

GOODBYE, MOONFLOWER, Novel Excerpt

By Connor de Bruler

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WHY WE LIKE IT: *Every writer has different strengths and in the case of Connor de Bruler, it's dialogue. In this excerpt from his forthcoming novel Goodbye, Moonflower, the conversation between Lemmie and Lucinda is so powerfully charged with presence and authenticity as to make their reality unquestionable. And though it sounds so 'real' it is far removed, as the best dialogue in fiction always is, from an actual transcription of speech. Done correctly, as it is here, dialogue melds organically with descriptive prose, in a unity of style. This young American author hails from the Deep South and he writes in the full glory of that rich tradition with all its cloistered angst and stygian festerings. He describes the novel as 'Psychedelic noir...kind of a dark tale on magical realism'. Quote: 'She pressed down the gas pedal, charging toward the four-way near the Bi-lo where so many of her dreams took place and the old folk's home that had stood there since the turn of the last century.'*

Goodbye, Moonflower
by Connor de Bruler

I'll re-emerge, defeated, from the valley; you don't want me to go where you go, so I go where you don't want me to. It's only afternoon, there's a lot ahead. There won't be any mail downstairs. Turning, I spit in the lock and the knob turns.

— Frank O' Hara

Szomorú vasárnap száz fehér virággal
Vártalak kedvesem templomi imával

— László Jávör

1.

She was the first down by sunup, peeling open the duvet cover to throw herself into the cold-washed cocoon where her taut calves and blistered fingers could atrophy at her long-awaited leisure. Her toes caressed the rippled fabric—first chilled, then cool, then warm—as she drifted into sleep. The cat, curled at the end of the bed, oblivious to her fatigue, forgetful of her nighttime absence, widened her crinkled palette to yawn, her mouth nearly void of moisture like the sharp mandible of some giant insect. They both slept as the sun rose and the world outside screeched and squealed with numb life.

Beyond her walls, past the edge of the foliage-darkened lane, the roads she had only known as empty strips of asphalt would fill with traffic. Garbage trucks clogged the neighborhoods, holding back school-bound SUVs. The caffeinated drivers of sedans queued up along I-85, headed for the business parks. Empty pickups, ready for the hay bales and spools of chicken wire, plowed through iron-rich clay near the fresh sites of half-built homes.

As the dew evaporated from the grass, Lemmie Beaumont dreamed of shopping carts and the daycare center at St. James Episcopal Church, the church on Paris Mountain where her mother had sent her as a child. It was the only church that offered complimentary preschool for parishioners. Her mother, a master of juggling two jobs, gave up her Sunday afternoons to worship with a droll, white congregation just so her daughter had someplace to go during the day. Her daughter was safe with these nice, white children. Picked on perhaps. Ostracized maybe. But she was safe.

The dream was vivid. She could smell Mrs. Springfield's lilac perfume mingling with the odor of crayons and blackboard chalk in the airless cavern of the old church basement. She walked out to the street alone where her mother picked her up late, always late. That's when they got to go to Bi-Lo, and she could ride in the shopping cart. It was the closest thing she had to a carousel. She could feel the warm plastic handle of the sun-baked cart and the Southern heat belittling her presence. Her mother drifted away from her as the cart where she sat glided across the weedy lot. Her myoclonic twitches manifested as the rattle of the cart's uneven wheels against the grit. She reached out for her mother, then grasped for the side mirrors of idle cars. Gaining momentum, she screamed as the cart dropped into the gulch near the railroad tracks and, with a violent hypnic jerk, she awoke in her bed. A cold burst of adrenaline pulsed through her veins. Her alarm of choice, the opening chords of Nora Jones' *Sunrise*, played through the cell phone a few seconds later. She winced and turned off the alarm. The subdued light of the evening poured through the window, forming a warped trapezoid on the floor. She had been asleep for almost nine hours. Lemmie walked toward the bathroom with a full bladder, staggering as she adjusted her body, once again, to an upright existence. She had learned to walk twice: once as a baby and once after the shrapnel blast. She rolled down her heart-pattern panties and sat on the cold porcelain seat. Urine babbled into the toilet like a garden-hose jet stream cleaning the soil from a terracotta pot. She could see the dying sun through the tiny window above the shower and the gnarled elm which sat in the square patch of land behind her home. Some might have called it a backyard, but she didn't.

