

ISOTROPES

A COLLECTION OF
SPECULATIVE HAIBUN

BY TJ MCINTYRE

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Knots

When the winds first blew down from the outer tip of Olympus, it carried with it the dust of time, of loss, of empty years that went on for far too long without any meaning. There was an ache spanning the entirety of the crater itself. We did not notice at first, but that was all before things went bad.

the hanging bodies
swaying from cords in closets
blood lost in red dust

The winds battered the dome. The metal supports groaned as they bent and swayed. The Plexiglas, once so clear, grew pock-marked and stained a faint maroon. The storms raged over and around us. We watched digital displays from the weather satellites, but they were useless. It looked clear and clean on the screen, but we could see the funnel clouds overhead. Dust devils danced around the perimeter of our base, and all night long, the weather screamed.

suicide watches
psychological testing
there was no pattern

Olympus began to crumble in on itself. We watched, helpless, as waves of dust raced down the cliffs and came at us like a dirty red typhoon. Soon all outside light was blocked. What little sunlight we obtained on this distant outpost dimmed and then faded away, leaving us in the dark. None of us liked what we saw when the lights went out, when the solar generators lost their charge and the windmills ceased turning. The turbines and ever present electric hum grew quiet. None of us knew if it was imagined or real, but we feared dust came in through cracks. We could taste another world, one very cold and very unlike our own.

when we faced our end
nobody struggled or cried
we tied our own knots

Promethean Petri Dish

At the microscopic level, the cells split, recombined, and danced a dance invisible to the naked eye. A tango of sorts, the cells altered little by little with each gyration, becoming something more than they were. When they started banging against the lids of my Petri dishes, I knew I was on to something, and I still could have turned back. But that was never an option -- I've always moved forward and thought this time should be no exception. I added a little more heat, the glass broke, and they were free.

the world lost itself
I was nowhere to be found
molecules devoured

The Orphans in the Wood

When our parents left us alone in the woods, we clung to each other for comfort. The wind swept around us, sending down torrents of twigs and leaves that crunched as they hit the dry earth below. In the morning we shivered with dew.

our breath fogging
frost glistening on tree tops
creek water murmur

So this is what it meant to be an orphan? To be alone, isolated and without protection in a cold world? What is a child without a parent? How could we be anything except prey?

devoured breadcrumbs
trails tend to fade overnight
the laughter of birds

The house on the horizon looked unreal. Candy glazes sparkled in the growing sunlight. A puff of smoke emanated from a licorice chimney, and we knew that inside there would be warmth. We knew it might be a trap. Anything too good to be true usually is, after all. But, by that point, we did not care. We just wanted to be warm.

a homely widow
lives among uneaten candy
her oven stoked high

Homecoming

It had been years since I'd been home. I left long ago, swore never to return, but, now, here I am. If not for her call I may have stayed away. But when Mother called, I felt compelled to come. I could never ignore her. Not after all she had done for me. Not knowing all that she could do to me. Despite our distance, my whole existence revolved around hers.

trees line the dirt road
a highway curving out of sight
into the shadows

The house stood on top of a low hill. It looked much like I remembered. The paint peeled back in more places than I remembered. The signs of rot and age appeared a little more obvious. One of the stone Grecian pillars had toppled over. Judging by the marble dust on the steps, the pillar had fallen recently.

I feel mother's pull
the windows are full of eyes
and waiting

Cousins greet me as I step out of my little rented Ford sedan. They pour out the entrance wearing smiles that bleed insincerity. I hear well wishes and questions about my exploits, but it is not for them that I am here. In fact, seeing them makes me sick. Seeing them is like looking in a mirror. Are they what I've become?

cobwebs everywhere
scent of dust and emptiness
the filth of neglect

I hear chanting downstairs, a familiar song. It calls my blood forth and leads it to boil. There is worship here and wonder and life everlasting in that song. It is all I can do to not run directly downstairs. My cousin Kayden insists I must eat first. There is a feast laid out before us.

flies buzz over meats
a pig's head centerpiece holds
a rotten apple

We make small talk. Reminisce a little, but always in the background I hear the chanting song. I hear the rhythm of drums, of life, of heartbeats. I wonder how her heart is doing. I never meant to break my mother's heart. I'm sure none of us meant to hurt her.

excusing myself
he didn't notice I left
Kayden's voice echoes

It is moist in the basement. And hot. Orange flames lick up from candle wicks. I can see a fire in the center of our cellar through the crisscrossing pattern of long empty wine racks. My family surrounds the fire wearing hoods. Down here, we all look the same. In truth, we are the same.

