

Day of Rest Z... Z...z-z-z

By

Kim Silva

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

There is something that touches the Southern Gothic about Kim Silva's, "Day of Rest." I was not even close to being born in the 70's, but, I've damn sure spent the bulk of a decade in Louisiana and can say that I've spent enough time in Mayberry – admittedly though this story would've taken place more towards the north, in gentile country, rather than closer to New Orleans.

Imperfections aside, this is a story that embodies the South – or, at the very least you can believe that author had spent a little time there; the heat, the grandmothers raising children, the soon to be dead animals, the charm, the disappointment, the surreal, all paint this picture of the fictional that I have read of and the real which I have experienced.

Sort of like Shirley Jackson meets The Fly – minus the Cronenberg...well, on second thought, maybe not – and toss in a bit of John Kennedy O' Toole.

Silva has done something to the past that both distorts its truth and reveals a feeling, a compassionate goal.

What I think comes through the strongest is the way in which a child's perspective can be achieved through the heat and horror of the gothic. There are adult themes that take place in this story, but they come through as the grotesque – the viewpoint of a child who doesn't quite understand why the monsters who plague her are her closest brethren. There is an understanding of her need to escape, but the knowledge that this is the child's whole world.

In some ways, I think that encapsulates the South. I could always be wrong, but I've spent enough time in the surreality of the heat to just believe in monsters – either through apathy or simply plain assault.

Silva has a voice that she is exploring time and space with, a voice that is growing, learning to share a part of the past with, and I hope that she continues with the craft.

Read and enjoy her work.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

Once a month, I burn my bloodied panties in a pile of leaves down the hill next to the fence. Ashes to ashes, panties o' panties, the tales they could tell, but it's the cows and the crows and

the hyenas I wish to please, not the gods of Shine. As they burn, I murmur to the great Blood Stream of Life, *hallowed be thy name, all ye snakes and vermin and varmints and hares, of all shapes and sizes everywhere. Be strong, hide well. Amen.*

“Day of Rest”

It’s a Sunday, August 12, 1979, a small town in the South, *Shine*. As usual I’m home smoking cigarettes and sipping coffee while Special goes to church. Wolf and Coyote are here; they speak but we don’t have to, what’s the point, words are nothing but trouble. That’s all done, along with a simple feast of purple hull peas simmered, leftover fried cornbread pones, and a mess of collards. Cucumber salad with vinegar.

Shine buzzes and roars with brisk, orderly gadgets and nature-tamers: filing, burning, blowing, chopping, sweeping, scrubbing. Gerunds all, running amok. The people here laughing like harsh crows, a girl I am, just that, *yawn*, of seventeen years, invisible yet despised, leaving my bed to walk in the moonlight with the creatures, the ones no one knows. Why does my grandmother, *Special*, need me here? Our relationship is rocky; I cannot please her no matter what I do.

Once I was small and Special sewed dresses for me, smiling and cooing as she carried me. She says I was pretty then but now I’m ugly. You’re *different*, she mocks; looking down on me from her ladder, as she screws and unscrews a lightbulb in the ceiling. *Different*. It’s true, I am different from the other girls my age, the cheerleaders and the beauty queens, the smooth, shining church-going lasses dressed in virginal white.

Her gray eyes magnified through her old-people glasses, she slams her palm down on the table. “You look like a bum, that wild hair sticking up all over the place, and baggy, uncertain clothes. Eyes like a wolf. What are you? A beast? It’s bad enough for a man to be one, but a beastly girl... Look at those overalls, and no panties.”

May we talk it out, I venture, but her head leans forward as if falling asleep. “What do you want for dinner?” she asks.

Defiantly, I cry, “Fried okra, mashed potatoes and gravy, hot biscuits with margarine melting and *no salt pork* in the beans.” Special makes three four-course meals each day. She herself does not eat. She sits and watches every bite of food that disappears into my mouth. Outside, the sun glitters with a secret. A mockingbird sings the songs of other birds, putting them to shame.

Another magnolia blossom she culled from the tree in the front yard, lies face up in a shallow bowl of blood on the kitchen table, exhaling its intoxicating scent, invading the rooms.

