

FADE to BLUE

By Moriah Hampton

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Joey Cruse writes:*

In these lovely times of self-quarantine and distancing, conspiratorial suspicions and ignorance, indulging too much or too little, Moriah Hampton's "Fade to Blue" offers readers a pane glass lens and a heat lamp spotlight to reveal how space, or the lack thereof, blinds us to our own insecurities, dependencies, and, oftentimes, our hopes. Hampton has created a story that is both realistically surreal and exaggeratingly concrete, and, in turn, as annoyingly antithetical as those phrases may have been written, has crafted a story that is entertaining and humorous as well as honest and meaningful.

Evette and Reid are characters stuck in an exhausted cycle of their own perceptions of each other. Unsure of their own goals in work, school, or the direction of their relationship, the cracks in their connection begin to disintegrate with a new addition to their environment.

Throughout her story, Hampton subtly weaves together the fractured madness created when absurdity meets reality and the all too real issues we find conflicting in ourselves after getting lost in what was once a familiar gaze – and how or if we ever confront these introspections left in the air. With a rhythm that can lull your senses, à la Beckett, the style of language adds depth to the characters' condition(s), "...He saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon...Simon dozing in the full shade of a potted palm. Simon dragging his baby spoon belly through a sand patch. He entered the kitchen and saw Simon lapping water from the edge of a wide bowl. He saw Simon everywhere."

Do I know whether the Simon in question is real or imaginary or whether this Kafka-caressing thought process threatens a Kubrick-esque break from reality ("Here's Simon!")? Do I know what "fades to blue" as the title suggests or know whether the story ends in tragedy or lets you linger in a sense of hopefulness?

Sure, technically, yes, as I have read the story, but, if you've made it this far into my introduction, you still haven't and should do yourself a favor and do so.

Enjoy.

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Aimee Bender – Willful Creatures; Susan Steinberg – Spectacle; Raphael Bob-Waksberg - Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory; Etgar Keret – The Nimrod Flipout; Bonnie Jo Campbell – Women and Other Animals; Tom McCarthy – Remainder; Carson McCullers – The Ballad of the Sad Café; Haruki Murakami – The Elephant Vanishes; Karen Russell – St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves; Vladimir Nabokov – Laughter in the Dark; Richard Brautigan – Loading Mercury With a Pitchfork; Laura Mullen – Murmur; Jorge Luis Borges – Collected Fiction; Raymond Carver – Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?; Megan Cass – ActivAmerica; Lauren Groff - Florida.

- *Joey Cruse, April 12-19th (?) 2020*

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Reid watched Evette slog across his living room, dragging her oversized purse, towards the couch. He peered closer as she passed his newly purchased vivarium, replicating the tropics with river rocks, dew green foliage, and splotched bark. She showed no signs of interest and plopped down next to him, her purse straps loose at her feet. They sat beside each other as if on different couches in different living rooms, until at last Evette opened her mouth to speak. Reid, dissatisfied, leaned his head back against the wall, half listening.

“...out of lemon-scented dish soap...20 minutes in overstock...found a bottle...even buy...the kid with the guilt-stricken smile...shoplift...glared once like his mean big sister...fled.”

She stopped speaking moments before Reid realized and waited as he sighed and sat up.

“That store would go to pot without you,” Reid said.

“Yeah,” she replied.

Neither believed it. The lines they recited brought only memories of comfort. On other days, they ended their conversation about Reid’s situation in the same routine way. Yes, the extra work Evette did at Discount Drugs would go unnoticed. Yes, Reid could decide on a major and finally go back to college after a year off—as if there was a point. There was nothing left to say.

To him, she appeared stuck to the 14 x 8-inch area on his couch where she always sat.

Water drip-dropped from the kitchen faucet.

“That blue-tongue skink came in the mail today,” Reid said, point-blank, and watched her head turn and eyes lower. He expected her to approach the tank, but Evette sat motionless. Reid thought of the skink, hiding behind the log or half buried under some shavings, motionless too.