Thyme pushed the cracked door open with her paw, rubbing the side of her face on the alabaster frame, then jumped onto the counter to sit inside the dry sink bowl.

“Are you hungry, you little fucker?”

Thyme sprang up from the sink bowl and placed a paw on Lemmie's naked shoulder.

“What do you want? You want to be pet?”

The cat meowed.

She scratched the cat behind the ears, then stood up to flush the toilet. The cat's reptilian eyes expanded as she stared at the swirling yellow water. The tank roared. Lemmie walked down the hallway and threw on a long pink t-shirt from the clean hamper above the washing machine alcove, eventually making her way into the cool air of the kitchenette. The countertops had just been replaced with dark-blue tile, which dampened the harsh fluorescent lights overhead. She set the kettle on the slowly reddening stove-top coil before reaching beneath the sink for the cat food. Thyme watched her from the top of the refrigerator as she poured a single scoop of the dry food into the metal dish and, once Lemmie had returned to the main kitchen, bounded onto the eggshell linoleum to scarf down as much as she could, exposing her fangs in short, vicious chomps. Lemmie poured a glass of water from the sink and squeezed a lemon wedge above it until the mixture was cloudy. She downed it in one swallow with a large capsule of krill oil and 40mg of Prozac.

The clock on the microwave read 5:30 pm. The analog clock above the stove was positioned at forty-five minutes past five. She glanced at her smartphone on the counter. It said 5:43 pm. Of course, to her body,

it was nearly six o'clock in the morning. The night shift would start soon. Her preferred dispatcher, Anoosh Hakim, would take the helm tonight. She had worked with him since her apprenticeship. He was soft spoken and professional. No humor. No stuttering. No mistakes. A shift with Anoosh was always smoother, faster. She looked out the window above the tile countertop as she poured the boiling water over the bamboo coffee filter. It was early spring, which meant her Ford was covered in bright green pollen as if someone had just towed the vehicle from a scum-filled pond and left it out to dry. She'd have to hose it down before she departed for the night. She bought her Transit Connect from a dealership on the Motor Mile. It looked like a French ambulance; a smaller, sleeker way to get around the city and the neighboring counties, in which she also happened to work. She sipped her coffee and glanced at the front tires. Perhaps she had missed something. Lemmie had driven over a possum the night before. The rat-faced marsupial had scuttled out from under the kudzu, attempting to cross Aberdeen Avenue to the public golf course where the trash cans were full of sliced sandwich crusts and ice-cream bar wrappers dripping with puddles of pure sugar and calcium. Just before his little dream could be achieved, he was crushed under her careening tire.

During the day, she watched out for squirrels, rabbits, stray cats, and lumbering dogs, especially near the suburbs. At night, raccoons and coyotes infiltrated the back roads near the state and the surrounding trailer courts, their glowing eyes hovering over trash can lids, their howls echoing in the distance. A flash of gray and black stripes might pass before her headlights. Possums, however, were rare. She had only seen one once before when she first moved into the house on Ticonderoga Lane. She had been startled awake by Thyme's agonized shrieks. She had never heard vocalizations this low from Thyme before. Was she wounded? She found the cat pawing at the glass doors to the backyard. Her spiked fur added an extra three pounds to her appearance. On opposite end of the glass, a ragged possum crawled along the bare concrete slab of her patio. It was the first thing that came to her mind after feeling the suspension rattle as if she had driven over a speed bump. After the bump, she frowned, looked into her rear view mirror out of habit knowing she would see nothing in the darkness, and pulled onto the shoulder. She got out and shined a light on the tires. There was nothing stuck in the tread but grit. She knelt down and checked the suspension. Everything checked out, no fur or crushed bones wedged inside the engine filling the car with the stench of death.