Our home is never clean enough. Special scrubs the walls, bucket at her side. I try to help, but when I scrub, the poor house cries. Before she can pull out the leaf blower, I bring in a few leaves from the yard and arrange them on the coffee table. As I stand admiring my arrangement, she takes a dustbrush and swooshes them into the trash. A silvery gray cat pads through the house, then out again.

Special shuts her eyes.

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Her car eases smugly in the carport. She whistles a tune, a hymn. After changing into her house dress, she joins me in the cold room, air-conditioner chugging and gasping. I notice the hairs on my t shirt. Wolf and Coyote shed, it's summer, they can't help it, who cares, not me, but Special would. Special, along with the rest of the Shine folk, loathes animals. They are dirty, filthy, and spread germs. True, but don't people as well, also they are filthy, in more ways than one.

I'm reading my novel, chuckling at the passage in which Ezra violates his mother's pot roast, then sets it back in the fridge. Daddy did things like that, except with animated pot roasts, he married one of them, now she is my stepmother. Special sits on the sofa, pert and upright, as if waiting for instructions. From someone, anyone. Her old gray eyes are furnaces.

The yard is open, lies hot and gasping, unsheltered by trees or tarps or shadows or anything. The neighbors like it like that; nothing out of sight, nothing out of mind, burnt to a crisp. A loud male voice lobs through the chug of the AC, landing in our midst like an ostrich egg. "Nile!...you crazy bitch...Get out here!...I'll kill you." From whence does it come? My mind scans recent history.

Special gazes upward, her head cocked. She makes a move to go to the window, as if launching herself into a dance. The window affords a high and wide entry into our living room, which is where we go to die. I too wish to dance, rising quickly to peer out into the blinding face of day. Parting the ghost's hair of the filmy curtains, I see a man, a broken man, leaning on a stick, tremendously off balance. Sounds, abc's, fly from his mouth, slicing through the humidity, the graceful tool of the South that hushes its puppies. *Leonard*. He sees me, waves a cane in the air, crooked end up, weaving murderously, his dull black hair parted on the side, like a child's.

"You stole my pills!" He screams.

Special says, "Who is that, Nile? Who is that man?"

"Just ignore him," I say. "He'll go away. I don't know who that is...he's sick." His eyeballs sink their fangs into mine. "You selfish cunt! I will kill you!" Gee whiz, the mouth on this one.

This thirty-two-year old creature lives on disability in a falling-down shack hidden in the deep, dark woods out by the lake. After the initial sheen wore off, I came to despise him, yet that made me want him more. Every chance I got, in Special's car I galloped out to this place to scorn and scoff and push and shove at him as diamonds glittered keenly overhead, urging me on to peck out his eyes, pull out the stuffing, spit out the bones.

Aimlessly, he lurches around on the sidewalk. Exposed are the things I found so glamorous, so dangerous, so exotic, so rudely, deliciously out of step with the squeaky-souled, blue-eyed boys of Shine. Botched harelip, check. Missing middle finger, check. Unfocussed, drug-addled gaze, check. Limited vocabulary, check. Thick, black moustache. Black Leather Jacket.

Across the street, Mrs. Simmons opens her door, leans out as if balancing a tipping boat, one hand shielding her eyes; her little grandkids slip past her out into the treacherous waters of the yard, chasing each other, but are soon distracted by the exotic words of Leonard, the little hobbit. Cursing, their mee-maw, Mrs. Simmons pulls them in quickly and shuts the door. The roar of her vacuum cleaner drowns out their plaintive wails.

Leonard lurches and skips towards us, up the short driveway. The sparkling-clean window is no real protection from such a threat. He could smash it with his cane and lunge over into the living room, his blood staining the carpet red; shattered glass piercing our skin. His rotten and withering spectacle would be integrated, as it were, with us, our resistant selves. We'd have to face him, *it*. We couldn't turn away. It's us, Special, he is us. How did it come to this? A mystery, our very own darkness, come to call.

He wants something from us, desperately. His brown eyes are like somber chocolates, a gift, he's a stray cur, hit by a car. Turning a bit to the side, he pulls up his thin plaid shirt, revealing an old

angry sore around his hip. It's green and gray around the edges; something is wiggling, I look closer. Maggots. He's being eaten from the inside, a living carcass. Now what. He reaches down and sticks a finger in the wound, then brings up a small mass of the fly larvae and smears them on the window in front of us. Special straightens and eyes me gravely. I can do nothing right. I've got some issues; I murder men's hearts so that mine might live, that was the idea anyway. Sounds good, at any rate.