Evette hunched her knobby shoulders and bowed her head, gnawed by concern for Reid. Will this be enough?

“I’m glad you got your lizard, Reid. I hope it’s what you want.”

Reid paused, taken aback, then clutched her shoulder, “Of course. I told you he’d come today. Didn’t you remember?” and nudged her forward.

Side by side, they stood peering into the tank. Inside the four glass walls glowed, a different world, self-contained, undisturbed by the spiraling arms of time. To the left, three grey rocks were assorted to size. To the right, a hollowed-out log, with bark stuck to the outside. Evette scanned the floor bed, covered with sand and wood shavings, and Reid sensed her frame but not her absent flesh. She focused on the looming plants, following finger-thin leaves to pointed tips, and, as Reid failed to foresee her bare bones disintegrating, Evette moved to the farthest end.

Resisting the pull of the exotic habitat, she raised one palm to the glass then the other, feeling urged to spot the lizard, to confirm he had survived intact. A mail-order skink. All that banging and shaking and sliding around? What if a postal worker put him next to a snake?

“There he is,” she whispered, almost too low for Reid to hear, catching sight of the grey and black skink camouflaged against the largest rock. Her voice rose, accusingly: “He has no food.”

“Not time for him to eat,” was his curt response as grabbed his pet.

“I’d give him food.”

She imagined the lizard nibbling bits from her hand recalling the three times she refused food that day.

Drip, drop.

On the couch, Reid upheld the wriggling skink for Evette to see.

“A skink’s diet is similar to a human’s,” he intoned. “In captivity, they will eat vegetables, fruit, and cooked meat. But I can also feed him mice, crickets, raw beef heart, and even dog food.”

Reid had waited on Evette all afternoon to take him out of the tank, thinking they would enjoy playing with the skink for the first time together.

“Come over here Vette,” following her with his eyes to the opposite end of the couch.

He opened his hand, releasing the skink from his grip. For a second, the skink held still, covering little more than half of Reid’s palm. Then he began squirming towards Reid’s fingertips. Reid watched as he barreled over the edge, his tail too short to catch in a pinch, so Reid’s other hand swooped up to meet him. Reid glanced at Evette, hiding his smile, when he saw her look of concern.

“He’s scared,” Evette said.

Reid shook his head no and kept playing with his pet. He let him squirm to the edge of his palm again, grey and black stripes rippling, catching him just before he fell, one hand after another, growing more immersed with each round until, at last, he seized him whole with his left hand, feeling his smooth, rubbery skin. Reid lifted the lizard toward his face and peered into his earth-filled eyes. The skink’s blue tongue whipped in and out, leaving Reid in awe.

He turned towards Evette, wanting to know if she saw the blue tongue, but she seemed to be sitting even farther away on a couch that had doubled in size.

Doesn't she like anything? He gave the skink a droopy eye look, surmising that Evette needed a push.

“Here, you hold him,” Reid said, stretching towards her. He was about to drop the skink in her lap, but she slid back, even farther away from him. He leaned upright, harboring a new-found belief in telepathy. *She'd be satisfied just sitting here for the rest of her life.*

No sooner had he imparted this message, he sat staring at his empty hands. He shot to his feet and began tossing worn cushions from the couch onto the floor. He looked past a candy bar wrapper, then a comb, to the sheen of a nickel he took for the skink's glistening scales. He was wrong. He jammed his fingers in the back crease and slid them to the corner. Nothing. Aghast, he whipped around towards Evette and saw her blank face as a fun-house mirror bending him all out of shape. He straightened himself, commanding Evette.

“Check. Check.”

He watched as, slow enough to sprout, she stood. He armed her aside and flung the cushions seeing only paper-thin lining underneath. Standing in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain, Reid knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood, a dot on a floor plan, like smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.

