

3 MICRO FICTIONS

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EXIT WOUNDS

This is what we know: She was dropped-kicked off the open tailgate of a Chevy Silverado highballing down a dust-beaten road. Perhaps some unpaved stretch of northern Vancouver Island (or conceivably Tennessee, although vegetation would surely differ).

Or: She up and split one dawn without even a thanks for the cakewalk dude, it's been a micro-slice after the flock she had been flanking from a scrim of pine grew progressively more transparent until each animal (even the shepherd) was nothing but a crayon scrawl enclosing a manure pipeline from mouth to anus, leaving no further alchemical secrets to be gleaned.

Tellings differ. The salient point is: She is here. Now. Alone (sort of). And we can assume, hungry and tired. But bear in mind case histories of civilizations built on assumption. Still, if our story is to have some sort of coherence and move forward with a sympathetic character who will struggle against her circumstance until ultimately arriving at a resolution or acceptance of it, and who will be transformed by her journey (as we ourselves will be in our vicarious travel with her), then we must establish some context for future action. Hungry and tired is a start.

She drank the wind.

She ate the dew.

She bathed in the diffused brilliance of a scattered sun whose ten thousand panes of glass had fallen onto a lake with no bottom, thus creating a primitive aquatic greenhouse. (Whether this solarium arose by chance or design is beyond the scope of our tale, although it could form the basis for a sequel.)

When evening's chill arrived, our protagonist sewed herself a cloak from unformed thoughts, stitching them together with handspun apostrophes that lofted past as dandelion fluff.

Sated, bathed and garbed in proto-thought, she spent her days wandering the mossy furrows of Douglas fir bark, the underside of river stones, the silvery trails of slow-moving brains. Yet one void remained: She sought to be bigger than her Self, to shed her tattered garrison of skin. So she married the lake with no bottom, whom she had first met at her initial bathing. They had stayed in touch all this time through the miracle of ForestBook, commenting on each other's statuses and activities until realizing their two solitary profiles were meant to interlock.

Each night they slept in a caravan shaped like a kidney and lined with liquid dreampillows, which neither would recall the next day. Nor would they recall the brown creepers that spiraled the night away bobble-walking down shaggy draperies of cedar sentences.

Each night she would spread her legs so the lake could fill her with flounder and jellyfish and neutrino stars. Each morning she opened her mouth to let cubes and tetrahedrons and spheres (all the Known Quantities) escape. The objects drifted up to trees where they lighted on limbs and became large dark birds muttering rusty questions (or

maybe just swapping gossip—it was hard to tell).

We are about to discover that the lake was a bigamist, being already married to the sky by virtue of those ten thousand panes of floating glass holding close the clouds, raindrops, overflying wasps, arc of sun. Essentially living that blissed-out, boundaryless union we all dream of, long for, have read about in *Cosmopolitan*.

The sky is more possessive than one might think. After fuming over the lake's philandering for about ten years, the sky sucked up enough air to make a tornado. (The sky's slow burn could have elapsed over days and not years. These units of measure are arbitrary constructs solely for our convenience so that our weight-slung minds, too dense with fear to float free on indeterminacy, are given a cork paddleboard of data to cling to as we chop our way across the possible, heartened by our apparent progress toward the fabled groves of master narrative beckoning on the far shore. Yes, we can almost see them now, dancing their little hula in the breeze, their treetop clusters of fleshy Meaning so ripe the taut skin is starting to split, iridescent nectar beading up along each sticky wound. And us of course never realizing that the span is infinite and hence lacking any conclusion, that we are, in fact, caught in some sort of hellish Zeno's paradox, our tadpole mentalities always seeking but never arriving.)

A gale-force gust inflated our protagonist (who was, remember, still drinking the wind) like a helium balloon. A second gust blew her back to the beginning, flinging her down on that gravel-studded logging road (or pasture edge) where she started – if linearity can still be trusted. For who among us can claim to own the market on origins after all that has happened? It could be argued that she actually began in her backyard this morning reading *The Inner Teachings of Chuang Tzu*, which is where all that stuff about drinking wind, eating dew, bathing in diffused brilliance comes from. But if it still tracks after 2,300 years, why not use it? Chuang Tzu wouldn't mind. He was an anarchist, after all, although more along the lines of Chomsky's anarcho-syndicalism than Fight Club's nihilism. Which is to say he gave a shit about the general well-being of humanity.

She heard creaking overhead, like rusted gears in a derelict machine. She looked up and saw large dark birds on tree limbs. Had they always been there? And why were they counting in base three?

