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"Seventy-six Thousand"

I passed 76 K words this weekend. The work-in-progress is progressing towards a finish line of sorts. I sort of know how things are going to end, although how it plays out until then I'm as in the dark as my characters, and you. There are writers who know precisely what is going to happen every minute of their drafting, or who have a very sound outline for the plot development. I am not one of those. Writing for me is an offroad adventure, with bald tires and a hiccupping engine. No heat or air-conditioning. And I enjoy it that way, because I get to experience a lot of what my reader gets to. What happens next? I dunno. Let's find out. OMG, what if?

So I'm nearing the end of the first draft. I've talked about this before, but something is different. I'm a little sad that it is soon to be over. That I will type the words, and then The End and it will be done. Not done-done, not yet, because the draft has to go through a kind of fermentation process like beer or wine – where it is left in a virtual drawer and I go off to do something else. At some point, I don't know when, I will come back and read it and decide I can be more objective about it and do a rewrite. (Just then, the helper-software tried to antici-type "really good job" instead of rewrite and it's not wrong.)

But I will be done with this first draft, forever. And that's a bit of a bummer. It has been a part of my life for over a year. When I sat quietly on the front porch, drinking my morning coffee, I often thought about where I was in the story and how to unravel a problem, or where I might include something earlier in the world-building so that it would be more interesting and real. That is a good feeling, and nothing at all like just sitting and vedging out. Although in my fam's defense, it sure looks like it.

I have something resembling the blues. There's no good reason for them. I have other works in progress that need to be WIP'd into shape. One is already well-developed and needs to be marched towards an ending of which I'm already aware. I've put it off (while working on this "project") for too long. It's pretty good and deserves to be completed. Is that what I will do next? Or will I begin this other thing that is sloshing around in my skull like primordial soup, just the inkling of a project that could be fun and who am I to not bring it around with magic words and a wave of my hand, like a sorcerer or a big-eared smiling apprentice of one? So if I already have a lot more to do, why am I sad about ending something? Do long distance runners slump at the end of a marathon simply because they are exhausted, or because they know that this one race is over and that is a reason for reflection with a touch of sorrow? I should ask and find out.

I'm a lot older than when I drafted my first novel. So is Stephen King, who turned 79 either yesterday or the day before. And although I do not know him, I think of him when I sit down to type, because he is the storyteller we all want to be. Just sit down and start typing, or scribbling, or speaking into a mic. That's his advice. It's sound stuff. Just tell the story. So that's what I'm doing and what I want to do when, sometime around the middle of October I will tell what happens to my nameless narrator and his friends and put paid to that story, and think about what happens to my next characters, while sitting like a lump on the glider on the front porch, staring out at something halfway to the railing, somewhere that only exists in my imagination.

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♌

CAUTION

I guess that's why they

"On The Way Home"

by Chris Jansen

Driving to south Georgia is like going back in time. Dropping over the Fall Line, you are aware of leaving behind the New South, with its movie studios and craft breweries, for a land where things are pretty much like they've always been.

Today I'm taking my daughter, just eighteen, down to Albany to kayak the Flint River and maybe see some of where her dad grew up. She's never been there. Like most people who don't live there, she's never had a reason to. Marooned in the vast plains of southwest Georgia, miles from Interstate 75, Albany isn't on the way to anywhere. It's just there.

On the highway we pass vast fields of soybeans and peanuts, then on the smaller roads there are the rusted houses, old cars put out to pasture, the occasional derelict tractor standing helpless in the tall grass.

Turning through east Albany I notice the newest building is the plasma donation center. Then we pass the long chain link fence that marks the boundary of the Miller/Coors plant. A barely legible sign - "US Government Property – No Trespassing" - betrays its history as Turner Airfield, where a squadron of B-52s once waited for a signal to begin the end of the world.

We launch our kayaks at the Marine Ditch which flows into the wide, slow part of the river. The riverbanks are low walls of pitted gray limestone, the accretion of 80 million years of marine invertebrates that lived and died in an ancient ocean, then settled out as this strangely beautiful landscape. Lapped at ceaseless by the water, they form small caves and grottoes, from which knobby roots protrude like buried choirs.

As we work downriver, paddling under massive cypress trees with their long gray hair of Spanish Moss, I tell Ava, "The thing I like about this river, honey, is it's like going back in time."