Hours later, the pair gave up and went to bed. Reid, alert to the slightest noise, catalogued the cracks and crevices a skink could hide until he accidentally fell asleep. Evette, doubtful that a baby lizard could survive loose in an apartment, fixated on her first sight of him still against the rock. She spied him again and again, as he grew denser, the grey and black stripes fresh as paint strokes drying. She traced his solid form on the rock in her mind's eye. He would be her compass through the night.

At 2:00 am, half-asleep, Evette stirred, the soft light from the tank pressing against her eye lids, creating a path to the couch. There was her bed, inviting, already laid out by a knowing hand. She sunk into the cushions, drifting into strangers' dreams.

At first, she felt the faint piercing of his claws as an itch that would pass. But the piercing persisted, so she brushed her hand in the direction of her thigh. When no relief came, she leaned forward. On her knee, the grey and black striped skink crouched before a curtain of haze. He stared up at her with opaque eyes, forcing her to look away. She turned back, hoping he fled, but when her head stopped, he was in the exact same place. He grew animate within her sight. She could feel his heart thumping, blood coursing, muscles constricting. Her own flesh looked different too. Arms and legs so thin, no more than skin-covered bone. Stomach so indented, the last breath sucked out long ago. She stared as he approached the hem of her t-shirt, dragging the many years he had left to live. Her vision widened, and she flinched at the size of her thigh, narrow enough for her hand to wrap around. She asked the universe but received no reply. *When had this stick figure replaced her?*

The urge rose to fling the skink across the room, to make him disappear, but, before she could lift her arm, the lizard bent to sniff her skin. He sniffed, along the flat surface of her thigh, interested in the non-tangible realities of her flesh, interested and unashamed. She too grew curious about the precise amalgamation of her scent. The skink gazed up at her, the tip of his blue tongue slipping through parted lips. His head lowered again, and Evette felt his blue tongue elongate as wet crystals bursting against her skin. She felt like she'd been kissed a thousand times, his kiss radiating past her extremities, reaching sun, moon, and stars. When the skink retracted his tongue and lengthened it again, she remembered what she was made of—98 pounds of flesh and more.

Evette slipped out of her t-shirt, pulling it over her head as if shedding the last layer of dead skin. She peered as he crawled across her pelvic bone towards her stomach, an empty bowl turned upright, leaving behind a luster-filled trail for her to follow. He stepped over her belly button, sparking a tingling upheaval that she steadied herself against while he finished the course. Towards her sunken chest, he inched, pausing to lick her sternum until it gleamed like a strain of pearls never worn. Soon he covered her entire body, every segment of bare flesh, enwrapping it in one beating glow. Before the light faded, she turned on her side, and holding herself, sunk further into sleep.

The sounds of banging and shuffling and scraping awoke Evette the next morning. She opened her eyes to the sight of Reid bent over a mass of tangled power cords. Scenes from the previous night flashed in her mind. Before sense could be made, Reid turned, "I need you to get up. To look for Simon."

Evette pulled the blanket over her shoulders without taking her eyes off him. He looked crazed. His red eyes pulsed; his wiry hair shot with electric currents; his hands shook as though invaded with alien life. Deflecting Reid's laser beam stare, the scenes returned. The skink crouching on her knee. Crawling up her thigh. She ran one hand over the path he travelled under the blanket. She paused, encircling her fleshless femur.

There is more to me.

Evette left for the bedroom. She found her clothes, aware of Reid's intensifying search for Simon. The contents of Reid's apartment, herself included, whirled around the point where the skink had disappeared. Buttoning her jeans, she resisted the living room. She couldn't spend one more minute surrounded by Reid and his things, not if she wanted room for herself. She took one step towards the hallway and didn't stop until she was outside the front door.