Yes, I stole his pills, which he stocked up on after the second operation on his back. I even told him I was pregnant and had to get an abortion, and needed \$300.00. He cried and said but we could keep the baby, at the very least let me go with you, but I said no, that's not necessary, that would be too hard, I'm fine, you stay here, it'll be alright, just shut up; taking the money and buying 250 Quaaludes with it.

Shockingly, Special's knotted hands cover her face; she makes low sounds that seem to belong in another place and time. I wrap my arms around her thin shoulders. For a second, the notion of shaking her so hard that her old, gray head falls off crosses my mind. "Special, before I came here to live here we played together, you fried fresh perch in Crisco that Mr. Botzong, the neighbor, caught and brought over for us. Corn-meal-breaded, crunching on the bones; be careful, don't swallow a bone; if you do, eat a slice of white bread. And you grinned, you said, *Nile likes the crunchy parts*. It's because of us—that's why I do the things I do. Don't you understand? We have to talk so these terrible things won't happen."

Removing her glasses, she fishes for a tissue from her robe pocket and dabs at her old, tired eyes, sniffing. "Crazy, just like your mother. I've done all I can for you. But you never change, *selfish* just like that man says."

The maggots multiply, crawling off of Leonard, down his pants legs, up onto his shirt, wriggling and feeling around blindly for direction. Down the street, neighbors convene, grouped in clumps of two or three, gazing in our direction, wagging their tongues, towering hairdos bobbing as they spray clichés at each other. Animals peer from the leaves of the magnolia tree, and the ivory blossoms lean our way, listening. Leonard seems either unaware or uncaring that his little soft, defenseless fly-larvae friends are abandoning him.

"Mrs. Rotwing!" He turns and points to a house down the street, "I want you to come to my mother's house this afternoon. I want you to know everything your granddaughter has done to me."

Now, Leonard's wound is spreading, spreading rapidly, apparently it itches, causing him to hop around even more, he starts pulling off his clothes. He slaps at the irritated wound as it spreads down his legs and back. The maggots spread all over Leonard's body, his face, neck, everything, falling off the top of his head, all they want to do is find something good to eat and then hatch into flies. Is that so wrong? Soon, he is nothing but a whitish, glistening, writhing mass of fly larvae.

Special walks away to the other room. Leonard's black eyeballs sear one last hole through me. Is he a Scorpio? Funny, I never asked. Then, as I watch, maggots fill his eyes; the magnolia tree cackles, hoots.

The air conditioner raises its hum an octave, as if clearing its throat. My mouth is dry, my stomach flutters up my throat; it's a Leonard-sized heap out there now; in the driveway; it's moving. People are afraid of maggots, but they are useful, aren't they? They clean things, keep it tidy.

The walking mound shifts, turns away from me, moves slowly onto the driveway carefully as if balancing a plate on its head, glittering in the dancing light. Jays swoop down and grab a mouthful, flying off to perch on a branch. Shouldn't the squirming larvae melt or wither in the fierce sunlight? In the harsh judgement of the screaming sun? I wonder if Leonard is in pain. Loaded to the gills with Percodan, I doubt it. He is a sore. A walking sore. The maggots are doing him a favor.

Somehow, I feel lighter, watching this. For once something is happening just as it should. It's so quiet here, so quiet as if everyone is sleeping, everyone has been drugged, for no neighbors gather, no children call, no dogs bark. The trees stand stock still, at attention. Wolf crawls out from the shade of the magnolia, pads a circle around Leonard, sits and watches a minute; tongue fluttering in the heat, then goes back under the tree.

The larvae now begin sloughing away, the shape turns black, still human-size. Little black legs form, six of them; simple little sticks, hinged together, exoskeleton legs, little claws at the end. Leonard's tiny head remains the same. Short antennae sprout and Leonard's brown eyes stretch and bulge, their focus widens. Wings emerge, Prussian blue and milky white, transparent, stretching, sparkling.