Mother writhes in pain
we left her too long this time
her face fades

Mother screams out and we raise our voices in the ancient chant, in the ancient language of long ago. This is the language, these are the words that birthed us, and she was the conduit. Without Mother, none of us would be. She warned us to stay on the plantation. But we grew restless, we grew older and wanted more. The taste of rednecks grew sour long ago. We wanted to try the cities and left this land behind. Mother never left. How could she?

Mother asteroid
a gelatinous presence
from our home world

The door opens again as we chant. Mother might have life again, our lives might be renewed, but we were neglectful. No one thought to bring a sacrifice. No child, not even a bull or ram. We chant empty-handed as our stone mother melts into the ether, sucked away, leaving us mortal and frail.

our home collapsed
leaving only dirt and bone
when the vortex closed

Birth on New Terra

The hallways of the ship were always so cold. I could feel the chill directly through my slippers. Charles always complained my toes were like ice when I'd crawl back into bed with him, snuggle against him, and try to warm myself again. I grew tired of this new routine nightly escapade, but I understood I had something pressing against my bladder.

the bathroom trips
morning sickness and cravings
manic moodiness

I still had not told him. Charles was unaware. I knew I should have said something before we lifted off, before we left the world behind, but I was afraid. If I were to tell him, what would he have me do? Abortion? Out of the question. Delay the trip? Impossible. I had no choice but to remain silent.

I wanted a crib
to sew and knit some booties
my hidden nesting

Soon the bulge became noticeable, and I had no choice but to tell him. He wanted to turn the ship around, to reverse course. He wanted to go home, marry me, buy a house, perhaps become an accountant. But I wouldn't hear of it. I married an astronaut, not a suit. When he notified mission control, they surprised me by agreeing with me. They were curious to see how my pregnancy played out. I must document. I must report. I'm a scientist, after all.

my charts were so cold
lifeless and empty and drab
my stomach fluttered

New Terra loomed large on the horizon, clouds cycling over a world of green and blue. It looked so much like home, but different. Those differences were minor, and that somehow made this new world seem all the more alien. The continents were different. The hurricanes roiling over the oceans didn't appear to swirl in the same way. I felt the baby kick.

the screams of childbirth
broken by roar of thrusters
a nervous descent

When I held the child in my arms, I saw she was like this new world. She looked like me, only different. Her skin was leather and her eyes were orbs of cloudy ochre, reflecting the twin suns of our new world. She cried out with her mind, not with her mouth, and then was silent. They had to pry her out of my arms.

while returning home
Charles refused to speak

about bones left behind

The Revolutionary Behind the Tavern

He entered Uriah's Tavern with his chest puffed out. Turkey feathers stuck out from his tri-corner hat. The elaborate white curls of a wig spilled down onto his shoulders. Gold glittered along the lines of his red vest and around his pockets. Brass buttons shone in the amber firelight. I watched him and knew he was my mark. He was the very picture of pride. In fact, I laughed when I saw him knowing that pride always goes before the fall. A big specimen like him, he was bound to fall. And when he did, it would be hard. Besides, dressed like that, it was clear he was not from around here. The territories are no place for gentlemen of his ilk.

flasks of rum
jovial conversation
forced laughter

Once I became annoyed with his grating donkey bray of a laugh, I asked him if he would like to come outside to take a look at my new buggy. I told him it was hand-hewn of the finest local red oak. I made it sound absolutely beautiful, one-of-a-kind. He believed me. They always believed me. It seemed to me there must not be much going on beneath those elaborate wigs. Imagine, a fur trader like myself owning a buggy! A lot of good that would do me on the trails.

knife in hand
moon scowling down from above
horses whinnying

Behind the tavern, I said. Just a little further. I took him into the shadows, beyond the reach of the thin light of gas lanterns. The ground was muddy behind the line of trees and small brush. Sucking sounds erupted from our heavy footfalls. The man stumbled once, ankle-deep in muck. I helped him up, friendly chap that I am. But once safely out of sight, I pulled the knife from my pocket. He never even asked why we walked in the opposite direction of the barn.