ANATOMY OF A NARRATIVE

Something happened. And then something happened next. And then a context was established, preliminary relationships formed. And then a complication arose. And then it appeared to get resolved. And then nothing happened for quite some while—that is to say, nothing of such intrigue or suspense that we could not go off to pop popcorn, take a leak, build a career. And then we discovered that three new characters had somehow become central to the plot, had in fact killed one of the earlier characters who we thought had been central to the plot. And as we were revising our concept of what the fuck was really going on here and what might happen next, something happened next. And then we realized (despite our narrative gap) that the initial complication had not actually been resolved, at least not in such a way that all parties were truly satisfied and all wayward urges rectified, and that what we were witnessing in this scene of graveside flower-laying was a classic example of chickens coming home to roost. And this caused us to reflect on whatever unaccounted-for poultry may be flapping around in hidden chambers of our own lives. And then it dawned on us that the unexplained bursts of dark we had given up wondering about at age eight could in fact be chickens hurtling across slits of light marking entries to unexplored rooms. And were the chickens being tossed, or flying under their own power? However, being actively engaged in the primary narrative, we did all this reflection and dawning subliminally, somewhere in that ninety percent of our brain that goes unused at any given time. And this slight loss of focus caused us to miss the explanation of why the man in the Stetson couldn't bear to see a glass of milk placed beside a ham sandwich. He did not appear to be the type of person prone to OCD. In fact, he was probably the most self-possessed character we had met so far. And so we began to talk among ourselves about what we might have missed, which caused us to miss what happened next. And then we learned that our oldest son had gotten married three years ago and we were about to become grandparents. And so we started to book a flight to Des Moines but then couldn't remember ever having had children and so began to wonder if this was a hoax or an attempt to defraud us of money like those emails from British barristers looking for someone on Vancouver Island to handle a \$1.3 million bank transfer for an estate settlement in return for a sizable gratuity. But then we speculated that our children may have happened very early on, when we went to make popcorn during that first slow stretch, and so we continued packing. We also assumed from this fact of our grown children that we were, in all likelihood, married. And to each other. We had no memory of this either. But (fortunately for us) the ability to construct narrative precludes the need for memory. The self-possessed man in the Stetson was fixing a flat on a highway off-ramp. The city skyline in the background looked like Vancouver. He clenched his tobacco-stained teeth and grunted as he loosened the lug nuts. Despite the urban setting, a grove of ancient cedar trees towered above him (which lent further credence to the Vancouver theory). Suddenly the man in the Stetson tensed and froze, as though hearing a noise we had not yet heard. As he looked up, his eyes widened in what we would have sworn was terror on a mousier, more uncertain

man. His tire iron clattered to the pavement just as a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig the size of a Shetland pony lumbered out from the trees. And then something happened next

POINT OF ORIGIN

Our setting is Vancouver Island. Yet a phalanx of California Quail parachute on stubby wings from the bent lean of an old apple tree that has never borne fruit. Spotty paratroopers crash-landing among centipedes, bluebells, lettuce gone to seed. Sending unarmed villagers running for cover, grabbing mud-caked offspring, retreating to secret tunnels in the clay. (When the body contorts to commas and apostrophes, it begins issuing its unused umbilical cords as narrative strands.)

We start with the search for answers. And herein lies our problem. For every narrative must have a problem or the monkey-mind grows bored, starts lobbing spitballs at corny thesis statements, dipping dangling participles in inkwells. But it is our questions that need finding/defining/defending/defenestrating so they will hit hard and split wide.

Our protagonist (who will not outlive this paragraph) googles orchard pruning and pollination techniques. She reads up on mason bees, labia-soft sable brushes, feather dusters, manure teas, in her quest to locate the solution to the barren apple tree. Yet the answer never left home—is not even trying to make a run for it. A tree is simply a metaphor recapitulating the nearest warm flesh sack.

It is our questions that need finding, and before nightfall. They are lost on the north face of a neglected paradigm where the hand-hewn teahouse burned down ages ago. The fire's point of origin was the computer room where too many binary answers were being amassed. A circuit overloaded. A fraying cord gave way to the furnace blast of unzipped files expanding logarithmically in a cybernetic Big Bang that ultimately burst the sensate vacuum created by browser intellect.

They are shivering now, our missing unframed questions, amid the charred timbers that had been their last hope. Even the paratroopers have returned to base camp where they are eating non-melting chocolate bars and reading letters from home. While the rest of us fashion chain-mail vests from aluminum pull-tabs (which we will send to the future amputees, our bobbling platoons who are off bringing democracy to someone somewhere) before executing all the barren trees for their acts of domestic terrorism. And then we'll rent 2012 because Mayan prophecies are cool and John Cusack is cute, and because we are totally fucking wiped after such prolonged contact with the two-dimensional universe (it's a little frightening actually, all that existence without depth). The only thing we're up for is cracking a cold one and hoping the planet (ours, that is—the real one, not the movie one) won't climax before the final credits.

With our splintered metaphors now lying face down in a mass grave on the outskirts of town, our hollow decurved bodies (which had long since coughed up the last of their umbilical narratives) revert to their default setting: empty upturned clam shells scattered in non-repeating fractals along the damp foreshore of an interrogative with no vanishing point at all.