Reid heard the front door shut, lying on his side, peering underneath a drawer in his entertainment center. He paused, listening for movement, before deciding that she was gone. Evette never left without saying goodbye. He knew that something was wrong, but that's as far as he could think about the matter. He needed to find Simon. He looked at the items already checked—a wooden coin box, a pair of tennis shoes, a bag filled with old magazines. He picked up the coin box and threw it down on the floor. He picked up the tennis shoes and bag of old magazines. Down on the floor they went. He bounded over to the couch and, after doing a quick scan, began throwing pillows on the pile growing in the center of the room. With no reason to stop, he lunged towards his bookshelf and grabbed an armful of paperbacks. Down they went, along with a rolled-up *Star Wars* poster and stack of junk mail. Reid caught sight of the tank glowing bright, glowing steady. What a wonderful world. His forehead on the glass, he imagined his life filling the four panes of glass, drop by drop, until overflowing onto the floor.

The transformation of Reid's apartment into a section of the Australian countryside began with a potted fern bought on discount from Do It Your Way. When Evette did not show after work, he rose from the couch where he had been waiting and started walking in the opposite direction of Discount Drugs. He followed the route, unwavering, until it dead-ended at the entrance of the home improvement store. Stepping through the sliding glass doors, he believed he had helped create a destiny of sorts.

He set the plant in front of the living room windows and took a step back to admire the effect. He could almost see Simon crouching beneath withered leaves. He saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon. He saw Simon splayed atop the largest rock in the formation, his stubby limbs outstretched. Simon dozing in the full shade of a potted palm. Simon dragging his

baby spoon belly through a sand patch. He entered the kitchen and saw Simon lapping water from the edge of a wide bowl. He saw Simon everywhere. And, since Simon was already there, Reid needed to make him comfortable so he would stay.

Over the next few days, Reid made several more trips to Do It Your Way, counting each step he took away from Evette behind her cash register. He brought back eight potted plants, two bags of soil, one bag of sand, one bag of wood chips, three large and two medium stones, a box of plastic sheets, and four wooden beams. He almost dropped the bag of sand while crossing highway 75. He hoisted the rest on his hip or curled inside his arm while walking home.

Reid redid his apartment to his vision, creating a sand pit near the living room window, building a rock and log garden before the kitchen entryway, lining up plants along the baseboard. He stopped to make a trip to the pet store. Purchasing several heat lamps, artificial lights, and food and water bowls, he reduced his college savings to \$.94. He resumed his efforts with more earnest, dragging items Simon would not find in his native environment to the curb: his couch with Evette's spot flattened out, kitchen table and chairs, his twin bed. Within a few days, he finished the project and set about to live there with Simon. Just the two of them. One day he hoped that they might be roommates, brothers, lifelong friends. Believing Simon would pause and listen, Reid started to talk to Simon.

Filling Simon in on the details of his life, Reid talked openly to Simon, saying whatever came to mind. He imagined Simon's head tilted towards him, ear hole widening.

"Where were you born?"

"J-town."

"What about your family?"

"Parents, divorced, an okay little sister."

“What do you want to do with your life?”

This last question Simon posed in jest.

Reid’s answer: “Win the lottery.”

“Did I ever tell you about Mr. Barney?” Reid asked him, watching an elderly man cross the street. “In the neighborhood, us kids would see him walk back and forth to work every day, stooped shoulders, always frowning. We all said, ‘His wife died, or all his favorite things burned up in a fire.’ The possibilities were endless. One day he was heading towards us, someone whispered ‘Maybe he wound up alone and doesn’t know why.’ We huddled together as he passed, fear spread through us, then huddled closer.”

Awake in his sleeping bag that night, Reid felt a heaviness he couldn’t understand.

“What if I’m a twin separated at birth from my brother or sister? What if my parents are not my parents or what if they are and decided to keep me and not my twin?”

He imagined Simon, dressed in tails, somberly playing a violin.

“My missing twin,” he whispered, “my missing half.”

Loss brought Evette to mind, her sudden departure and lingering questions, but Reid focused on Simon, listening for the strokes of his violin.

“You can never go wrong with a grilled cheese sandwich.”