when the wig fell
he squealed like a tied hog
wallowing in mud

Football Weather

Jeremy tossed the football into the air towards me. It flew upwards, spiraled through the crisp blue sky, and I reached out to catch it. It fell through my hands.

a torrent of jokes
I pretended to laugh
my cheeks red with shame

“Smear the queer!” they shouted when I finally felt the pigskin cradled in my arms. The earth beneath me gave way just a little as I sunk in the mud. My clothes were heavy when I finally stood back up. I flung mud from my eyes so that I could see the other boys more clearly. Their jocular smiles taunted me.

isolated
last one picked on the schoolyard
bullied

They just don't know. How could they? I've hidden my powers so well. It could be so easy to let my mind slip into theirs, to drain them of their dreams. But I've been conditioned not to use this power. Mother would ground me forever if she simply detected the fact my thoughts had turned this way. She'd lock me in my head and not let me out. I've been locked there before; it's a scary, messy place.

revenge fantasies
visions of bloody schoolrooms
screaming bullies

When We Moved Underground

When the bombs finally rained down from above, it was almost a relief. Months had rolled by in a constant state of waiting, of not knowing if today would be the day. The anxiety was almost too much to bear.

sleepless nights
looking up at empty skies
waiting for the end

We spent our time preparing, trying to keep our minds off the inevitable. We knew what would happen; it was only a matter of time. We reinforced our storehouses and prepared for our new lives underground.

cheery school rooms
a couple vibrant nightclubs
thousands of kegs

Some of us actually cheered when the first mushroom cloud lifted up and filled the sky. We knew our feelings of joy were sick and twisted, but we were so relieved. It was time. We rushed down the corridors and let the authorities lock us up.

weeks grew long
time lost all meaning down there
we missed the sun

While the world above was replicated below, it didn't take long to realize how much could never be the same. The enclosed spaces, as wide as they were, were not enough, could never be enough. Not after living above. We realized how much we had taken the horizon for granted.

endless steel walls
the buzz of generators
artificial life

The Widower

I look around. I've lived here so long. Lived here alone. I can't imagine any other life. There was a time when everything was different. There was a time when I understood what it meant to be alive, but those days are gone. I can't go outside. I'll never go outside again.

books on dusty shelves
fraying yellow newspapers
faded sunlight

The young woman comes around every day. A pretty young thing, and she genuinely seems to care. She brings me meals and asks how I'm doing. She's asked if she could come inside once or twice before, just to use the bathroom or the phone. There's no way I would let her in. Or maybe I would let her in, but she wasn't alone. There was a brat holding to her legs and screaming. I never much liked kids. All people are covered in germs and contaminants, but kids are the worst.

empty meal trays
television always on
without sound

Once upon a time in my old office, people sat on my couch. They told me their problems, their traumas, their insecurities, and I soaked them up, pretended they rolled right off me (but they didn't). I helped my patients on their way. I prescribed the occasional pill to kick-start the process. I told them to get out more, create comfortable routines. There is so much security in the routine, in the comfort of being among other people. We are naturally social no matter how unnatural it feels at times. I know I should get out, I should have been going out for years. I need to follow my own directives; I'm such a hypocrite. How long has it been?

sweaty black suits
a casket reflecting sun
stifled tears
year after year after year
and I still can't let her go

Molten Uprising

Here in the South, we always joked about the day California would be sucked up by the sea. But when it actually happened, nobody laughed. It wasn't funny. Not at all.

waves crashing
goodbye Golden Gate Bridge
Hollywood submerged

We were left terrified. Faded ripples of the quake worked their way eastward as far as Chicago. On television, while we still had television, all we could see was smoke and steam. The molten innards of the Earth spilled upwards along fissures.

volcanoes rose
ash suffocated cornfields
meteors fell

I locked up my family in the storm cellar. We still had plenty of bottled water and food after that whole bust of a Y2K thing. There was no television reception – it was impossible to get digital signals down there – but we had radio. We huddled around and listened as the world fall apart through a tinny little speaker. I'll never forget what we heard at the end.

