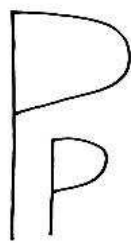


SMALLER THAN MOST



KRISTINE ONG MUSLIM

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Published by Philistine Press
www.philistinepress.com



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Acknowledgements

“Bigheads,” *Six Little Things* #13, Winter 2009. Reprinted in *Dark Coast Press: Gallery*, May 2010.

“Jack’s House,” *Spinning Whorl* #2, Fall 2006. Reprinted in *Brave Blue Mice*, August 2009.

“Why We Never Missed Russell,” *Kinships* #7, May 2007. Reprinted in *Literary Bitch*

#1, Black River Publishing, February 2009.

“Bad Egg,” *Everyday Weirdness*, April 2009.

“How They Make Skins,” *Explosive Runes* #6, May 2008.

“Carnage & Co.,” *From the Asylum*, August 2005. Reprinted in *Tales from the Asylum Year 3*

(FTA Books and Press, January 2007) and *Writing Shift* #3, July 2009.

“Prodigal,” *Macabre Cadaver* #9, July/August 2009.

“But with a Whimper,” *The Tiny Globule*, September 2008.

Contents

Little Bigheads

[Bigheads](#)

[Jack’s House](#)

[Why We Never Missed Russell](#)

[Before the Homerun](#)

[Out of Place](#)

[Bad Egg](#)

Little Horrors

[How They Make Skins](#)

[Carnage & Co](#)

[Prodigal](#)

[But with a Whimper](#)

[The Taxidermist and the Girls Made of Dead Things](#)

[Flowers, Secrets](#)

[The Collage Artist](#)

Little Bigheads

Bigheads

They rarely talk in their sleep. The nurses even say that, sometimes, they do not even wake up at all.

"Radiation has made those infants grow to the size of a fully grown German shepherd," Dr. Flip explains to the crowd. "Please do not feed them with your bare hands. Please do not look at them directly in the eyes." Then he motions for one of the attendants to close the door behind.

The tour continues. Someone, possibly the bald man who is about to sneeze, has been led away. Expectant parents hold hands, smiling at each other like old turtleneck sweaters which sag at the right places. Dr. Flip distributes several souvenirs -- a mug containing the hospital's logo, casts of one of the giant baby's umbilical cord, and pamphlets with information about irradiation. *Maximize the growth potential of your offspring*, it says on the cover.

Jack's House

In Jack's house, every thing could happen. The old fashioned tub once contained an ocean which bled through the edges of the continents. Racing against the time elements, Jack tried to delay the Ice Age, only to be disappointed by a malfunctioning thermostat in the living room. He put in a lot of quirky creatures inside his house to see if they could last the whole night through. He hung a moon and a couple of stars in the ceiling, made some adjustments with the orbit to simulate the tides in the planet-size Jacuzzi, and gave a blessing to his creatures to have a great night out. One thing led to another and Jack was not disappointed that they helped themselves to doing the whole reproduction thingy.

The volcanoes in the kitchen were messy and killed a lot of his creatures. He had to plant strange-looking plants which the wooly mammoths ate. The human species ate the mammoths, the ever-reliable bacteria ate the humans, and the newborn humans ate the bacteria. He had himself a grand conversion cycle running only from his refrigerator engine. So far, the humans only figured out as far as the indestructible nature of matter and energy. He unconsciously sighed. Such indestructibility was one of the hardest facts of life. That meant if you jogged two miles every day for the rest of your life, you might burn some fat here and there, but the fat would always come back to haunt you in one form or another.

In the guest room, every one evolved into something else. Jack always beamed on top of the stairs while watching the spectacle he once conceived from a series of permutations he had run from the computer in the den. The only sad part was that some of the poor creatures could not catch up with the changes in the temperature of the air-conditioner, the radiation from the light fixtures, and the impact of meteorites passing through the roof that they became extinct.

The creatures all died from a plague, a disease concocted artificially by the most dominant creatures in the house. The last time he peeked through the keyhole from the roof, he saw that nothing was left alive except some viable spores of bacteria.

Jack's house was built as a part of a trial run. Undaunted, he swore that next time it would be different. He would start with some dark matter here and there, puff enough hydrogen for the glow-in-the-dark sun, and patch the black holes in the ceiling with cosmic glue.

Why We Never Missed Russell

When my brother, Russell, went away to attend college, he only took a small duffel bag with him. It was filled with the few things he considered important.

Last night, Mother and I tried to make Russell stay home and forget about going to college.

Russell said: "Leave me alone. I had enough memories of this stupid family to hound my way to hell. Dr. Rainey was right about all of you!"

"Son, college is only for losers who want to prove themselves otherwise," Father said as if he were the world's expert on knowing what was good for people.