When she was first starting out, she drove from job to job in a pattering, oil-burning, gas-wasting Chevy Astro that she had inherited from her mentor Lucinda. Obama's Cash for Clunkers and a few months of good business had changed that, and now she was cruising through the boulevards and backways in a European Ford. In these parts, nobody liked to see a Locksmith pull up to a house with a beat-up Toyota, or any other Japanese type.

Lemmie sipped her coffee and ate an oatmeal bar from the pantry while watching as Thyme scarfed down her dinner. When she was finished, the tuxedoed cat smacked her jaws and waddled away like a penguin toward the darkened living room to sleep for another hour before returning to her aggravating and precocious lifestyle.

She took her coffee and phone to the garage and closed the thick door behind her. The Cyclops lock stand was still loaded with the practice cylinder from last night. She sat down at her work desk and took a hot gulp of coffee, then flipped through the touchpad to find the song she had been listening to that morning: Charles Mingus' *Myself When I'm Real*. She paused the song and looked for something harder, something raw. *Moanin'* was good. The saxophone blazed through the notes like an oxyacetylene torch. Mingus was the underdog of the jazz world and, like most underdogs, he was probably better than the superstars. She never understood why jazz aficionados preferred the egotistical minimalism of Miles Davis and the precarious, risky, grandeur of John Coltrane over the sheer perfection Charles Mingus, who could present opulence without pretense and economy without restraint.

The garage had become her workshop where she kept her desk propped against the wall of keys. Beside it, she stashed her only family heirloom: a hollow cello case her grandfather had used for bootlegging, even after prohibition ended. She had filled it with more than fifty locks, all of which she'd learned to pick expertly. There were three car doors mounted to sawhorses near the garage door where she practiced

with her lockout tools. She spent her mornings and evenings in the workshop, surrounded by music and the scent of polished metal.

She raked the pins and started working the cylinder. There was time to spare.

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“My father used to tell me this story, like, once every year or so, a story about his father and how he'd killed a Catholic priest in his youth. If you know anything about Honduras, you'd know there are a lot of Protestants, more than in other Latin American countries. My family was part of the Apostolic Network of Honduras. Why my grandfather even knew a Catholic priest from the Yoro diocese, I'll never know. According to my father, my grandfather shot this old priest in the face at point blank. My grandpa, this little *abuelito* type, was dressed all the time in a vest and a tie even in the heat, even in the humidity. He was kind too. Always had chocolates stuffed in his pockets for me. Always had advice. His right wrist was crooked, kind of warped you know. Apparently, he had broken it when he shot the priest. He shot him with an old rifle. One hand. Thing went off and broke his wrist from the kickback. The priest's head split in two. There was blood all over the altar. The nuns wouldn't go near it. They paid a little girl and her mother at the end of the street to clean it up. I think about them, squeezing those rags into the bowls of soapy water, mopping up that 'holy' man's blood.”

Lemmie kept both hands on the wheel, paying as much attention to the road as she could.

“Why?” she asked.

“It's just something that stuck with me, part of my family's bizarre life.”

“No, why did your grandfather kill him?”

Lucinda paused, then laughed.

“I don't know,” she said. “No one ever said why and I never asked.”

“How long was he in jail for it?”

“He never spent a day of his life in jail.”

There was no one else on the road. Bits of tinted glass from the shattered back window shook loose as she sped over a manhole cover. She cruised past the synagogue and the Vietnamese church, the Meyer Center for disabled children and the dry cleaners beside the sketchy pharmacy with the blinking neon Rx sign in the grimy window. It seemed that the usual landmarks remained in this afterlife. It was odd that so much had changed and yet crumbling buildings and piles of garbage were unchanged. She pressed down the gas pedal, charging toward the four-way near the Bi-lo where so many of her dreams took place and the old folk's home that had stood there since the turn of the last century.

