

In this Story the Author Kills Herself

by McKenzie Hurder

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WHY WE LIKE IT:

There is great literary prowess in this strongly transgressionist exhortation, where we sense an aloof Virginia Woolf, rocks still in her pockets, dripping in the shadows. The velocity of the prose, the use of lower case throughout, and the voice, which is both distant and in your face, brings the frenzied narrator to life with a convincing fastness. Images akin to mnemonics flutter throughout the narrative like panicking birds. The mood is morbidly upbeat, the tone frenetic yet balanced and the portrait it paints, tragic but curiously satisfying. There are so many good lines here it's hard to choose. Quote: 'there was something electric about europe that made my heart gurgle, like it was trying to beat backwards.' And '...the ones who want to fly most are so dangerously close to sinking.' And and and 'with an arrow in your chest they ask you to remove a thumb splinter for them when you had nothing to do with it and they had everything to do with shooting you.' This is a powerhouse story that drew each of us in and when we were able to catch our breath at the end, we said, 'Uh-huh, this is a writer!'

IN THIS STORY THE AUTHOR KILLS HERSELF

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the one issue with suicide is that i only get to do it once. it's an art, a sort of theatrics. i thought about all of the potential possibilities and lamented that i'd have to choose one. i will be as indecisive in death as i was in life. i began thinking of myself as past tense once i settled on my death date, how brides choose their wedding dates. i float somewhere in the grey between life and death, not fully living and edging closer and closer to dying like a leaf slowly browning. but the good news is that's the only decision death asks you to make. life is all decisions. life is overwhelming with *choose this! choose that! choose choose choose!!* your school, your friends, your job, your classes, your food, your music, your books, and which hand to use to pick your nose. i had jumped around from major to major, following every insignificant whim like it was god's call, agonizing over having to pick a single degree, a single career, some sort of self-constructed *purpose*. i used to have a huge appetite for life. i was always gorging. in my late teens, i never missed a single party. i didn't even need to drink, i'd sway alone in the kitchen after everyone else had called it quits. i woke up one saturday and drove the six hours to frank o'hara's grave just because i could and had a coke with him alone in the middle of march. i hid in the uni library overnight, tucked under a desk to study because they wouldn't let me take the textbook home. i wrote poems about all the places i've been and all the people who hurt me and let them be buried in internet pages. i barely ever slept. two a.m. was for novels or taco bell or dancing or spilling my heart out on the phone. *i will sleep when i'm dead*, i used to tell my mother when she would shake her head at my 3am homecoming, or my insistence that i still fulfill my obligations sick as hell and after a swig of nyquil. i gorged myself on life, and now my stomach is distended. sick, even. and i can't throw it up or take it back, and all i really want now is a good long sleep. for my phone to stop buzzing. for the starbucks barista not to say *oh my goodness what happened yesterday, we didn't see you at all!*

the nightmares stopped after i picked my death day. may 5th. like the kind of relief of turning in a thesis or something; the grade doesn't matter yet, it just feels good to have it out of my hands. my death day couldn't be too close to thanksgiving or christmas or new years. i didn't want to ruin the holiday season for anyone, or rather, ruin it any further for my mother. it couldn't be on my birthday because i wouldn't have the time with nobody leaving me alone and insisting on constant celebration (even though dying at a whole number age with no hangnail remainder was appealing). may 5. a monday. let everyone enjoy a good normal weekend. death is better during the week. most jobs give time off for "bereavement". people won't have to work and still get paid. nobody likes a saturday funeral. saturday is the day my mom does laundry. if she had to go to my funeral on a saturday, she would have to go commando the following week and i wouldn't do that to my mother.

i almost wanted to shoot myself as a last rebellion. the scientists say only men shoot themselves and that women are vain and don't like to destroy their pretty faces like that. that's where they're wrong. there isn't a single woman alive that agrees when the world calls her pretty. once us women know we are beautiful the men will have nothing to give us. what can men offer except knowledge of our beauty? if they can't give that we'll see right through them and do away with them altogether. the women that i've kissed all looked at me and called me beautiful as if to say *i'm sorry the words don't exist for what i mean*. women don't shoot themselves because women are more thoughtful than men. to shoot yourself would make such a mess, and it's an unfair burden to ask someone else to clean it. i mean, i surely won't be there to do it after. women are always thinking of other people like that. we are always giving giving giving. maybe it is

practice for when we have babies and society tells us we are bad people if we do not give everything for our children. our youth, our bodies, our careers, our freedom. i didn't even have children and people were already telling me what a selfish woman i was, choosing not to magic one of my internal eggs into a whole baby. wasted fertility, wasted potential. it's better like this, though. i could never make somebody an orphan, and i'd be afraid i'd do it even if i didn't want to.