I escaped the gravitational pull of my hometown for the University of Georgia in Athens. With its enormous student population and storied football tradition Athens is a city of eternal youth, always looking ahead to bright futures and next year's season. I've seen the same girls jogging down Milledge Avenue since I arrived here in 1989. I age, they don't.

I imagine the life where I hadn't left. Where I'd spend every Friday night at AJ's Oyster Bar with my buddies from high school, and Saturday afternoons on the river fishing for bass or sitting on a blue hole smoking cigarettes and passing a bottle of Old Grand Dad. Who's to say which is better.

The south Georgia sun is already high as we move along this great wide section of the river, and the pitiless midday heat is coming on. There are no shadowy places

on the river to hide in, so we just paddle harder. Soon we reach our first waypoint at Radium Springs.

"Pull up here, honey," I tell Ava, as we park our canoes on the muddy shore, grateful to be in a shady, tree-lined spot for a moment. "You see that," I say, pointing up to an old stone archway where a trickle of clear water overflows into the river. "That's the world-famous Radium Springs Casino."

"Never heard of it," says Ava.

"Oh it was a big deal back in the day," I tell her. "Behind that wall there's a giant bluehole. Sort of like a natural swimming pool. Someone discovered the water was radioactive, and back then they thought radium would cure all kinds of illnesses, so people came from everywhere to swim here. They thought it would heal them."

"I thought you said it was a casino?"

"They called it that. But it was more like a resort. They had a big building up there where they held all kinds of events. Parties and dinners. Even beauty pageants. People came from everywhere."

Something there is that doesn't love a resort - at least not on this site which was so sacred to native people. The Muskogee called this spring "Skywater" and "The Radium Springs Club at Skywater" (later "The Radium Springs Casino") opened in 1927 to great fanfare. Even the governor came. It was the perfect place to build a resort.

But it was cursed, like the Overlook Hotel. Radium Casino was abandoned during the Great Depression, then reopened intermittently, was destroyed by fire in the eighties, rebuilt, destroyed by a flood in 1994, rebuilt, and destroyed for good by a flood in 1998. It was beautiful though, when it existed. Beautiful and cursed is a theme in these parts.

The truth is, people had been coming here long before the resort opened. For at least 15,000 years people had come, leaving traces of themselves scattered around us. To show Ava, I take us on a short paddle over to Radium Shoals, just below the springs.

When the water level is low, as it is today, the Shoals emerges as a long rocky plain surrendered from the river's depths. It's a kind of debris field that holds everything that's ever gone into this river. Among the caramel-colored flint there are old tires, spark plugs, fishing stuff, condoms, broken dishes from the 20s, clay jugs from colonial days, fossilized shark teeth, and thousands and thousands of prehistoric stone tools.

"Look honey, just look," I say, as we walk along the crunching rocks. "It doesn't seem like anything at first, but once you really look, you start to see amazing things."

I step carefully across the broken landscape, relaxing my gaze, and waiting for some interesting shape to materialize out of the mass of detritus. It's like fishing in a way. Pretty soon a nibble comes. In the hollow of an old tire I spot something. "Ava, look..."

I show her a piece of exquisitely carved

flint with a narrow edge and liquid curves like frozen caramel. "It's a knife," I say.

Ava looks skeptical, so I put it in her hand. "See? There's a place for your fingers here."

"And here—this little hitch for your thumb. And look at this—" I trace my finger along the edge. "It's still sharp. You could cut a steak with this thing."

Ava tries it out, making some slicing motions at the air. "It is a knife!" she says. "Cool."

"Now think about this—the man who made that knife died 8 or 10 thousand years ago. Everything that we call history has happened since he dropped that knife. And now it's in your hands."

I sit next to the tire and start to sift through the rubble. "Now look at this," I say, holding up a biscuit-size rock. "What do you see here?"

"Is it a fossil?" she asks. "Yeah, but look on the shape on the bottom, what do you see?"

"It's a starfish!" she says. "Wow, how old is it?"

"Really old. 30 or 40 million years."

Ava acts duly impressed, but I'm aware she doesn't feel the weight of history the way I do. Her life is all now and soon, Instagram and TikTok and getting things ready to start her first year at UGA. And that's okay with me. What I really want her to learn is this way of deeply looking at things. Of seeing. Noticing.