He stood with his hand on a frying pan the next afternoon, sun streaming through the kitchen window, “Every bite is gooey, soft, and crunchy. So delicious. When I first moved into this apartment, I made grilled cheese sandwiches the usual way—butter two slices of bread, stick a slice of cheese inside, and grilled it on the stove—but I’ve figured out other ways. Sometimes I

toast the bread in my toaster, add the cheese, and wrap it in foil. After five minutes, voila. Other times, I toast two slices of bread in the oven with cheese on top till they come out piping hot. Then I mash the pieces together and enjoy.

“So far, I’ve invented four ways to make a grilled cheese sandwich and told Evette about each one.” Reid continued, unable to stop, “I thought of asking her to make one together, but Evette and I don’t talk about food, at least not food she eats. It’s like she’s written a giant X across the topic and never bothered to explain why.”

Reid thought of Simon, recalling signs he noticed around the apartment: skin shedding stuck to bark, nail pairings stray on the floor, droppings buried in sand. The more he tried, the more he thought of Evette, and, in the end, he knew that Simon was out there listening and cared.

“At Discount Drugs. That’s where we met,” he said not wanting to go to bed. “She was standing outside, smoking her daily cigarette. She squinted at me, recognizing someone from her past but only saw a stranger. I smiled and walked inside.

“She was Evette, the girl who came around after work. I found her a little odd. The first time she took off her coat at my place. Rail thin. But I forgot about that. She never talked about it, and I never asked. Well, once, but she reached for her purse. Subject dropped, she stayed.

“We’d sit watching bowling or poker and talk. We liked comparing firsts: first concert, first plane ride, first job, first heart break, first realization that life was unfair. She willingly sat through all four seasons of *Mork and Mindy*, and after she suggested *Good Morning Vietnam* and *The Fisher King*, or maybe I did, but she agreed. When I became interested in Spock, she did too. We watched *Star Trek* episode 1 of season 2, the one where Spock returns home to get married, probably eleven times. At some point she stopped caring what we watched. I told her about the 1984 adaptation of *Dune*, and she just sat expressionless. The whole time we watched,

I was sitting next to the skeleton from my high school Biology class. We fucked after and I felt the sharp outline of her ribs as I came. It never had bothered me before.

“I miss feeling excited about what we were going to do next. I thought having an unusual pet would be good for us. That’s why I adopted you, Simon. But when I took you out of the tank, she didn’t even want to hold you.

“Maybe it has something to do with Evette’s problem, but, if you think about it, there are so many problems—war, famine, disease. Pollution, genocide, child abduction. Sometimes I think the world is overflowing with problems, one gigantic bucket too full of drops from a leaky faucet spreading across the floor.”

That morning, Reid stopped talking to Simon. In silence, he felt synchronous with his pet, their steps, stance, their breath, growing closer together, about to coincide. That afternoon, when he heard Simon rustling in the corner of the living room, he felt no surprise. He simply shut the front door and walked over to the spot he thought Simon might be. If not now, sometime soon. The fact that Simon had appeared meant he would do so again. To Reid, this prospect offered him, Simon, and Evette the chance for a spectacular do-over. The hope that Simon would reignite his relationship came back. Simon was saying, “Hey, man, it will go better this time. You, me, and Evette. Give it another try.”

He called when he knew she would be working and left a vague, hysterical message.

“Something happened,” he said, sounding disoriented, “come over, please.”

He hung up, resisting the urge to shriek, realizing how much faith he had put in Simon appearing at the opportune moment for Evette. After all, Simon was an animal, not a magician. He needed help. To draw him out of hiding, Reid decided to leave the florescent lights on all

night at full spectrum. When Evette arrived, he would still be active, and somewhere in the apartment on route towards a destination he alone knew.

He heard knocking and his legs carried him to the door. He didn't pause before opening or think about what he wanted to say. He was angry at her for knocking, she had erased all the times she entered without knocking, all the times she came slouching, plodding, and, once, fluttering through the front door. He wanted to remind her that she stopped knocking back in October, but, before he could say anything, she stood facing him.

“Come in. Come in.”

