

FADE to BLUE

By Moriah Hampton

THE EDITORS WRITE: *A young man obsessed with his vivarium and a 98 pound young woman with self esteem issues are the supporting actors in this a memorizing, iridescent disorientation in which the star is an exotic skink. The spell is cast and we are drawn, ever more deeply, as if down Alice's rabbit hole, into Reid and Evette's bizarre descent. Complicated, dimensional, dangerous and cool. The glint of gold, everywhere....star dust in our throats. Five stars. We are publishing two versions of **Fade to Blue**. This is the original submission we accepted. The other is guest editor Joey Cruse's edited version. We like them both equally and suggest you read each one carefully. The point we want to make here is that the writing experience is as much 'process' as finished work. A deconstructionist imperative always assumes a state of flux. The prose is brashly beautiful. Quote: Reid stood in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain. He knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood not as a dot on a floor plan but as smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.*

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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, which replicated the tropics with river rocks, dew green foliage, and splotched bark. She showed no signs of interest. He turned away, dissatisfied. She plopped down next to him, her purse straps loose at her feet.

They sat beside each other as if on different couches centered in different living rooms, until at last Evette opened her mouth to speak. Reid, still 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 it and waited as he sighed and sat up.

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

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Yeah,” he said.

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

But on this day, Reid felt something other than the typical “Why bother?” attitude he and Evette shared. Out of the corner of his eye, he studied Evette, trying to gauge if she felt anything like what he felt.

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. “I shook the sack and saw him tumble down to the bed.”

He expected her to rise and approach the tank. But Evette sat motionless. Something else for him, something more. Reid thought of the skink, probably 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? Then she sat up, faced him, and said, “I’m glad you got your lizard, Reid. I hope it’s what you want.”

Reid paused, taken aback, then he clutched her shoulder saying, “Of course, it’s what I want. 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. It stood self-contained, undisturbed by the spiraling arms of time. To the left, three grey rocks, assorted in 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 their finger-thin leaves to pointed tips, as Reid failed to foresee her bare bones disintegrating. Just then, Evette moved to the farthest end.

She neared the tank, after resisting the pull of the exotic habitat. She raised one palm to the glass then the other, feeling the urge 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 or something? Just then, she caught sight of the grey and black skink camouflaged against the side of the largest rock.

“There he is,” she whispered, almost too low for Reid to hear. But suddenly, her voice rose, accusingly: “He has no food.”

“It’s not time for him to eat,” was his curt response, and he reached in and grabbed his pet.

I’d give him food. She imagined the lizard nibbling bits from her hand and recalled the three times she refused food that day.

Drip drop.

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

“A skink’s diet is somewhat 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 could have said more about a skink’s diet, but at that moment, he wanted to play with his pet. He 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,” he called, following her with his eyes as she sat at 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. He lifted the lizard towards his face and peered into his earth-filled eyes. Just then, 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 after that Evette just 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 probably be satisfied just sitting here for the rest of her life.

But no sooner had he imparted this message then he sat starrng 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 to “Check. Check.” And he watched as she rose slow enough to sprout legs before she came to stand. He armed her aside and flung off the other cushions seeing only paper-thin lining underneath.

Reid stood in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain. He knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood not as a dot on a floor plan but as smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.

Hours later, after putting the contents of his 750 square foot apartment back in place, 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, Evette stirred towards the glow cast from the tank in the living room. Half-asleep, she felt the soft light pressing against her eye lids. She rose, catching sight of a light-filled path leading to the couch. There was her bed, inviting, as if 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 as if 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. When had this stick figure replaced her, she asked the universe, but received no reply.

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. Along the flat surface of her thigh, he sniffed, interested in the non-tangible realities of her flesh, interested and unashamed. She grew curious, too, 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 beheld his blue tongue elongate and felt it 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 because she could not do otherwise, 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. But before she could make sense of them, Reid turned and said, “I need you to get up, so I can look for Simon.” Evette pulled the blanket over her shoulders without taking her eyes off of him. He looked crazed. His red eyes pulsed; his wiry hair appeared shot through with electric currents; his hands shook as though invaded with alien life. Evette pulled the blanket to her chin, trying to deflect Reid’s laser beam stare. One blink, two, and Reid turned and became preoccupied with the power cords again.