Quickened, the wings vibrate, shed their newness, and spread out. Black all over—a *housefly*. Watching me, or hundreds of me, the little mouth still churns with silent curses. His body turns away from the house, as it hums and gathers before flight. With one last parting glare, he lifts a few feet *bzzt*, then lands, then a little farther, lands, and then, off it goes, up into the air, heralded by the ring-chinging of cicadas. He's gone, on to contaminate all that he touches.

A couple of maggots still inchworm their way down the glass.

I run back to Special. "Special, he's gone! He turned into a fly! He flew away!"

On her hands and knees, she scrubs the bathroom floor, reaching for the toothbrush to tackle the grout. She looks at me, puzzled. "What? Who?" She shakes her head. "Get some clothes on, half-naked beast. And get those feathers out of your hair, they're nasty, spreading germs."

I retreat from her. The house reeks of cleaning agents like Clorox. Holding a hand towel to my nose and mouth, I go to the kitchen to get a drink of water and open the window. The magnolia blossom on the table is turning a darker shade of ivory as its petals curl inward. Brown spots appear. The scent now is cloying, sickly sweet, heavy. I lower my face within its folds and inhale. *Clotted blood, stench of heaven, the violations that clothe me.*

Sensing the sadness of the tree out front, I go out and climb its branches, almost to the top. It's dark in the shelter of the thick waxy leaves. Wolf and Coyote lie on the cool soil below the branches that touch the ground.

Special never learns of my secret refuge.

I remember hearing the pop of her secret pleasure, a cold Schlitz; seeing her flushed skin, recalling her pleasant, old-people smell as she bursts in from working in the yard, pronouncing me lazy and selfish as if I don't know this already.

A cat joins me in the tree, he has a bloody eye, a neighbor must have shot it when it crossed their yard. Blood drips onto the waxy leaves. Licking his paws, he rubs his head against my thigh. He finds a nook in between two branches. He goes to sleep. He will never wake up; he vanishes, absorbed into the tree itself.

Special revs up the mower. The roar seizes the quiet of day, taking captive everything in its wake. She mows neat rows, tidy as can be. Then, the horizontal direction over that. No blade of grass is left uncut. I've tried to help before; it's more of a headache to her, she says let her do it, then it's done right. Weed-eat, then rake and scrape, the sun sweats along with her. Surely, my grandmother is tired? It's so hot, she shouldn't be here; should be lying on her cool bed in the softly breezed bedroom, reading her romance novel; the picture of Paw Paw, grinning at something beyond her.

Special starts to stumble, sweat covers her, the fierce sun is frying her. She crawls, crawls along the grass, crawls to get shade, yes here under the tree, plenty of shade and cool earth that shares not its secrets, everything that happens here stays here, here, here!

Only the purity, the silver tongue persuades, high above the rot and filth of nature, nature lies bleeding in the grass, long live the death of nature.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I think of writing as a kind of home away from home. Though it may be taxing and laborious at times, the freedom of this adopted residence makes it all worthwhile. The fictional world on the page is not subject to the law of gravity. My overall approach is spontaneous and intuitive. I try to carve out a larger story from a certain feeling or idea. Inevitably, the writing process takes me to a place that is more insistent than my initial, rather contrived idea. I am a visual artist as well. The way I paint unconsciously informs a lot of the imagery and subject matter in my writing. I see the two disciplines as interchangeable and complementary. Right now, I'm writing flash fictions based on the surrealistic imagery in the paintings, creating a written story for each one.*

I've always been drawn to the grotesque. When I was younger, I was inspired by Carl Jung's theories about the necessity of owning one's shadow. I found this notion to be astonishing. Liberating. To this day, Jung's shadow work informs my artwork and writing on a core level. When I explore the grotesque, unconsciously I am attempting to balance my own socially acceptable inclinations with the more transgressive ones. In this way, self discovery becomes a tucked-away and fugitive result in and of itself. A sort of mirror arises of something I was unaware of before starting the work.

My influences are many, but the ones who stand out currently are Joy Williams, Russell Edson, and Charles Bukowski.

AUTHOR BIO: Kim Silva was born and raised in North Louisiana. She is still traumatized from the good times gone wrong back in the seventies. She is a hermit who keeps her dog company. She feeds the chickens (songbirds) and fights off starlings (vultures) and squirrels (monkeys) from the backyard feeder. Her brows are permanently furrowed from overthinking. She now lives in the puzzling land called Rhode Island.