when radio died
a new language like thunder
unnerving static

Where Grass Faded into Sky

I agreed to meet her in the field behind the mall. She was a little odd, but I thought she'd be cool to share some weed with, especially if she was buying. I thought I knew what she meant when she told me she had found some "green." It sounded a little odd when she said it that way, maybe a little dated, but she was from Europe or somewhere. Gawd, I'd love to have her complexion!. That girl's olive skin was so beautiful and smooth. I could tan all summer and never get near that color. Her color was perfect.

by the light of day
while the world remained solid
before the shifting

The field wasn't what I expected at all. She sat alone between a few granite boulders. Tall grass blew around her in a way that resembled the waves along a beach. "Where is it?" I asked. She smiled at me. There was something in her smile I didn't like, not at all. It was icky. The word "corrupt" came to mind. I could smell something rotten, it reminded me of the smokehouse, or, more specifically, the spot in front of the smokehouse where Daddy did his slaughtering, where blood pooled in the thick red clay, and the air was always clouded with flies. Suddenly, I didn't want to be there anymore.

the grass was faded
her face dissolved and ascended
a hole in the sky

Feeling sick, I told her not to worry about it, that I had to be leaving, and right as I was about to lift myself up from that odd space of grass and stone, she touched me. My back arched and my toes curled. At first, it was incredibly pleasant, way better than that time with Jim Callaway in the back seat of his shitty Matrix. The sensation swarmed through every nerve ending. I shut my eyes and, for the first time, understood the meaning of the darkness behind my lids. It, the darkness, was heavy. I became lost for a moment, disoriented, so I opened my eyes. I never should have opened my eyes. It was all so green.

unhinged deities
the worlds we try not to see
the veil is so thin

Martyred

The airships billowed overhead. The formation eclipsed the bright afternoon sun. I let go of my wrench, wiped the sweat from my brow with my grease-stained arm, and looked up. I saw the massive video grid displays. I saw a familiar face. Her face.

just this morning
we lay entangled and close
now so far away

Gerri told me to try and forget her, to go to work and remain silent. I did as she asked. Not out of cowardice but out of respect. She knew the risks, but, to her, it was worth it. She spoke of it all the time, read the forbidden books, studied the ancient encrypted sites on the Net.

forgotten knowledge
the holy books long silent
they meant everything

She said God spoke to her. At first, I was worried she was insane. No one believed in God anymore. It would have been laughable had she not been so sincere, had her eyes not had that sheen. There was something in her eyes. Whatever it may have actually been, it looked a lot like truth.

no words to dissuade
it meant everything to her
words brought new life

It was her job to spread the Gospels, she declared. I sighed, I shook my fists, and refused to hear her out at first. But soon, I saw her passion would not die. It overtook her body, her very being, and the woman who was my wife became someone else, someone better than me.

no more feuding
she would hug her enemies
win the world with love

“Through love,” she said when I asked her how she would do all this. “Through love.” I wanted to believe by then, really I did, but it all seemed so insane. The dusty old books, the encrypted files. It had all been discredited long ago, hidden away. The world had been promised peace then, but it did not take long to learn it wasn’t religion that caused the wars -- it was us.

with empty lives
nothing to look forward to
we all grew depressed

The wars raged on in spite of our beliefs, or lack thereof. The fighting, in time, actually increased. Corporations formed battalions. Bullets and bombs became the new currency as we all fought to control technology. In spite of all

this, who was I to say she was crazy? Because of this, it appeared perfectly logical to imagine that Gerri might be sane.

she asked me to join
but it was her faith, not mine
I couldn't believe

There were others who saw her eyes. They saw the light there and wanted to have some of what she preached. They wanted to feel what she had to offer: Hope. There was hope in her words and the words of those books. There was something in them that made sense, but I refused to believe. I am a mechanic. I work with my hands. I move a wrench, and the nuts and bolts lock into place. This is a simple thing, and I am a simple man. I like what I have and never asked for more. Her followers always wanted more.

her face in the sky
wanted for spreading false hope
police ships blaring

I know they will find her one day. The Euro-American Corps will track her down. They probably have already infiltrated her followers. There will be a corporate Judas at her last supper. Already I can hear them asking me if I knew her. I deny her already, just by not being there with her, and the proverbial rooster hasn't even begun to crow.

