." Masochism is just like every other thing in the world, it's just like baseball and wine culture. It is its own world with its own vocabulary and different degrees and every degree is in motion with every other degree in every other world.

Some femdoms are nicer than others, some will have lunch and chat and some won't. Some dommes really like what they do, others are just performing a service for money. Work is work and work can also be fun.

CDs looked to be selling fairly well, still. They even had a good set up for some cassettes over in one corner. I looked through to see what all they had, lots of metal from the 80's, several copies of Master of Puppets and Peace Sells.

The girl behind the counter had an aqua green knit cap on that I absolutely loved. I smiled at her and she smiled back. I saw they had a section of classical CDs and went over to check them out. It had been a while since I'd bought a CD or two on a whim and I found a nice collection of Shostakovich's string concertos that were placed together in a boxed set and I decided to buy them almost the minute my fingers touched the case. And just for the hell of it I bought Master of Puppets and Somewhere in Time on cassette. I really wanted to hear what they sounded like on my stereo at home.

The girl behind the counter and I had fun talking for a minute. I asked her if she was a student here and she smiled and seemed like she was about to answer me when I heard a voice come from behind a red curtain leading to what must have been a back room, "Darlene! Get your fucking ass back here, I can't wait all fucking day, God-damnit!"

I smiled and she seemed to smile too and she rung me up for my Shostakovich boxed set and metal tapes and I asked her one more time, "So are you here in the city to study?"

And she looked at me and looked back at the red curtain and then back at me and that same voice yelled, “Jesus fucking Christ, Darlene, my man’s fucking here to do business and you’re just gonna fucking stand out there like a fucking dipshit? What the fuck, Darlene?”

I nodded at Darlene and walked to the door and she went behind the red curtain. I noticed after she’d gone that there were a couple television monitors around the store playing the DVD of The Red Hot Chili Peppers live in 2003 at Slane Castle. They were performing *Under the Bridge* and I stood there and watched. It really struck me. All the dudes in that band looked so rough, so beaten and mean, but they all showed their sadness so well. And what’s so wrong with being so tough if you’re every bit as sad, too? And while they were all playing they just seemed, well, I don’t know about happy, maybe happy, but if they were happy that happiness seemed to come out expressed a lot more like relief.

Then it surprised me. After that video clip ended the whole picture jumped on the two monitors and a video of Meshell Ndegeocello performing her version of Nina Simone’s classic song *Please Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood* started playing after an ad. They were streaming YouTube videos from a computer behind the desk. I walked over and looked and saw the way they had their AV cables running to the monitors on the wall. If I would have left the store after Darlene went behind the curtain I would have never even noticed that they were playing YouTube videos instead of that particular Red Hot Chili Peppers DVD. I

stood there for a while and watched Meshell and her band play. Neptune survived Greece. St. John told people about his best friend that he got to see again and when you know your lover isn't coming back, you still meet someone new. There is more left than people want to imagine.

Even that night while I was eating dinner I thought about Darlene and her aqua green knit cap. Maybe if I went out for a drink in that neighborhood I'd see her at a bar and could have a chance to talk with her. But I didn't go out for a drink, at least not in that neighborhood. I just sat up at the bar in my hotel and had one or two glasses of wine and went to sleep early. After my meeting the next day I was gone from the city all over again.

And the next time I came back something truly strange happened. I was in the train station getting my bags together and thinking of my hotel and my favorite lamp and then I saw her. I hadn't seen my sister for a very long time. A train to Philly and then a flight to London and she was gone. I got an email, once. She'd met a man and they were living together and were essentially happy.

Our parents died when I was eighteen and she was sixteen. She moved in with me while I was studying for my degree. I didn't have parties very often, but when I did she would go hang out at the coffee shop down the street from our apartment in Baltimore. And of course I'd do the same for her when she had her friends from high school over. I have several happy memories of reading books in those armless black leather chairs in that coffee shop, hoping my sister and her friends were having fun, for once.

We both cooked and we both cleaned. After she graduated from high school she moved to the West Coast, to Oregon, and studied there. I lived alone after that. Once on a break of my own I rented a car and drove out West to see her and that's when I learned how beautiful Pacific Northwest really is. We hung out in Eugene for a day or two and then we drove up around different parts of Washington. I rented a station wagon on purpose so at night once we were tired of driving we could just pull off and find a quiet spot and sleep in the back. One morning, early before the light was out, I woke up and found myself curled up on the floor of the back seat and heard my sister back in the trunk talking to our parents in her sleep. Every night that week we'd find a random bar in a random town and try and each pick up strangers and we would play our favorite songs on the jukeboxes over and over and over. I don't think I have better memories than those. I played everything from random metal bands like Mercyful Fate to Elliott Smith. Kara knew all kinds of electronic artists I never did learn the names of, all of the best drum and bass and trance music I've ever heard night after night.

After she graduated it was very simple. She came and met me in Baltimore and we went out and had one dinner and then I had work to do and she went off to get drunk and the next morning my phone was ringing. She was meeting a friend from college in Philadelphia for the weekend and then she was taking off. I wondered whom it was she knew from college that she'd want to spend her last

weekend in America with, but she didn't say anything about them, she just told me her plans.

I hadn't seen Kara since we celebrated her graduation from college and after I stared at this woman at the train station in New York I realized that she wasn't Kara. I smiled at her and she smiled back and then she walked away and I got a cab to take me to the library before I went to my hotel. That night I didn't go out. I watched some of the Knicks game and then I played the opera in my room and thought of St. Francis. I thought of a Bernardo Strozzi painting, St. Francis in Ecstasy, where St. Francis is looking at a crucifix and the look he has on his face and his body language and entire disposition suggests his entire being is centered and focused on that Crucifix and there is such tension in his body and being, such a nervous look of something very close to a mixture of strong sadness and fear. But right along with this was tremendous and awesome openness and warmth, maybe revealing such casual inner nature in their relationship, him just being himself in front of a living Jesus. There is such casual presence, you can practically hear Francis asking Christ, "Are you fucking kidding me? I'm gonna bleed from my hands and feet? Like you?"

There are other paintings of St. Francis with him around angels or other heavenly beings and situations. And maybe that's how it really was. But I have to imagine if St. Francis really did have the stigmata, day-to-day it felt more like having a hernia or diabetes. It's very rare that our human eyes see anything Heavenly, anything actually originating and coming down from Heaven itself.

Heaven doesn't have to come to Earth, that's what Bernardo Strozzi understood so well.

Biography

Thursday

Simpson spends her time between Iowa City and Peoria, Illinois. She has a BA from the University of Iowa and

is a founding editor at OUT/CAST, a journal for queer and Midwestern writers. Thursday has been an active musician since 2002, spending her time between a cowpunk and 70's prog aesthetic.

Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Hexing the Patriarchy, Clash Media, Dreginald, Mistress, Thirteen Myna Birds, The Breakroom

Stories, Rhino Poetry, Fishfood Magazine and Far Off Places. She believes in Feline Satan and garlic and onions. Ask her to do an impression of King Diamond and she will probably smile.