"Oh, shut up, Mark," Mom snapped. She curled, pouted, and chewed her lips to emphasize how angry she was.

Then they argued for an hour and forgot that they were supposed to prod Russell to stay.

I thumbed the copies of *Penthouse* I remembered sneaking under the mattress two days ago. The centerfolds were very, very nice. One of them reminded me of Stella, a girl from a long time ago. I could not remember how we were related, only that before she called 911, she had said something like: "You really need help, Raymond. Mygodmygod--"

When I woke up the next morning, I saw Mom in the corner. She gave me a look, the one that said she was bored, sleepy, and badly needed to gossip with Elena, the half-Mexican woman in the other bed.

Elena tried to purge herself clean by drinking lots and lots of water.

I did not know that water could be toxic if taken in significant amounts.

A nurse went inside the room. Her hair was tied up in a bun. I did not like women who would not let their hair down.

There were a lot of things that I did not like.

There was no need to hide the stack of *Penthouse* since she acted as if they were invisible.

Dad, the idiot who never left the three of us alone, eyed the nurse's jiggling breasts.

The nurse checked on Elena, tinkered with the equipment beside her bed, and left.

I sat back and cursed Russell for leaving us.

Sometimes, I tried to stir my brother Russell out, since we were, after all, family. But you see, he just would not budge. Perhaps, next week we would simply forget that he even existed.

Besides, I was sure Russell never really went away to college. Dr. Rainey got rid of him. I could never forget how he referred to Russell as "a passive personality that could be yanked out without resistance and without leaving a psychological after-current behind."

Before the Homerun

Before that incriminating smile, that smell of urine on the bed sheets. Before that make-believe sniveling in front of your professor to get that passing grade. Before the public life. Before that perfect teeth and surgically enhanced breasts on the covers sold thousands of magazines. Before that alleged affair with your co-star who ended up leaving his wife for you and one year later, left you for a seventeen-year old starlet who got the forgettable role of Isabelle Raimi, the poster child of teenage pregnancy, in the forgettable movie *Glorious Bandits*. Before you were old and dying and unable to recall your own name. Before nobody can remember your name, much less mistake you for a movie star. Before the inevitable home run, you remember how you once have to stop, to linger for just a misstep on the third base.

Out of Place

Never mind the draft seeping between the floorboards. The beast is already awake, and you are late for work again. You are now snagged between the juggernaut's front teeth. The snooze button of the alarm clock a whining sound (it used to be a scream back when you were nimble and hard to please).

The train breezed past you. The man behind the sliding door gave you the finger when the glass doors slid shut with the finality of a hydraulic hiss.

The man inside the elevator winked at you, closing the doors in your face as you scampered to catch that slit of hope, that receding gap between the elevator doors. If you can only squeeze yourself past in, glide along the corridors straight to your cubicle where the unaccomplished city of your corporate daydreams sprawls fully booked and tampered, then nobody will ever notice that you are late again for the fourth time this month.

Somewhere, a postcard is folded against the grain. You ache with your remaining left hand, and you snap with your fist. That déjà vu buzzing. That disconnect happening once again.

Bad Egg

That day, he had his second eye cut by the optometrist out of the natural cracks in his calcium-enriched shell. After that, he could no longer take his new eyes off the framed portrait of the defiant Humpty Dumpty on top of the optometrist's gilded mantel.

The image of Humpty Dumpty, glaring insolently on top of the brick wall as the king's men held their breaths below him, haunted him. That was everything that he wanted to be. He had grown tired of his life--the slow staggering around, the delicate white shell which enclosed and stifled his protein soul and his will.

One night, he told his little brother about his plans.

Crying, his little brother reminded him of the news of the grisly omelet crimes on TV.

"Then they're gonna put you into those refrigerators. It's gonna be dark in there and cold and ugly!" the little brother said, his voice about to turn into a squeal, his shell trembling with fear. It took a lot of effort for him not to rattle his nerves too much and crack up.

"Then they'll crack you up and kill you!" the little egg brother screamed at last in his futile attempt to breathe sense into his stubborn egg-headed big brother.

But no one could scare the hell out of this bad egg, even the gory instruction manual of an electric egg beater failed to discourage him.

By dawn, the bad egg went out of the hole and of course, like the other renegades before him, he never came back.

Little Horrors

How They Make Skins

Julie Nash, age 11, wrote the following on her notebook. The police found the said notebook inside her bedside drawer. Analyzing it for prints, the investigator was baffled by complete human handprints found on the glossy cover. The prints were too small even for a human baby's.

I told the three little green men under my bed to stop making fun of me but they just won't stop so I told them that Daddy will be home anytime and that I need to finish my homework before dinner so I can watch 1 hour of TV tonight. But Russ the oldest of them won't shut up and keeps tickling me. He wants another round of storytelling. Again!