unwavering faith
she was burned without a trial
saying I love you
burning tears wet my face
I fell to my knees and prayed

The Sea Wife Retrieves Her Man

It was a quiet night, like any other. Just Hans, Obediah, and I above deck. A flash of lightning lit up a mountain range of distant clouds high up in the western sky.

winds ruffling sails
under a moonless sky
cutting through the sea

Waves rose. Winds blew. Tiny drops of salty ocean spray pelted through my wool coat, making it even heavier than usual. Obediah screamed something my way, but I didn't hear him. I wasn't really paying attention. My coat was too heavy. Despite the chill, I slipped out of my coat, only wanting to have that weight off my shoulders.

thunder rumbling
ocean and sky merging
a brewing tempest

When the ocean rises to meet the storm, when the air and the water join forces, there is little you could do but ride it out. We blew our warning whistles, drew the hands onto deck, pulled down the sails, and those of us with any shred of belief prayed. The crew called on the names of many gods. I just hoped that one of them would be the right god.

our ship lurched forward
run aground or into reef
splintering wood cracks

I saw it before the others, rising from the deep, but I would be the only one to recognize her. Seaweed trailed from her massive form, covering all of her except for her eye – that horrible eye. There in the center, in the horrid pupil, I could see the worlds beyond this world, and a song rang in my ears. A song I had almost forgotten; a promise I never kept. I never should have married the sea.

“love me” she said
and I had, to an extent
but I had to roam

The crew screamed. They threw harpoons into the massive eye, but they were deflected. The eye remained. It roved over the ship, looking for me. I stepped forward. The crotch of my pants grew warm with a fresh wetness. But I knew who she wanted; no more lives should be lost on my account. It was my forgotten vows which led us here. A tentacle shot out of a wave.

her salty embrace
I saw the world above waver
while drowning in sea

The Cabin in the Woods

He stood on his mountaintop, looking around for miles. Sunlight filtered through dense clouds, sparkling against the shiny dark green needles of the surrounding pines. Stray snowflakes danced around him while he breathed out thick clouds of vapor in the crisp morning air. He inhaled the scent of the forest, and looked down at his hands.

covered in maroon
clenching then unclenching then
lost track of his thoughts

A stench filled the air, even above the ever-present smell of pines, of mulch, of the rotting vegetation or even that foul stench of his smokehouse. It was her smell, it was her perfume, and it reminded him of the things he could never undo.

periodic filters
the mind is a mystery
of hidden seas

So he looked back to the cabin, saw his shadow outlined in silhouette, and thought it looked lonely. It was single. It was just him and the jagged outline of shadow trees. The animals rarely came around anymore. The scent of the smokehouse and her perfume seemed to keep most of the creatures at bay, except for the occasional starving wolf or coyote.

the woods are lonely
he ignored every warning
to not stray too deep

When he saw her he had loved her. His fate was sealed in a kiss. But now, the pleasant memories faded like the maroon stains on his hands, and he feared what he might remember if he thought about her too long.

it was ritual
it was something beyond real
it was her truth

He called her Gaia, for lack of a better name, but the word was too painful to speak now that she was gone. Not that it had ever mattered to her in the first place. She had never asked to be named.

her world defiled
by forced preconceptions
from the outside world

She was never meant to be tamed. She was of the world, of the earth, of the soil, and of the trees. When with her, there were animals all around, and life itself resembled a fairy tale. There was a Garden of Eden, and with her, he never grew cold.

now snow is falling
collecting on the cabin
where warmth is fleeting

He thought he would make her a home, he thought he would make them a life
together -- a place to create and raise a family. How was he to know that this could
displease her or worse?

once the walls were raised
blood dripped from the fallen logs
and she was gone
it hurt him to remember
what he never should forget

Time & Place

Time floundered until she found her Place. He was stunning in his way, laid out across the foundations, stretching on forever. She loved him at first sight, and the two of them came together.

ambient lovers
slipping through the light of suns
galaxies expand

When Place found Time, he marveled at her perfect curve. It wound around and around and around. No matter how much he touched her, studied her, loved her, he never knew exactly where she began or ended. She just was, and, to him, she was perfect.

explosions of touch
elements and energy
bursting from black holes
holding each other tightly
conceiving the universe

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