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.

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

Reid heard the front door shut while 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. At that moment, he really needed to find Simon. He closed the drawer and got to his feet. He looked at the items he'd already checked—a wooden coin box, a pair of tennis shoes, a bag filled with old magazines. Again, he heard the sound of the front door shutting. 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 felt relieved. 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. As the last unopened envelope sailed to the floor, Reid caught sight of the tank glowing bright, glowing steady. He neared, peering into its lush and far-removed depths. What a wonderful world. Resting 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 he 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 into 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 its withered leaves. Glancing around the room, he saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon. He saw Simon splayed atop the largest rock in a rock 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 believed he needed to make him comfortable, so he would stay.

So over the next few days, Reid made several more trips to Do It Your Way, counting at first the steps he took away from Evette stationed behind her cash register. He brought back to his apartment 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. The bag of sand he almost dropped while crossing highway 75. All the rest he hoisted on his hip or tucked inside his curled arm while walking home.

He redid his apartment in near approximation to his vision, creating a sand pit near the living room window, building a rock and log garden before the kitchen entryway, lining up potted plants along the baseboard. He stopped to make a trip to the pet store. With the purchase

of several heat lamps, artificial lights, and food and water bowls, he reduced his college savings that he had earned to \$.94. He resumed his efforts with more earnestness, dragging to the curb those items Simon would not find in his native environment. 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. Not as host and guest. He held out hope that they might one day be roommates, brothers, lifelong friends. Reid even started to talk to Simon, believing, if he did, Simon would pause somewhere and listen.

"Didn't see that coming" Reid said, after stubbing his toe for the gazillionth time on the floor panel separating the hallway from the living room.

Later that day, Reid began filling Simon in on basic details of his life.

"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."

From then on, Reid talked openly to Simon, saying whatever came to mind. Simon, he imagined, with head tilted towards him, ear hole widening.

"Did I ever tell you about my neighbor back home, Mr. Barney?" Reid asked him one afternoon while watching an elderly man cross the street outside. "Us kids would see him trudging back and forth to work every day, with stooped shoulders, always frowning. 'Mr. Barney,' we all said, 'is so miserable. Something bad must have happened. Maybe his wife

died, or all his favorite things burned up in a fire.’ The possibilities were endless. Then one day when he was heading towards us, someone whispered ‘Maybe he wound up alone and doesn’t know why.’ Fear spread through us. We huddled together, as he passed, then huddled closer.”

That night, while lying awake in his sleeping bag, Reid felt a heaviness he couldn’t quite understand. Turning on his side, he mused, “What if I’m a twin who was 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 playing somberly a violin.

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

The loss of Reid’s twin brought Evette to mind, her sudden departure and other lingering questions, but Reid focused instead on Simon, listening out for the strokes of his violin.

The next afternoon, Reid declared, “You can never go wrong with a grilled cheese sandwich.” He stood with his hand on a frying pan, 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. I buttered two slices of bread, stuck a slice of cheese inside, and grilled it on the stove. But since, I’ve figured out other ways to prepare them. Sometimes I toast the bread in my toaster, add the cheese, and wrap it in foil. After five minutes, voila. It’s done. Other times, I toast two slices of bread in the oven with a slice of cheese on top till they come out piping hot. Then I mash the pieces together and enjoy.

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

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

“At Discount Drugs. That’s where we met,” he said the next night, not wanting to go to bed. “She was standing outside, smoking her one daily cigarette. She squinted at me as though about to recognize someone from her past but then saw me for a stranger. I smiled and walked inside.

“No, she never reminded me of someone from my past. 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 quickly forgot about that. She never talked about it, and I never asked. Well, I did once, and she reached for her purse. I dropped the subject, and she stayed.

“We did have a lot of fun at first. 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. Later, she willingly sat through all four seasons of *Mork and Mindy*. She even suggested we watch some of Robin Williams’ films like *Good Morning Vietnam* and *The Fisher King* or maybe I did, and she agreed. And when I became interested in Spock. She did too. We watched *Star Trek* episode 1 of season 2, which portrays Spock returning to his home planet to wed, probably eleven times. But at some point she stopped caring what we watched. I remember telling her about the 1984 film adaptation of *Dune*, and she just sat there expressionless. The whole time we watched it I felt like I was sitting next to the skeleton from my high school Biology class. After, we fucked, and I remember feeling the sharp outline of her ribs as I came. It never really bothered me before.