White light filled the intersection as if she were driving into the path of an oncoming train. She swerved, galloping over the raised median, then slammed hard on the brake. A terrifying squeal from the suspension; a hundred and eighty degree turn, facing the opposing vehicle's headlights; the scent of burned rubber. The remainder of the smashed window glass lay across the tire marks freshly peeled from the Hankook tread.

A red GMC pickup, revving its engine, backed up to regain momentum.

Lemmie could see a dark cage welded to the front of the grill with three foot-long lengths of girder assembled vertically between the nearly blinding headlights. She sped forward before the pickup could ram into her Ford, scraping its side. She lost her left mirror.

“Who the fuck is this?”

Lemmie barreled down the road, weaving between lanes. She glanced at Lucinda. Her expression was stoic, unsurprised.

“I'm sorry, Lemmie.”

“Yeah? Anything you wanna tell me now?”

“Obita set us up.”

“No shit,” she said, struggling to keep the steering wheel straight. Something had gone wrong with the suspension.

The faded sign of the Oakdale Motel passed by on the right. She strained to keep the Ford from veering into the guard rail as they sped up the bridge. The slaughterhouse emerged from the canopy. The red pickup's headlights filled the European Ford as it crashed into them. The airbags deployed. Her own headlights were crushed into speckled, reflective dust. The hood folded over the side of the bridge.

They were pinned to the seats from the pressure of the airbags.

Lucinda's nose had broken, crushed flat by the airbag. Blood drenched her mouth and chin.

A bullet pierced the windshield.

It was cracked but not shattered.

Lucinda's airbag deflated, allowing her to finally gasp. She had been grazed in the arm. Blood spread across the sleeve of her coat.

A man in a plaid shirt, his face masked by the brim of a Stetson, jerked open the passenger door.

Lucinda blocked his wrist with a firm grip, keeping the black gun in his hand aimed at the roof.

They struggled.

She told Lemmie to run.

The redneck overpowered her and shot her twice in the chest. He ripped off her prosthesis and fished the hashish out of her inner pocket.

Lemmie took the opportunity to roll out of the car and run across the bridge.

A small Fiat with blue racing stripes sped up the bridge.

She hesitated for a moment, noticing it in her periphery.

A gunshot sounded.

She caught a bead in the shoulder. Her right arm was paralyzed in a searing pain as if her blood were hot enough to poach her skin from the inside out. She crawled across the asphalt.

Another shot rebounded off the concrete barrier at the edge of the bridge.

She hurtled herself over the side.

The sharp knots and hardened vines of a wisteria broke her fall, shredding her clothes, bruising and cutting her already mangled body. She landed hard on a flat stretch of desiccated earth, then dragged herself into the dark tunnel below the bridge.

More shots sounded. It didn't make sense. They weren't shooting over the edge of the bridge.

She lay on her side, nauseous from the pain.

Welcome to paradise, she thought.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this novel from the spring to the winter of 2015. It's hard to say whether or not I was the same person then. Two major New York literary agencies were interested in my pitch, but right after sending them the manuscript, their doors slammed in my face. I wrote the scenes in the morning before my grocery clerk job while my significant other kept sleeping. The novel became my dream journal. Every loose image from the night before was worked into the narrative. I based the character off the information I got from a locksmith who helped me get into my car twice (I often left the keys in the ignition). There's a darkness and an irreverence there that I didn't attempt or plan for, and I'm happy with this book. It should be available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble from Montag Press next month.*

BIO: *Connor de Bruler lives in Columbia, South Carolina. He is 29 years old. He has been published in FRESH, The Rambler, Litbreak, The Horror Library Vol. 6, Flyover Country, and Pulp Metal Magazine. He is the author of "Chokecherry" published in Fleas on the Dog, Issue 3 (fiction) and the upcoming novel "Goodbye, Moonflower."*