Her lips began to move as Reid stood struck by some change in her. She talked, and he scanned her pale face, looking down her blue and khaki uniform, trying to decipher the change.

“Reid,” she said from a distance “are you okay?”

Evette had gained weight. A pound, maybe a pound and a half. Not a lot, but something.

“Reid.”

“Yes,” he spat, steadying himself.

“Your message, I...” she stammered.

“Oh,” he replied, trying to rub the wrinkles out of his MC Escher t-shirt, “there's been a development I wanted you to know about.”

He fell silent and noticed her squinting at him. Her eyes widened, and she turned to look around the apartment. Reid followed her eyes, seeing the sandpit with mounds of sand strewn over its plastic borders, rocks toppled over in the rock and log garden, and plants shriveled along the baseboard. He looked back at her. I'm not the one with the problem. He needed to convince Evette of this too, so he grabbed her hand and led her to the kitchen where he heard Simon scampering that morning.

“I must have just missed him, but he’s alive. I’m certain.”

He bent and touched the rock where he suspected Simon crouched earlier.

Evette watched his fingers brush the rough surface and recalled when she first spotted Simon, already gazing back at her. She smiled slightly at the possibility that Simon was alive. Hearing Reid talk further about the signs he had seen, she started to believe it too. Simon breathing, crawling, sleeping so near, all this time. Then she recalled the last time she had seen Simon winding down her arm, stardust flying. She said goodbye as he disappeared, leaving a dark hole to fall back through to sleep. She glanced at Reid, standing wide-eyed, believing.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” she asked, broaching this possibility with him. He staggered, turning his head from side to side.

Reid knows Simon.

Reid and Evette faced one another, in the center of the living room, their feet pressing into the sandy surface.

“That serial shoplifter lives in this neighborhood, I think. Last week, I was taking out the trash and saw a kid strolling past, blond hair half covering his eyes, green book bag sagging. I wondered if he got past you that day,” he said.

Evette raised her eyebrows, and she almost told him of her recent encounter with the kid trying to steal a bottle of cologne. But she didn’t want to talk as they talked in the past. Lately, she thought more about the future, and told him of her promotion to Associate Cashier and the \$.15 pay bump.

“Moving up in the world,” Reid quipped.

“A regular Rockefeller.”

Drip, drop.

“We could recite the entire Spock wedding episode for entertainment?”

She looked at Reid until he grew uncomfortable, “I don’t think I want to.”

They sat beyond the cast of florescent lights near the tank. The silence all around threatened to solidify, fixing them in place. Reid started to pat his hand against his thigh then hers, the steady beats, growing faster, about to burst into a drum roll, but he stopped, suddenly, not liking the roundness of Evette’s thigh.

At an unknown hour, they heard creak, slide, tap, tap. Reid arrived first. He saw Simon crouched, triangular head bent, over a plate of tuna in the kitchen. Simon looked as if he had swallowed himself whole, swelling twice his size. Evette neared as Reid clutched Simon towards his chest. She leaned in, seeing his mid-section rising and falling, his tail wagging. Lifting her hand to the faucet, she let a bead of water form on her fingertip. She offered the water to Simon, joy winding through laughter at the flash of his blue tongue making the drop disappear. Reid tensed at the sound, ignoring the smile she wanted to share. She leaned in closer, and his shoulder rose, shutting her out of their circle.

“You came back.”

Hunched over, Reid began to pet Simon, stroking his glistening scales. He looked deep into familiar eyes, as Evette took a step back. He did not feel her moving away.

“It’s about time,” he whispered, wanting only his friend to hear.

Evette took another step back, forming a mental picture of the pair entwined together. She had memories with Reid and Simon from before, and no wish to stay for more pictures.

By the looks of things, Reid wanted Simon to himself for a while.

EDITOR'S BIO: *Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and an even worse English student – he is, easily more, a lot of nothing and everything. When not getting into trouble, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and finishes a Masters in Composition and Rhetoric in Lafayette, LA. His other short story work has also been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **The Scarf** appeared in Issue 5.*