Before she died at the hospital that sits just a few miles up the river, my mother gave me this gift of seeing. She taught me to look closely at the little things of this world, and to listen, and to notice what I noticed. That's part of what made me a poet. I remember one day in the grocery store when I was a kid. Workmen were disconnecting the old mechanical cash registers and replacing them with digital models. "Listen to that," she said, referring to the clatter and ringing of the old registers. "Remember what it sounded like. Pretty soon you won't ever hear it again." I worried for years after she died that I would forget what her voice sounded like, but I haven't.

And I haven't ever forgotten the gift she gave me, this deep listening. I want to make sure I pass this gift on to Ava.

I put on my mask to snorkel the shallows and slide into the warm, welcoming waters. This is such a big, mighty river that to go beneath it and look into its depths seems like a rare and secret privilege. I crawl along the bottom, going deep, fixing my gaze for shark teeth, then as I come up for air I notice Ava is carefully walking along the Shoals, examining the rocky ground and looking for her own treasures.

I could spend all day here. I've done it before, and wound up paddling furiously downriver trying to beat the darkness, so I know it's time to get moving again.

We collect our fossil finds and pack up our gear. I remind Ava to tighten everything down and keep her phone secure. "This river has a way of picking your pocket," I say. "It can untie knots and rob you of everything you have before you know it's

gone."

The water level continues to drop as we paddle. Ava takes advantage of the lazy current to lie back in her kayak and work on her tan. Meanwhile, I can feel the liver spots on my forehead blooming into melanomas, so I prod her to keep going.

Soon we come on a row of timbers sticking out of the water like an exposed skeleton. "That's a shipwreck," I say. "It was a cotton barge that sank back in the 1800s."

We give the wreck a wide berth. The current is swift here and it would be a bad place to get hung up among the jagged metal fittings and broken spars. Just below the water we see the concealed boulders that took the boat down and left a ghostly reminder of when cotton was king.

Dragonflies have appeared now to hitch a ride on our paddles. An enormous, pterodactyl-like Heron dives from a tree and skims along inches above the river. In the shallows we spot an alligator gar with its long snout full of teeth.

"You see what I mean, about the going back in time thing?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. "Everything here looks so…archaic."

As we paddle around the bend we spot our first humans of the day.

An old guy in a johnboat and a very big lady in a very small kayak parked near the riverbank.

I'm always wary of people. The most dangerous animal out here isn't the cottonmouth or alligator but the southern species of crimson nape, loaded on beer and weed. We give them a friendly wave as we pass. They start pointing and shouting.

"Over here!" yells the old man. "Come over here!"

Ava gives me a look, but I turn and paddle upriver. Might as well see what they want.

"Y'all looking for the blue hole?" says the old man. "We're sitting right on it!"

We edge over and the old man reaches down to tug Ava's kayak into some tree roots, while I paddle around them and park on the sandy bank.

"You want to feel it?" says the man. "It's right here."

I note the big lady is kicked back smoking a cigarette, while the man has a pint of Old Granddad in his lap. They seem nice enough, though I kind of wish I'd packed my pistol.

Ava gives me another questioning look. "Go ahead honey," I say, as she puts her hand in the water.

"It's cold!" she says.

The old man laughs while I swim over. "Here baby. Try it out," I say.

Ava slips into the water with me. I show her the jagged hole where the river bottom cracks open and we swim in and out of it feeling the ice-cold water jetting straight out of the cavern's mouth and freezing our limbs, while the languid waters of the river curl around our shoulders like a warm blanket.

It's a strange, almost spiritual feeling, being so cold and so warm at once. I have the thought that people would pay big money

for this, if they knew about. Celebrities would come here to feel it. It would be all the rage, like Radium.

"Y'all ever been here before?" asks the old man.

"I'm from here," I say. "But I don't get back much. I wanted to bring my daughter to see the river."

"Nothing like it," says the man. My apprehension has diminished. We're just people that love this place. "You go to school here?"

"Albany High, class of '88," I say.

"Damn, me too, '96."

The old man is eight years younger than me. Whatever healing secrets this river holds, the fountain of youth isn't one of them.

He takes a pull from the bottle and tosses it to the lady in the kayak.

"Shame what happened to it," I say.

"Still cain't believe it," says the man.

They closed my high school. I didn't know that could happen. Monroe, Westover, maybe...but not Albany High School. It was like having your youth declared null and void.