i decided i would hang myself. jumping into traffic would be unethical; i wouldn't want the driver of the vehicle to be haunted by guilt or unnecessary trauma. to jump off a bridge would cause too much of a scene. i'd hate to be on t.v. especially during such a personal moment like dying. i only get to do it once. maybe it'd be different if i could practice beforehand, make sure i do it good and right, maybe then i'd be ok with people watching. hanging myself definitely isn't the most creative, but i imagine it'd feel as refreshing as cracking my neck in the morning. the half a second of consciousness i have with my feet dangling above the hardwood floors will make me feel as light and airy as an angel. i want my suicide to feel like flying, that way there's a chance god can tell i want to reincarnate as a bird. *you made my body too heavy. it was a nice body, please don't think i wasn't grateful. it was just hard to live in, like if you made a frog live in the desert. please, for this next life, give me wings.*

when may 5th came, i woke up like it was any other morning, except my first thought was *today is the day*, instead of *only 5 more days, only 4 more days, just 3 more days, 2, 1*. i sat in the sink to do my makeup, my knees nearly to my chest, my mouth habitually open as my hand wielded the mascara wand. i didn't care about dying pretty. i feel i must clarify. i do not want the nasty

male scientists to think they won, to say, *that's why she didn't shoot herself!* i did my makeup because it's what i always do. the eyeliner brush is like a fountain pen, each thick black line over each eye a word i write when i have no words to write. like a spell, like a prayer, like something to do, a reason to wake up. write the two magic words over each eye so the sun will rise, so the starbucks barista will get lots of tips, so nancy stays un-nervous, so richard can feel that i am still living and in case my brother's baby hatches . i need to have an almost normal day because if i did anything fabulous or terrifying or spontaneous or brave i might change my mind. i could forget what my day really is, what everyday is; a coffin that is too cramped. more trapped than if i was in prison.

when i hang myself, i will be smiling. i do not doubt this for a second. edgar allan poe writes, "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."

there are few things more tragic than a dead woman. a woman happier in death than in life is one of them, beauty or no. this is where poe and i disagree. where he says poetic, i say tragic; where he says beautiful, i say happy, but i think we mean the same thing unless we don't.

because if he did mean beauty than he was like every other man and just lamented not getting to fuck a beautiful woman before she died. everyone knows the dead are off limits unless you're a pervert. you die and your beauty vanishes, the opposite of a cheek flush. and even so, rigor mortis will set my smile for the rest of my bodily existence, until the skin melts off and is chewed away by maggots as fat as cherubs. and then it doesn't matter anymore what anyone said about anything. my teeth will be exposed forever. i will grin at the worms going through my long-gone eyes, and one day, an archaeologist or an alien will dig me up, a few teeth missing, but even still; they'll know i'm smiling. in a happier place.

i took may 5th off from work. i requested it far in advance. i became quite attached to that date, which was alarming. i liked the date so much i was afraid that if i didn't get it off from work to make it a perfect day to die, i'd force myself to wait another whole year. may 5th. may 5. five five. because it's the fifth day of the fifth month, and i am five feet and five inches tall. something about that made it satisfying.

i couldn't think of a worse way to spend my death day than working. i've already thrown away years to this job. in economics, once you spend money on something you have to forget it exists. it was in the past, so it doesn't count anymore moving forward. i felt that way with all of the years i already threw away. they were already gone. i couldn't get them back. they floated away in the wind like newspaper bits when you burn them in the fire, drifting far away and sizzling out to ash. *good-bye, good-bye.* i sold shoes for a living. all types of shoes, sneakers and dress shoes and sandals and girly flats and boots, but all trendy. i would say the same thing to every customer every day because every customer was exactly the same. i worked on commission and when you work on commission the first thing you do is sell your soul. the next thing you do is buy waterproofer for your shoes, and then you pour water on your shoes all day long and give a show, *look how great it works! not a single stain!* and then all the onlookers will buy a can of waterproofer and *voila!* you're good at your job. when the manager said my sock numbers were ridiculously good, i was proud for a moment and then horrifically depressed. my life purpose has boiled down to selling socks which is worse than not even having a purpose.

and if i decided to kill myself after work nancy would somehow convince herself that it was her fault. she would rack her brain and try to think if she said anything slightly off-putting that day, or maybe i took her critique of my sock pitch too personally. nancy was gonna give herself a nervous breakdown for being responsible for everyone else. my last day of work really solidified for me that i wanted to be dead, which made me unusually happy. my sales numbers were out of the water. every time i poured water on my shoes i could feel that there would be less and less times i'd ever have to do it again. tomorrow i would die, and it'd be all over. it was like watching the clock countdown during a basketball game and you can feel that the crowd never considered that seconds were finite before. i felt like an established c.e.o. looking forward to a vacation, *only one more stack of papers to blow through, only two more employees to fire, only three more meetings to sit through, and then it's the bahamas, baby!!* nancy said i was a whirlwind and she wanted my secret. she asked what i had for breakfast and i told her just fruity pebbles. she waited for more of an explanation so i told her i had a paradigm shift about life and death and was feeling good. she said she was glad for me and was scared maybe i found jesus instead. when i left work i said *nancy, i always like working with you, you're really a good egg.* she looked confused but decided to let it go.