The little green men really loves to hear about Alice. Especially the part when she had tea with the Mad Hatter. Tea makes me happy, Russ said. Tea tea quite contrary, said Annabel playing with a ball of string. I sure wish she gets caught in it. I hate her. She jiggles her big breasts like Aunt Molly while talking to Mr. Baker. That's our neighbor who works downtown.

After 1 week.

I saw Jim in school today and he winked at me. Russ couldn't care less. He said that I need to put some green powder in Daddy's coffee. He said that it will make him smarter so he can earn more money to buy a pony for me. Russ was a

liar liar liar. I put the powder during breakfast time when Daddy answered the phone.

Daddy is supposed to be smarter so he came home three hours earlier and saw Mommy and the salesman talking about bizness in the master's bedroom. That afternoon the police came and took Daddy away. Then they put Mommy in a white coffin with some gold curly stuffs at the side. It was my fault. The other little green man Fred said that it was really my fault. I believed Russ and gave Daddy the green powder which made Daddy mad at Mommy and now I have to live with Aunt Molly. Russ was a liar liar liar.

Fred says I have to do something. Tea tea quite contrary said Annabel. Fred give me something to eat so I become small to look for Russ under the bed. Russ is hiding somewhere under the cracks and I can't catch him. I eat the little stuff from Fred and sure enough I am becoming little. I write fast before the pen becomes bigger than me.

The little green men used to look so cute before when I was still bigger but now they are starting to look so ugly. I wonder how I look when I become small like them.

Carnage & Co.

Stephen finally found his severed tongue that day. Pickled by the summer wind, the crinkled mass of flesh was nailed to the door behind the shed where his twin sisters once vied to kill each other. During his mad dash towards the door, he almost stumbled while trying to retrieve his tongue to put it back inside his mouth before his mother would wake up and rip it off again.

His tongue attached unceremoniously to its natural place in his mouth. To Stephen's amusement, the pink flesh quivered inside his mouth as if reminding him of how glad it was to be found by its owner.

He was whistling with contentment when he accidentally glanced at one badly lit side of the shed. There they were--his freshly cut blistered lips gaping at him like grisly, well-loved remains. He felt that his luck was starting to pile up in his side of the universe again.

The moment he put his lips back on, he heard his mother calling out to him from the house.

God, what does she want this time?

Please, Lord, not my eyes. Anything but my eyes. I won't be able to find them again.

Prodigal

Back when I was still a child, brooding and defeated inside one of the crumbling tenements located south of Brooklyn, I had grown to be suspicious of the lingering aroma of stale sweat and liquor in my father's breath. It reminded me of how much death there was to endure while life went on.

Two years of marriage to John Haldane prompted me to have the same feeling of distrust. On the second year of our marriage, he became indifferent and cold. He rarely talked to me. He spent his weekends watching TV shows and catching the phone on its first ring. The closest we could get to intimacy was when I gently turned him sideways whenever his snoring became unbearable. Still mumbling in his sleep, he would unconsciously take my hand so that I was facing his back and embracing him.

John told me it was not because of another woman. He said that he had always loved me, that he simply felt left out like there was something missing.

Sometimes, I believed him.

Then I forgot all about John when I gave birth to Josie. Josie came to this world looking like a female replica of her father down to the eyes and chin. The only thing she took after me was her red hair.

#

Josie was now four years old. She had a teddy bear she had named *Pete* and would not stop raving about *Sponge Bob*.

One night, she whispered to me: *Put my plastic doll on top of the stairs and turn off the lamp over the balustrade.*

I called the ambulance an hour later.

We buried John Haldane a week after that. The police asked a lot of questions. Sometimes, they had to ask the same questions twice just to check if my answers were consistent. Turned out, they were consistent enough.

I never told them about Josie. My daughter was blameless. Eventually, they left us alone to grieve and to forget.

#

I snuggled beside her.

The green glow of the nightlight created a shadow play of a dragon across the wall. It was the same dragon, the very same shape that snarled fire, which had scared me as a child.

Josie told me: *Don't be afraid, Mama. You have been afraid all your life. I am everything you have. I am yours, and you are mine.*

I believed her.

My parents said that I should get some help. They tried to talk me out of getting rid of my "obsession" with a child named Josie. No one would have understood about my daughter.

The next day I gave my left pinkie to Josie so she could munch it with her breakfast cereal. I tried to take it cleanly off the bone so I had to use the meat cleaver.

It hurt a lot. But then, I wanted to be a good mother.

I watched the milk on her cereal bowl dilute the blood as she swirled it with the spoon.

But with a Whimper

Five days before the broker was scheduled to show the old family house to the buyers from upstate, you decided to clean the room under the stairs.