Those first loves and first fights. The long green hallways and square pizza. The pep rallies with the band blaring, and the beautiful cheerleaders cheering and shaking their pompoms, and everyone screaming "A! H! S! Who ya rootin' for, A! H! S!...A-L-B-A-NNN-YYYYYYYY!" as the football team roared into the gym.

I'd never seen girls more beautiful than they were then. I'd never have friends I loved more. Now it was just an empty building, and all my loves were in danger of becoming obsolete.

The old man steadies Ava's kayak while she crawls back in. I saddle up and we thank the couple for showing us this beautiful place and wave goodbye as we push into the middle of the river. Now we've got some work to do.

"Are we almost at the end?" Ava asks, after a long drive of sustained paddling.

"Not 'almost'," I say. "But almost almost." I've done this trip many times, but I'm always confused at this point. It always seems like the end is just around the next bend, but there are always a few more bends to go.

As we hit the final bend before the straight shot to the take-out I spot a limestone outcrop and tell Ava to pull up. "One more thing I want to show you..."

A large valley opens in the middle of a tall riverbank with clear spring water trickling along through the cleft. "Be careful where you step," I tell Ava. With the high ridges blocking the sun, the path is dark. The rocks are slimy with algae and where they've broken there are long edges of flint, as sharp as a scalpel.

The path ends in a hollowed-out bowl in the earth. In the center is a huge reservoir of water, glowing an eerie, iridescent blue like the pool in a nuclear reactor. Though the water is crystal clear the bottom is just a play of shadows, invisibly deep.

Ava wades in carefully and then swims out

to the center. “You coming?” she asks.

Some people have a fear of heights. I have a fear of depths. “I’ll just watch you,” I say.

Ava smiles perversely. “You scared?” she laughs.

“I’m not scared of anything honey. I just want to watch and make sure you’re okay,” I say convincingly.

“You’re scared,” she says, and does a few laps, then pauses to float and look down at the bottomless shaft.

High above us on the ridge, the evening sun is just visible descending through the pines. It lights up the pine needles like fire and casts gold shimmers into the depths of the blue water. Evening cometh.

“I think we should get going,” I say.

We walk the path out with Ava leading the way this time. Meanwhile I’m watching every step on the treacherous rocks. I go to step on what looks like a flat black rock under the stream and the lower half of my body is suddenly swallowed up. (As Ava tells it later, “I looked back and Dad was gone.”)

“Ava!!!!!!!!! What the hell?? Ava!!!!”

I’m stuck in a crevice and I can’t feel the bottom. I’m aware it could go down five feet or five hundred. Meanwhile cold spring water is pouring in around me, turning my legs into popsicles.

“Help me up!!!” I yell. “I just fell 20 feet deep!”

Ava runs over and assesses the situation. I’m really stuck. I wriggle around, screwing myself deeper. Finally with Ava pulling and me pushing I manage to extract my remarkably unfractured femurs from the shaft.

“Thanks, honey,” I say. “You saved me.”

Now my erstwhile rescuer is overcome with an attack of the giggles. “What…why are you laughing? That was no joke.”

“I can’t help it Dad…You said, ‘I’ve fallen 20 feet deep!’ ”.

“It felt like that.”

Back in our kayaks we make for the end. I need to call Jeannie from the Flint River Outpost to let her know to be there to collect our gear. Jeannie always used to say, “Call when you see the smokestack from Plant Mitchell,” but they demolished the plant a few years ago when coal power was being phased out, so instead I call her when I see the empty spot where the smokestack used to be.

“Well did y’all have fun?” she asks.

“We had a great day,” I say. “See you soon.”

I know we are getting near the takeout point when I start to hear music and people yelling and splashing. This spot is a favorite swimming hole among the locals. In the distance I see a guy swinging out on a rope like Tarzan before leaping into the dark river. As we get closer we see the local people, with lots of tattoos and a few ankle monitors, milling around with some newcomers who speak Spanish and float plump babies in the shallows. Everyone comes to the river.

As we pull up to the boat ramp, Jeannie is already backing her truck down. The kayaks have taken on so much water they're too heavy to pick up, so we fruitlessly try dragging them for a bit.

"Y'all find anything good?" asks Jeannie as she effortlessly flips over one kayak, then the other and throws them into the truck, while I stand around feeling like I've failed as a man.

We show her our treasures, as proud as if we'd just retrieved them from the Titanic.

"Beautiful," she says.

