

The Frozen Ones

I chose it because it was at its barest, it was a naked woman on the stage of the street; it had been stripped down, once inhabited by alcoholics and junkies who had emaciated the house, emaciated themselves, until one day they disappeared completely, self-erased. The skin that hung from bones had been peeled away along with the shreds of translucent curtain that once shielded the outside from the inside. The final rotting teeth had fallen bare, adjunct to the woodworm ridden beams and the mouse-tormented kitchen. Arms, skin tortured, punctured, tightened, squeezed, just as the walls had been afflicted with burns, singed, the floors scraped. A sole curtain still shielded a fractured windowpane. Why is it that a curtain is always left behind?

I chose it because it had been abused and abandoned, the last house on the row. The garden thick with weeds, long and wide, wild flowers. The shape of her body still pressed into the grass. The taste of warm butter on a tongue, yellow reflected on a chin. It scorned the hollow shell of house with its vivacity, kaleidoscope of the living.

Erin was her name.

She was the last one to go.

A neighbour shared. There were fragments of her, splinterings, breaths left behind, thoughts and words saturated into the floors and walls, and the hollow in-between.

Her children would come by sometimes, try to persuade her to come home.

Sometimes she'd go with them, but she'd always return.

They haven't been back for a while. I guess they gave up.

What does “giving up” entail, I wondered. Surrender, throwing one’s hands in the air, putting down the gun. This was a neighbourhood of misfits and fit-ins, the watchers and the watched.

But, these neighbours did share some common ground: the sidewalk, the corner-deli, the injections. Injections filled in the lines, smoothing the crows of lips and foreheads; injections pulsed euphoria into veins. Addictions of this or that: escape, solitude, youth, Juvederm, Restylane, Volbella, and acceptance.

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She had been living in the dark - to temper a silhouette - blocking out eyes.

50, 55

I pulled away the final curtain, and replaced the light fixtures with pendants and globes, and flushmounts. *There’s a puddle collecting*, the man said, glancing towards the roof. *If it freezes, it could crack the guttering and cause ceiling damage.*

She looked much older though, wrinkles and grey hair coming through, stained teeth.

She didn’t take care of herself. She did dress young - wore tight fitting clothes, skin exposed.

Heads quaking, and judging, and glancing. *The gutter irrigation leads onto the west side, above the bedroom.*

It’s an epidemic, but they’re cleaning it up. Cleaning them out.

Where do all the misfits go?

They move down the road, probably some other squat somewhere, some to a facility. There's not much hope for recovery though, I've been watching them for years – pendulums - they come, they go. Until one day they just go, disappear. Like they never existed at all. And no one ever shows up to ask either.

They disappear like a thought, a taste, the sliding of warmth from organs. Something that is fleeting, fleeing from the body.

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City of norms: in this city there is a norm to ill the body with chemicals, to preserve, to detach from cause and consequence. Where consequence does not reach, vision is eroded. Is it that to be human is to be short-sighted? Short-sighted in striving for immortality. Short-sighted by accepting mortality. Where is the between? The here.

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The children run through smoke and hydrant geysers and legs. Smacking lips. Beer, barbeque, and chicken thighs. They're all in on it. But some houses are still bordered up or under construction, mine in tow. I contemplate what this might have looked like from - the outside - the inside of our house. The corner window. Perhaps she looked, wondered.

You're lucky you got in on that one.

We've been hoping someone would make an offer.

If I hadn't moved in, how long would she have stayed? How much longer would she have continued to hop scotch between the boundaries, slip between the fences that circuit these roads. Innocuous yet dislodged, cleaved from the pavement.

How much d'you pay?

A neighbour asks. A hot dog fêted with ketchup, falling over edges onto oleaginous fingers.

You'll make a killing on the appreciation. This neighbourhood is rocketing.

I wonder if she, from behind the window, perhaps, didn't care to look at all.

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I hid them in trash bags, the lost things, a photograph of a boy extracted from a kitchen draw. A boy perhaps lost. A lipstick. A Cleanly rewards card.

Erin from Idaho,

Someone thought.

She's probably gone back there.

He pulled the pipes out from the retreat of the walls, gutted it from the inside out. They were clogged, disused, cracked from an abandoned winter. They were both swollen and sunken. Its organs had shut down. *We need to get up onto that roof, he warned, to check the permeability, to check it's not causing that ring on your bedroom ceiling.*

Yes, that's him,

They said.

Her son. Don't worry, he won't be bothering you though. He used to come, always, with flowers – peonies - and a bag of groceries. Sometimes she would go with him, stay for a few days, but she'd come back, always, with some of the others. Hasn't been back now since, before fall.