after i do my makeup i go to the starbucks i always go to. i treat myself to a vanilla chai with soy milk. i usually get a tall black coffee, unless i'm celebrating something. i'm not made of bougie-vanilla-chai-with-soy-milk everyday type money. it's an almost six dollar drink. the same barista i see nearly everyday says *oh man, what's the occasion? a promotion? new lover? did your brother have the baby?* i shrug and say it's just self-care. i take a seat in the corner of the cafe and take out my journal. someone is going to go through everything i wrote once i'm dead. they'll

think the writing is better than it really is because everybody always likes the work of dead people more. they'll look at the dated entries and wonder if i'm telling the truth. old lovers will crawl from the woodwork and scream to my family *yes it's true! i'm the one in that entry from back in november! she fucked me after i made her a delicious dinner and translated my favorite dutch novel while reading out loud to her, and then never heard from her again! a pity she's dead, i wanted a second chance!* and my mother will be upset that that is all they can think of, a second chance, when i'm full-fledged dead. in my grave i'll talk back to her, *see, mom! see! nobody could ever love me! i was always just a pretty concept, the prize that cost the most tickets in the arcade, and all i ever really wanted was someone to see the dark hairs growing below my belly button, announce that i am very human, and love me anyway!*

my journal is all true. but it isn't the whole truth. if i was living, i wasn't writing, and if i wasn't writing, i was out living. i focused too much on sex escapades because they're easy to write about and very flexible. you can spin them anyway you want to. you can make it sound like a fabulous night even if the sex is very awful. you can say it was charmingly clumsy; *the way you two bumped noses like that*, and that he found your giggling at the flatulent noise your mouths made when smushed together endearing. i only saw any lover just a handful of times before i decided they didn't understand me at all and i hated them. this was more fun abroad. there was something electric about europe that made my heart gurgle, like it was trying to beat backwards. it was romantic to sweep into a city, charm the smartest man at the bar, heavily flirt for the next few days and fall in love as close as one can in a weekend, just to blow out of the city and leave him behind tragically. it wasn't that i liked to hurt people. i just couldn't get close to them in the ways that they wanted. it was always too much for me. i actually hated to leave them in the ways i did.

i only did it because i thought it would hurt less than building a temporary future with them, just to crash it in some other way. maybe i'd cheat, or decide i like women exclusively after all. maybe i'd kill myself out of the blue. if i had a boyfriend now, even if he loved me very much, they'd investigate him if i killed myself. they'd look at my corpse and that bruise on my thigh from stumbling into the dining room table drunk as a skunk would suddenly look suspiciously like a handprint.

but anyway it won't matter to me who reads what when i'm dead. maybe they'll try to diagnose me with some illness like bipolar. they'll cite day-apart entries that have entirely different moods because they're entirely different subjects, and bring-up our family history riddled with adhd and depression. who cares, i'm dead. it isn't my problem. virgina woolf doesn't care that they say these things about her.

it is my last entry ever, so i try to make it sound ok:

may 5th, 9:46 a.m.

a moth grows inside a purple polyp attached to my inner lip. it starts off small like a zit. i lean in close to the mirror with my fingers tugging down at my bottom lip to expose my gums and my sin and when i see it i let go. my body elastics back and i shut my eyes. i never open my mouth again. outside the classroom door a poster exposes me, a purple moth in a purple polyp. my own grows bigger.

i am in richard's bed but the man with me is not richard. he has no face and tells me i do not love him, cannot love him. i say nothing in case my mouth moth explodes and chokes him. i want him to hold me-just hold me- if he doesn't love me, cannot love me, then i want him to pretend. lie. he's inside me but that isn't what i want, i just wanted hands on my hips, on my belly, lips through my hair pressed to the side of my head. the moth polyp pops. the moth tries to fly and it's larger than my tongue. it spreads its wings and i clamp my teeth tight-pressed together. the moth pushes against the jail of my lockjaw angrily, scratches at my cheeks from the inside. the faceless man is still in richard's bed, still inside me, and i choke to death instead.

i think maybe i wanted to be the faceless man. or just a man. even with a face they still hurt you and go free. with an arrow in your chest they ask you to remove a thumb splinter for them when you had nothing to do with it and they had everything to do with shooting you. giving giving giving. it's almost the same as forgiving forgiving forgiving. now i think it's better to be the moth. die flying to the moon. someone will die at your birth like a great-grandmother or your dad's ex-girlfriend, but so what? my brother's baby will be born for my death, what's the difference, it's just tug and pull, give and take, a light bulb on, a light bulb off.