Jeannie continues expertly packing gear and paddles away. I have the feeling she's never needed to declare herself a "strong independent woman" because she is one. And a beautiful woman too. She runs the Outpost not for any revenue it generates but because she loves the river and wants as many people as possible to have the joy of knowing this beautiful place with its healing waters.

We say our goodbyes to Jeannie. "We'll be back soon!" I say, though I say that every summer and it winds up not happening.

Ava and I wrap ourselves in towels and pile into my little Porsche roadster. "Dad's stereotypical mid-life crisis car," Ava calls it. What she doesn't know is that I bought the car because, like the cheerleaders, I fell in love with them in high school and vowed I'd have one someday. I did finally get the car.

With the daylight we have left, I decide to give Ava a little tour of Albany before we hit the interstate.

I show her a tarpaper shack in East Albany in which I once attended a birthday party where roaches crawled across the cake and my friend T-Bone drunkenly wielded a sawed-off shotgun for laughs while the rest of the party-goers dove for the floor. I show her my old high school, now defunct and haunted-looking, and the lime sink across the way, venue of many after-school fights. I show her my old house, and her mom, my ex-wife's old house. They look so much smaller now. At last we turn onto the mobile-sign encrusted Slappey Boulevard.

"We used to call it 'cruising Slappey'," I say, "We'd drive from the movie theater to Putt-Putt. Just going back and forth, drinking and smoking weed."

"Don't ever do that," I add. "It was unbelievably stupid."

"Why'd you do it then?"

"Because...I don't know. We were young and crazy and didn't have the internet."

Last stop on the tour, we pull into Crown Hill Cemetery, across from Lake Loretta, where I used to take my first girlfriend to make out and feed the ducks.

We drive slow through the old part of the cemeteries with its mausoleums and nature-weathered headstones. I recognize all the old Albany family names – Etheridge, Faircloth, Gleaton – I went to school with their descendants. Todd Etheridge. Melinda Faircloth. Eddie Gleaton.

We park at a tree-lined row in the newer part of the cemetery. The headstones are bright here, some with inscriptions and

pictures of the person. A graduation photo from the 70s. A guy with a guitar doing a goofy pose. "Miss you, Todd. Forever our wild man. Love, Mom & Dad"

"Jennifer Montgerard is around here somewhere," I say, as we stroll among the headstones in the waning tatters of daylight. "She got killed in a car crash right after we graduated. She was the first one in our class to die so it hit pretty hard."

"There she is," I say, pointing to a headstone with some flowers. "It's weird to think of her never getting any older. I remember she had red hair and got in trouble in Spanish once for blowing bubble gum."

It's really getting dark now and I'm thinking we need to get on the road. "I don't think I can find her," I tell Ava. It's been a long time since I was here last. I just remember it was by a tree. Because she wanted to be by a tree."

Ava lingers on the path. Just as I'm getting in the car, she calls out "Wait! I think I found her."

Next to a tree much larger than I remember I see the headstone: Elizabeth A. Jansen.

I pause, paralyzed by a sadness I thought I had gotten over years ago. I remember her voice. I remember all those things she wanted me to see – an art museum, the first leaf of fall, a baby rabbit hidden in the grass.

I can sense Ava watching me. I'm watching her too. I remember a grave in Pere Lachaise that has an optical illusion built into it so that it's like looking in a mirror. Who were we really, finally?

We pile into the car and drive in silence back through the old names and turn in the direction of the highway and home.

Ava breaks the silence. "Do you think she would have liked me?" she asks.

"She would have adored you," I say.

Sometimes I wonder if my mother had wanted a daughter. My dad and brother were rough-and-ready males. They loved a dirty joke or a vicious put-down. My brother played football and later went into the Special Forces, perfecting the art of death from above. Meanwhile mom tried to cultivate a kind of sensitivity in me, an alertness to beauty, and the love of perishing things. Sometimes my sensitivity has hobbled me, made me vulnerable, but I'm ultimately glad she did. Because I have a daughter now

To mark our return to the grimy present we've hit up a McDonald's and Ava is sorting through the order as we merge onto the interstate in the darkness. I'm glad she let me show all these places and reminisce but I'm wary of burdening her with my nostalgia ["Nostalgia," from Greek. "Nostos" – to return home. "Algia" – pain. The pain of returning home.], so I try not to go on about the old days too much, but she's curious.

"How does it make you feel seeing all those things from when you were my age?" she asks.