Do you know about the frozen? He asked while sanding, leveling the scored floors. *They were found, two, missing for 75 years, now found. 280 have been listed missing in the Alps. It's the global thawing, it's uncovering them. Exposing the lost, a resurfacing.*

I wondered if it might bring her out: the heat, the sweltering of summer, the white noise of light on glass, the smell of sun on asphalt. *I'm going to strip it down to brick on this side.* The peeling back of wallpaper exposed a history - layers of the living - which I purged rather than added to. An outline of hands, uncovered. *They're expecting others to surface.*

I had started with a snapdragon white. Something to cover the scars, sterilize, clear conscience. If I had chosen elsewhere, would she have stayed? Should I have chosen Cotton, Honeymilk or Winter? *The bodies just emerge from the ice, like the walking dead, fully preserved as they were last seen. Dressed in the same clothes, wearing the same expression as their final - as if they've simply stepped through time.*

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She was ageing. They had said that she looked older. She had been sacrificing time, literally carving the future away. A body impaled onto Amis's arrow.

Skeletal.

A neighbor shared. The ageing woman, the one propped up, sewn together with plastic, nips and tucks and polyalkylimide injections, lip flamboyancy. Both thirty and fifty-five.

You could see the shape of her skull.

She was a Venusian, they had said. But the contour of these two - outlines - might not have been so far apart, the tartness of the neighbour's skin pressed firmly against an angular jaw. A female form whittled away for the illusion of beauty in slightness; or for an attempt to step out of skin and disband a body.

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These constructs felt foreign. On the fjord the wrinkles of a woman, the fold of breast over abdomen is subtle and calid. Skin is loose - pastel against the tonic air - and lines are sincere: symmetry is a factor of knowledge, and earnest. On the fjord heart is made from bark and clay and worms, nature, and unquestioning. Skin is made from foliole and aphids and consideration. The woman - fallen away from Cosmos – suppressed, bleached, painted and designed, fashions her own body with Adderall, and Cresta. And then catalogues on a myriad of screens, her form. Both sculpted for, or from, acknowledgment.

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They said that she was a dependent, that her body was just a shell, abused, arms scarred. The incalence had fallen away. They said that a cold had leaked in, had frozen her in a casing of ice.

They had to evict her from this road anyway. This is a family-friendly neighborhood.

She shared, the woman with facial crows, grey with tar from years of platitude. Her words moved on ashy exhalations, a Marlboro Red twitching between perfectly manicured digits.

I've seen the police come by and mark the house at least twice. It was only a matter of time.

The children used to go up and ring on her doorbell and then run away. I had to tell them off. It wasn't safe for them to be messing around over there.

On the fjord a door is left open and a stranger walks in. Entrances are pages – openings.

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And those that lost them - their family and friends - are also gone now. Finally found, but there's no one left to claim them. There has been no closure. They can't even decide where to bury them, to what headstone.

Her son is the one that leaves the flowers.

The man thought, the one with the black tooth who rummages through, picking for bottles and cans. A clinking of items shed.

She played the piano, or used to. I hadn't heard her playing for a while. She wasn't bad. Wasn't that good either.

Her imprints were somehow molded into the paint and the plaster and the shadows. I thought that if I could find her, somewhere, I might give her back the picture.

That was a long time ago though, once she moved in there she didn't come out much.

The bathroom tiling was now in place, fittings, growing inside. The pipes no longer howling, the fingerprints wiped clean. He tore the banisters out because they didn't provide any support. Rotten teeth ready for a pulling. *The puddles*, he said, *they're expanding*. I wondered if her frail body had leaned against it. I wondered if the garden had meant something to her. The long grass and wild flowers, if she had picked them, found some solace in a piece of the outside hidden from view.

Perhaps they had watched her but had never really seen her.

I pulled them in, clipped them, placed them in vases, spread them through the house, on the porch. Waited for them to wilt, refilled, watered, nurtured.

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They were her favourite.

He said.

I didn't know she had moved, no idea she had been asked to leave. She was always moving, anyway, but I knew, each time, that she'd come back here. She didn't even leave a note? Nothing inside?

Behind me the walls were now sanitized, the floors polished and windowpanes transparent.

We've really cleaned it out. I did find one thing though.

He studied the image.

That's from just before I last saw her, she had been over for my birthday. I told her I wasn't coming back again, I was done. I guess she believed it, I think I did too at the time. I kept thinking I would quit her and then I always found myself back here on the door step, holding these. Here - you may as well take them.

He was moving to Japan he said, the son. He had been hoping to say goodbye.

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Frankenthrottle.

They called it. The puddle widened and the ceiling caved in. It clutched the house until it ruptured. The barometer dialed down checking its distension and the air pressure dropped, pulling sinuses apart, secretly, pounding heads with dispersing atoms. The *hummm* of a low pressure resounding in ears.

The puddle caused a rot, it collected, it's been working away at the ceiling for some time. The hurricane was the final straw. The peeling, the darkened edges; I had watched as it crawled over in slow motion. The ceiling came down and the beech peered in. I lay there staring back out.

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A woman - contour - symmetry of wrinkles and grayed hair, walked by and gathered them in a palm, the peonies placed on the step.

The comfort of an unmade bed in the rain. The hide of new curtains, translucent, to let some light in and some out.

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