the world is a beautiful place. once upon a time i wake up to a blank day. i don't even know moths exist yet. the sun stumbles through my window, sprawls across my duvet, insistently taps at my eyelids. i hate window shades, i hate window curtains, i hate false closings and darkness and the small cramped space of a bedroom or a state like massachusetts. nothing has happened yet but i am happy though i don't know it for another whole year. my face is still sleep-swollen, my limbs still weak and slumber-leaden, but i am 20 years old and the world cracks open like a fat chicken egg and the golden yolk drenches everything i love in a heavy gravity that keeps them close to me and glues my feet to earth. i tell richard i am going to the marry the fuck out of him and mean it. it's a new city, a new country, a new continent, a new heart, and even dutch with its ugly double vowels that won't fit in my ugly american mouth can't cut me, so i eat birdsong like chips and kiss everyone in sight.

virginia woolf comes to me from the grave and it's too hard to tell if our hands are touching or our tongues. she whispers a million ideas into my mouth and they float down like maple pods into the abyss of me because nothing is new, not really. we bloom here to feel the old hurts and nothing gets better and you can say a million more things about the bananas in the bowl on the counter and how they touch each other. the bananas touch each other like they are hungry. it's the orgy-sin of flesh on

flesh that makes them rot, how we all breathe onto someone else and make them rot themselves hollow. alone we rot slower with persistence and i cannot tell which is more tragic. eyes are the same as cameras in dying, in living, in sex, in shitting out a baby; we need someone to witness our existing, to prove that it happened, while hating the lookers at the same time. an eyelash on my cheek curls into itself like a roll-y bug, like a comma might curl into a period to make a full stop, to shut out the world and it isn't fair that i'm jealous. virginia woolf carries rocks in the pockets of her dress and even as a ghost they're heavy. the ones who want to fly most are so dangerously close to sinking. my heart gurgles like its trying to beat backwards.

i usually like to write about the place where i'm writing because it really sets the mood. for example, if i say i am writing on the train and i have good news, i will point out how warm and pleasant the sun is peeping through the window, and how the old lady across the aisle has nice dimples, and i notice them because she smiles at the conductor when he checks her ticket, and how many people smile at strangers nowadays? but i've described this starbucks a million times. it's been a metaphor for my failure to leave this godforsaken city, it's been the north star calling me home. the barista sometimes feels like the only person in the whole universe who cares. then i remember they pay her to make me feel like that and the illusion shatters. sometimes i can only write in dreams.

i go home. i lay on my kitchen floor and listen to *good news for people who love bad news* by modest mouse all the way through twice. when *the good times are killing me* plays for the first time, i start to cry a little, and by the time it plays again, i am sobbing. i turn the volume on the radio all the way up so i don't have to hear my own patheticness. i restart the album for a third time, and drag a chair from the kitchen into the living room. four beams run across the ceiling. the original home-owner was going to build a loft up there at some point, but they never got around to it and now i will never be the one to complete their vision. i tie a thick rope i got at home depot a million years ago around one of the rafters like i've practiced. i tie the other end around my neck. the rope between myself and the beam is taut, even if i'm on tiptoes. i squeeze my eyes shut. they are still wet. my heart speeds up as if it's relentlessly trying to beat out its predetermined number of beats despite a sudden deadline.

as life gets longer, awful feels softer

well it feels pretty soft to me.

and if it takes shit to make bliss,

then i feel pretty blissfully.

i take a deep breath and beam my best smile. i jump. the air whooshes out of me and my hands fly to my neck automatically like my body wants to live even though i don't. i kick the back of the chair and it topples over. for a moment i feel nothing but my feet swinging and think, *if there is a higher power out there, dear god dear god let me become a bird in my next life, or one of your angels if you let me into heaven; it feels so good to fly.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I think this story nods to a lot of my literary influences, at least directly to Frank O'Hara and Virginia Woolf and more subtly to Sylvia Plath. I love the cool dark logic of Ester Greenwood in The Bell Jar, not only how uncrazy she seems, but how uncrazy she really is. Like Ester, my narrator has a lot going on beneath the surface. The fleeting imagery and interiority of Mrs. Dalloway completely enamored me the first time I read it and I want and I want my writing to be a tornado of colours in the same way. Albert Camus's philosophical essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus', stumped me for eons. Why is it we live on when everything we experience, think, feel is ultimately fruitless and meaningless in the end? My narrator can't think her way out of being Sisyphus, and sometimes I think we're all in danger of not thinking our way out.

BIO:

McKenzie Hurder is a just budding writer residing mostly in Massachusetts. When she isn't writing, she's off traveling or being consumed by a book. She graduates this May from UMass Boston with a Bachelor's in English.