"That's a good question. I feel sad in a way. We were all so young and full of

promise. The future just seemed so bright. But everything got screwed up and just never worked out like I had planned it."

"Sort of like falling in that hole?" she asks.

"Yeah. But there's something else too. It's a kind of sympathy for myself and all those people I grew up with. We were so dumb and didn't know anything. It always seemed like real life was some time in the future when we'd all be millionaires or something. I just with I could go back in time and tell everyone to love our lives and each other, because it was beautiful to be young and wouldn't happen again."

Ava hands me a Filet-O-Fish, knowing it's my favorite.

"I guess it worked out okay, though," I say.

We drive a long time. Both of us are tired and feeling the pull of a grease-induced coma.

"Are you a tuckered pup?" I ask.

"What's a tuckered pup?"

"That's like when you're really tired."

"I'm a tuckered pup," she says.

"It's okay," I say. "The way home always goes by a lot faster."

Ava is fighting sleep – somewhat unsuccessfully – as we turn down the private drive by the river that leads to my divorced-dad loft apartment.

I rouse her. "We're home, honey," I say.

We climb out into the darkness. The sky is clear though, and the stars seem very close tonight. It must have rained earlier, because I can hear the rapids rushing in the Oconee River just beyond the parking lot as we crush up our McDonald's bags and go to unload our stuff.

We find our way up the stairs in the darkness, souvenirs clinking in our backpacks. We could have done a million other things today. We could have gone shopping downtown, or seen a movie, or just laid around scrolling our phones and showing each other funny videos, then gone to bed vaguely discontented and looking forward to doing something fun tomorrow.

Instead we are two weary time-travelers, exhausted and dirty but satisfied with the day's adventure, and eager to sleep. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird
Please send excerpts from your own dream journals.
If nothing else, we'd love to read them.
We won't publish your whole name.

I Chose to Come Back - Years ago, while living in Los Angeles, I agreed to housesit for friends in the canyonlands between Sunset Boulevard and Mulholland Drive. My primary responsibilities were their two dogs: Sage, an older Rhodesian Ridgeback mix, and Boone, a huge but remarkably gentle English Mastiff.

The house rules were strict: no dogs on the bed, and the couch was strictly by invitation. Respecting that, I set up camp on the family room floor. Each night, I climbed into my sleeping bag as Sage and Boone settled beside me, one on either side. Sleeping between those two giant, watchful animals in the deep canyon quiet brought a profound sense of protection.

Then came the night everything shifted.

I fell asleep flanked by the dogs, but suddenly, I was elsewhere or perhaps floating just above where I had been. From near the ceiling, I looked down at the room. I could see my own body lying still in the sleeping bag, with Sage and Boone resting faithfully on either side.

Surprisingly, I felt no fear. I didn't panic, wonder how I had floated up there, or fight to wake up. Everything was washed in an intense, weightless peace far more tranquil than waking life.

Then came an uncanny realization: I had a choice. I could stay in that peaceful space, or I could return. No entity spoke to me, and no voice offered instructions. There was simply an undeniable certainty that the decision was entirely mine.

For a moment, staying felt effortless. Then I looked down at the dogs.

Sage and Boone were sleeping beside a motionless body. My friends had left town trusting me with their lives. Who would feed them in the morning? Who would let them out? What would Jenna and Mark find when they came home? I had made a promise, and remarkably, even detached from my physical form, my sense of duty held firm.

So, I chose to return.

The next thing I knew, I woke with a sudden gasp, slammed back into my physical self. I opened my eyes to the familiar family room. Sage and Boone were right there, unchanged. I pulled them both close and lay there for a long time, holding onto their warmth.

I still don't know what happened that night. Was it a vivid dream? A state between sleeping and waking? What people call an out-of-body experience?

Ultimately, the mystery matters less than the memory itself. What stays with me isn't the sight of my body from above, nor the extraordinary peace of that upper space. It is the reason I came back: two dogs were waiting for breakfast, and I had a promise to keep.

C. Goble - cyberspace

"Tiger Burning Bright"

by Julie Brandon

My birth was foretold. The stuff of legends, in fact. Old women whispered it, hidden in the deep shadows. Any man who intruded was greeted with a wall of silence so deep that he lost control of his senses. Enveloped by the unending silence, he was blinded and deafened as it wrapped around him like a boa constrictor, squeezing tighter until he thought his heart would cease beating. Old women held him in thrall until they were sure he'd never speak of such bone shaking fear. Once released, he'd scurry to the warmth and light of the fire. No man would admit being afraid of such a powerless creature as those in the shadows.