“It is better to have some company than none, but I miss how things were in the beginning. I miss feeling excited about what we were going to do next. That’s why I adopted you, Simon. I thought having an unusual pet would be good for us. But when I took you out of the tank that time she didn’t even want to hold you.

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

That morning, Reid stopped talking to Simon. In silence, he felt more in synchrony with his pet, their steps, stance, even 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 he was opening and walked over to the spot where 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. All the hope he originally felt that Simon would reignite his relationship came back. It was like Simon was saying, “Hey man. It will go better this time. You, me, and Evette. Give it another try.”

So he called when he knew she would be working and left a vague, slightly hysterical message. “Something happened,” he said, sounding disoriented and finished with “Come over, please,” as though resisting the urge to shriek. He hung up, realizing how much faith he had put in Simon to appear at the opportune moment during Evette’s visit. Simon was an animal after all, not a magician. He needed help coming out. It was up to Reid to draw him out of hiding. So he decided to leave the florescent lights on all night at full spectrum. Whenever Evette

arrived, he would still be active, somewhere in the apartment on route towards a destination he alone knew.

Later, he heard knocking and felt his legs carrying him to the door. He didn't pause before opening it or think about what he wanted to say. He simply flung it open and found Evette standing there.

"Come in. Come in," he told her, realizing at that moment that he was angry at her for knocking, since it felt like 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.

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

"Reid," he heard her saying from a distance. "Are you okay?" and at that moment he knew Evette had gained weight. Not a lot, but something. A pound, maybe a pound and a half.

"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, and continued, "There's been a development I wanted you to know about." He told her about Simon's reappearance that afternoon, ending with "I never once doubted him."

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 potted plants shriveled along the baseboard. He looked back at her. She was squinting even harder at him. 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 spot near 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 before the rock in Reid's vivarium. 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. But then she recalled the last time she had seen Simon winding down her arm, stardust flying. She said goodbye then, as he disappeared, leaving a dark hole for her to fall back through to sleep. She glanced at Reid, who stood wide-eyed, believing.

"What if he doesn't come back?" she asked, wanting to broach this possibility with him. He staggered, turning his head from side to side. This is not how things turn out. Reid knows Simon.

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

“The 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, so she told him of her promotion to Associate Cashier and \$.15 pay bump.

“Moving up in the world,” Reid quipped.

“I’m a regular Rockefeller.”

Drip drop.

Later, they stood staring at the outline on the wall where the TV once hung. He turned towards her as if struck with an idea. “We could recite the entire Spock wedding episode for entertainment?” She looked at Reid until he grew slightly uncomfortable and said, “I don’t think I want to.”

Near the tank, they sat just beyond the cast of florescent light. 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. Suddenly he stopped, 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. He barely recognized his pet.

Simon looked as if he had swallowed himself whole, swelling to 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 finger tip. She offered it to Simon, joy winding through her laughter at the flash of his blue tongue making it disappear. Reid tensed at the sound of it, ignoring the smile she wanted to share. She leaned in closer, as his shoulder rose, shutting her out of their circle. You came back. Hunched over, he began to pet Simon, stroking his glistening scales. He looked deep into his familiar eyes, as Evette took a step back, then another. 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 together, entwined. She had no wish to be in the picture. She had memories with Reid and with Simon from before. And she had no wish to stay for more pictures. By the looks of things, Reid would want Simon all to himself for a while.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Many years ago, I spent an evening in the apartment of a pair of reptile keepers. Along every wall in the living and dining rooms lived reptiles of various sorts in tanks. Upon stepping into their apartment, I felt keenly aware of the strange life that surrounded me. I continued to feel this strangeness while sitting in a recliner bathed in the florescent glow from the tanks. That experience inspired me to write “Fade to Blue.” The story also reflects my current fascination with plot. I wanted to push the story’s plot in unexpected directions, perhaps to express some of the strangeness I originally felt. Recent readings of Aimee Bender’s and Italo Calvino’s work influenced this story as well.*

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