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By Angela Joynes {!!} (angela....joynes)

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Angela Joynes' Trout Addicted to Meth is one of those stories that has everything you want to read in a story: love, tragedy, and the addiction to both, literary awareness, concision (editorially), succinctness (in dialogue), timelessness in tune with the contemporary, intelligence, speed, and awareness.*

About trout.

And that singular fact makes me, and should make you, incredibly happy at how solid of a story that I think this was written from top to bottom.

The juxtaposition of humanity upon trout is, at least in recent memory, almost always successful. Brautigan is one of those humans that wrote before I was born, was probably an asshole before I was born, but whose poetry (Loading Mercury with a Pitchfork) and novel(s) (but mainly one or two) (Trout Fishing in America) still continue to inform how I write.

The way in which Joynes' creates a vehicle for addiction and dependency is with true metaphor – the extended and perfected pun, one thing in the sense of another. You could also say personification, but this piece goes further than the gimmick, “One afternoon Elliot lunges for me, mistaking me for a juicy damselfly morsel. Then he starts spying menacing barbed hooks waiting to pierce his flesh around every bend. And he’s certain the billowing white plastic bag on the shore is a massive, voracious egret.” Joynes has captured the helplessness and violence that often controls love and addiction. The panic and paranoia of an addict or trout met with the knowledge of a lens that can only experience a sinking feeling through buoyancy.

I have stupidly said this once and I will stupidly say this again because I still like the lameness of the joke against the truth of the fact: this story has depth.

*There is a lot of good work in this issue. This story is among them.
Enjoy.*

Five Stars

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

But it's not Elliot's fault that his intake is passive, a heartbreaking result of environs. To keep from sobbing some nights, I grimace and joke about getting a fix, imagining a tight leather jacket hugging his lean slippery body, as he surges toward a biker gang or speckled cartel with a semiautomatic pistol tucked behind his dorsal fin.

TROUT ADDICTED TO METH

Standing under the old fieldstone bridge, I catch the first glimpse of his gem-like colors and lyrical, sensuous movement swirling among the shallows of tannin-stained water, and I'm instantly hooked. He blinks once, and again, and my heart leaps beyond reason.

Such encounters, however, my mother frequently cautions. "Be careful, my dear, scientists have proven that trout living downstream from sewage treatment plants can get addicted to meth."

"Yes, Mom, I read the same study, but Elliot is different; his surroundings, I promise, do not define him."

Yet a quiver jostles my cortex when he invites me to his neighborhood downstream from Duck River Sewage which, even I will admit, is less than idyllic — gar, mussels, algae, and slime aimlessly drifting among crumbling concrete, discarded tires, clogged drainpipes, and streets littered with flotsam.

And sure enough, deliriously distracted by infatuation's exquisite first flames, the titillation of shared secrets, and our fumbling physical explorations, I miss the initial signs of addiction. Elliot's behavior distorts slowly, as indolent and barely perceptible as the last gasps of air in a bank vault, the onset of vitamin-deficient blindness in a child fed only French fries, or leisurely boiling a frog. He gradually loses his cravings for tiny winged insects, and his emotions become capricious, but surely even trout, I stoutly proclaim, are entitled to mood swings.

Naturally my mother sniffs something amiss with my boyfriend, harboring an immediate robust dislike. "Where did you find this sucker anyway?" She cocks her wrist in a dismissive motion as if tossing trash fish back in the water. "His eyes are repulsive, all lidless and bulging."

His eyes do not bulge, I want to screech, you're a fine one to talk given your rewired thyroid. "It's an optical illusion, Mom, refraction of light in the water."

But she doesn't swallow this line, and deep down I know that it's more than lenses and physics. I've seen Elliot's school pictures. Even as a troutling he wasn't cute — scanty cadaverous lips on a splayed mouth, and that angular forehead receding into his scrawny, freckled frame — not that looks matter. Swampy love clouded by silt, no matter how boggy, still beats no love at all.

As the months pass, Elliot's peculiarities grow more suspicious — twitching and tics, scabby skin, wriggling and writhing, and dilated pupils. Rip currents of anxiety throb in my throat, but I remind myself that Elliot is kind, caring, funny, and fresh; he makes me feel happy and safe.

Most of the time.

Until he develops frank paranoia. One afternoon Elliot lunges for me, mistaking me for a juicy damselfly morsel. Then he starts spying menacing barbed hooks waiting to pierce his flesh

around every bend. And he's certain the billowing white plastic bag on the shore is a massive, voracious egret. Frightened, confused, he swims erratically now, hyperactive, vigilant, frantic.

"What did you expect?" Mom tuts after dinner. "Elliot is from a bad neighborhood; he's not much of a catch."

Yes, he lives downstream from sewage treatment, downstream from hallucinating, slack-skinned, living skeletons who excrete and then flush their meth-filled bodily waste. Yes, trout get addicted, I know. But it's not Elliot's fault that his intake is passive, a heartbreaking result of environs. To keep from sobbing some nights, I grimace and joke about getting a fix, imagining a tight leather jacket hugging his lean slippery body, as he surges toward a biker gang or speckled cartel with a semiautomatic pistol tucked behind his dorsal fin.

"I'll help you, baby," I promise. "We'll move away." But Elliot, spawned and raised here, refuses to leave, so what can I do? My ribs burn, nearly burst, with the painful slow inhalation of holding out hope.

Then his symptoms worsen. Trouty halitosis develops, the scent of fish slime, leaf rot, and detritus pervades every breath. Foul bubbles ooze above his soured gills. Parasitic copepods blister and crust all over his surface.

But I'll not abandon my love. "Shh, Elliot," I tenderly stroke the sensitive spot under his chin, rub the pale pink stripe down his side, and gently tickle his iridescent tail in the sunlight. "We'll survive this together. I love you," I choke. "I'll never leave."

And one day, finally the river reflects the blue sky, and the meth clears. A gift this, some reward for my patience. Elliot is bound to heal now, to go back to normal.

But instead he becomes lethargic, nearly motionless, and he's much less social — the signs, scientists say, of meth leaving his system, withdrawing from me and the drug. And I remain helpless, despairing.

In mind Elliot drifts — in body he floats. My sweet lover departs for some cold remote fathom where I can never, ever reel him back in.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Thanks for reading this quirky love story. Inspired by a scientific article of a similar name, "Trout Addicted to Meth" explores the pervasive and heart wrenching nature of addiction, and its intersection with environmental issues. Studies have verified that fish living downstream from sewage treatment plants display agitation and hyperactivity when exposed to human waste riddled with amphetamines. When these chemicals are withdrawn, the fish become lethargic and apathetic. We'd call it withdrawal, maybe cold turkey trout.*

Many people (and apparently fish) fall prey to drugs because of proximity, exposure, or social circumstance. The narrator who adores Elliot, steadfastly refuses to assign blame or shame. Although sad, I hope the story captures enough irony and humor to counterbalance the anguish of loving an addict.

Readers may ask, "Is Elliot really a fish?" or "Is the narrator a fish too?" Please choose for yourself, either or neither.

The creation and consumption of literature are the foundations of my sanity. They should be deeply personal, playful, lyrical, with moments of magic, but most of all, words should move us. Otherwise, what's the point?

AUTHOR BIO: Angela Joynes is a Canadian now living in Tennessee where she pursues her two passions — writing and primitive rug hooking. Yes, she's a hooker. She holds the following degrees: BA, MD, and a Certificate in Creative Writing from Middle Tennessee State University.