You saw the little bride made of bone china among the black-and-white family photographs, love letters, discount slips cut out from magazines, and game show ticket souvenirs. Your grandfather held it with rough hands many years ago when voodoo was still a family vocation.

Its tiny disfigured face felt of snow and salt, remnants of the rubble with no hopes of being rebuilt. Its hair was made of grass, long-dried and stained by pungent herbs and powdered nocturnal insects. Its mouth was painted with dried blood, now blackened and congealed into a final crooked O.

They had screamed long enough--this dirty bride and your memory of it.

Your little sister, wailing. In the corner, your parents were devouring her unborn child. They said to her: *to never spread your thighs before the man of your dreams for you will have nightmares all your life. But we can start all over, darling. The only way to defeat this evil is to consume it in its weakened form.*

And just a glimpse of all your nightmares to come: your father caught you on the very day you thought that for the first time in your life, nobody was paying attention. He chastised you when he saw you swallow the mutilated dragonfly: "What do you know about hell?" he said. "You haven't lived forever."

And then you understood that there was no way out of this filthy house.

And they had screamed long enough--this dirty bride and your memory of it.

And if you destroyed it, burned it outside under that same sky which

terrified you as a child, would you feel safe then? Would you forget what your grandmother did to the cleaning lady who seduced your uncle? Did the cleaning lady resemble the bone china bride in your hand?

Did she?

The Taxidermist and the Girls Made of Dead Things

Something grew from the bruises and the open wounds on their skin. Something that had hands and eyes and tongues and swollen lips. Something that would not whimper. Something that could not be killed by sharp objects or radiation. Something that would not break free from the skin.

The girls scratched and clawed themselves open, conveying red across the room. The taxidermist gave them a hand, excising whatever it was that could be severed with a scalpel, leaving their backsides untouched and the hairballs inside their stomachs intact.

In time, the taxidermist had an empire built by what he had managed to snip from the girls made of dead things. He fashioned leather purses out of them. The girls, in turn, slung his creations on their shoulders.

Flowers, Secrets

Home was always the most inappropriate place to start one's life. There was only history there, and history could not change anything. So on the day the second last of the Conners died, Marion Conner tended a flower garden on the front yard of the family's ancestral home.

This was the flowerbed where all her secrets grew names.

I don't know, mother. It's Joanna. She did it! I tried to turn him back, but his hands kept on sinking back to his body...I know why my sister did it, mother. She did it because it amused her.

There were dahlias, chrysanthemums, begonias, irises, and daisies planted in rows around a patch of ornamentals and smelly herbs. Perennials thrived in clusters behind the white fence.

Tell me, Bill, is it Anna? Don't lie. I can see it in your eyes. Nobody can deceive a Conner woman.

There were faces amongst the petals she did not want to see. One of them was Bill's face. The first husband. He was pleading, his voice hoarse.

Marion recognized Martha Deidre's face imprinted on one of the hydrangeas. Martha, a thin-lipped and voluptuous woman who had gossiped about Marion's family in the office, was shrieking in a tinny voice. The words were unintelligible. She had spread rumors long enough to be allowed to earn her voice back.

You see now, Marion? A Conner could only forgive but not undo. Once the words were out, you could never take them back. A spell was unbreakable, so much like the darkest magic of all. What is evil is something you cannot control.

Not this.

The garden buzzed like an empty tomb. Marion watched three bees gather. The very nature of bees was to seek and follow the trail of scents.

The drone of Bill's voice was lost in the buzzing of insects, the rattling of the wind. His other woman, Anna, was the face on the sole sunflower Marion had planted. Marion wanted the sunflower seeds to hurt Anna's eyes, to keep them closed most days so she would not have to meet the other woman's gaze.

Marion knew that they had suffered long enough for their sins, yet it was impossible for her to undo their fates.

I promise not to hurt. Promise, promise, promise...I'll never marry, mother. I'll be alone for the rest of my life. I don't want to hurt people anymore.

Marion tried to drown the screaming flowers with water from a sprinkler.

The Collage Artist

They said that she had a hand in all these. They said that, after he was introduced to her, he was never the same, was wearing that glazed look ever since, like a puppy dog that did not need a leash.

With her veiny hands, she scissored each red paper cutout to fit the frame, adorned it with torn up maps and hair strands. She juxtaposed familiar objects against strange terrains. Patched up lonely hearts on canvass, grattage on the right edge to simulate textures.

They said that there was no way she could have charmed him with her matronly ways and pockmarked face. They said that something did not seem right.

What little light he had left she scrunched in gold foil, affixed as light beams on the matted board above her stars. Every night, she took out the bound doll, caressed the button eyes, and tightened the stitches against the stuffing, his nail clippings and hair locks still in place inside the doll's stomach.

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