Oh yes, my birth was foretold. A girl child born on the back of a tiger was destined to have strong magic. My mother rode the beast unafraid. It came only to her calling; claws sheathed, fangs unseen. This was her magic and ultimately her undoing. Once I had been laid in the old women's arms, the beast leaped upon my mother, tearing her tender flesh to shreds. It is said she never cried out. With my birth and her death, the prophecy was fulfilled. I am powerful like my mother, perhaps more so. I hear Tiger prowling about in the undergrowth, waiting for me. With each roar, my claws become sharper, my fangs lengthen. Perhaps I shall tame my father as my mother could not. Until then. I wait. ❖

Artistic Statement - Brie Uzzell

The human experience is full of juxtapositions. It is both whimsical and mundane, joyful and mysterious, soft and hard. As a figurative artist, I paint recognizable human forms while incorporating surreal elements to convey discomfort with the unknown. This puts a familiar character in a fantastical world, inviting the viewer to form their own interpretation of the piece.

I focus primarily on the female form because I am interested in how we, as women, are connected to our earth and each other. What does it mean to be a woman? To be a human? Women's bodies are deeply connected to the natural cycles of our world, yet we are constantly controlled, used and judged by our society. My work explores these darker themes through a whimsical, sometimes playful lens, as womanhood contains multitudes.

Inspired by the dramatic illustrations found in modern comic books, I work in acrylic paints to capture similar bold colors and graphic mark-making. While acrylic paint is my preferred medium, I experiment with many materials, including colored pencil, pastels, and collage. I am drawn to the patterns and designs found in nature, mixing realism with abstraction to mimic the world around us.

Contributors

Chris Jansen is a translator, essayist and poet. His books include Hamlet Decoded, We Can Be Heroes: A Rehab Memoir, The Last Mayan, and The Lost Poems of Juan Ramón Jiménez. He lives in Athens, Georgia.

Julie Brandon is a playwright, poet and short story writer. Her work has appeared in *Bewildering Stories, Corner Bar Magazine, Fresh Words, Mini Play Magazine, Altered Reality, Detangled Brain, Brilliant Flash Literary Review, Wicked Shadow Press* and others. Julie's short plays can be heard on Theatrical Shenanigans, RubySky and Broken Arts Entertainment podcasts.

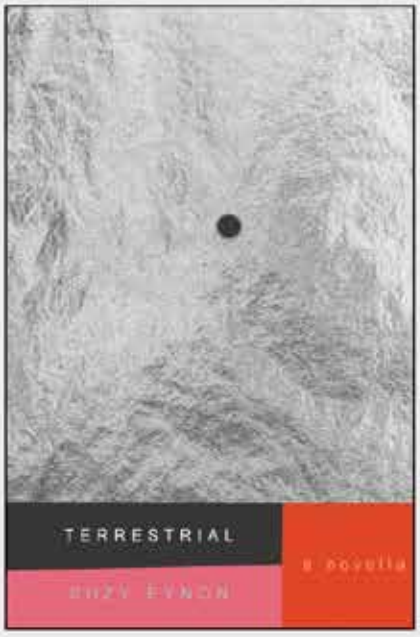
See **Brie Uzzell**'s artistic statement above. She is an artist living in Charlotte, NC.

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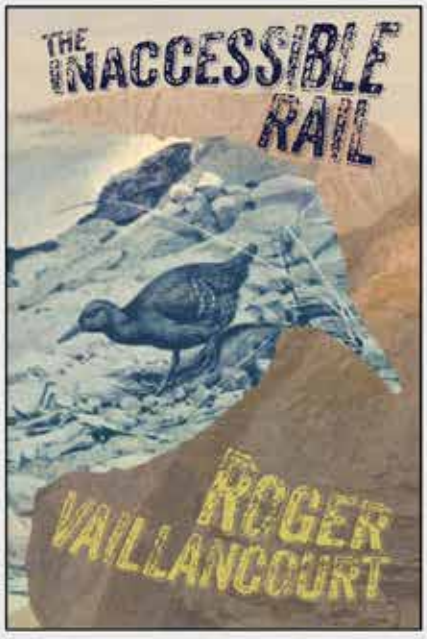
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