

DRAGON LADY

Included in this excerpt are the first stories from each of the five novellas-in-flash featured in MY VERY END OF THE UNIVERSE: BETTY SUPERMAN by Tiff Holland, HERE, WHERE WE LIVE, by Meg Pokrass, SHAMPOO HORNS by Aaron Teel, BELL AND BARGAIN by Margaret Patton Chapman, and THE FAMILY DOGS by Chris Bower. Want to read the rest of each novella? Buy the print book at www.rosemetalpress.com or purchase the e-book for your e-reader!

WHAT SHE WEARS: SWEATERS, tight over missile-silo brassieres. Pink. Yellow. Two pairs of support hose and open-toed shoes, even in winter. Estée Lauder perfume. Frills. Too much hairspray on her cotton candy hair. Make-up, every minute she is awake. False teeth. She had her real ones pulled when she was twenty. All of them. They were crooked. Then she tore up all the pictures of herself, all the sweater-girl pictures of herself in poodle skirts, smiling with her own teeth. Sometimes, at work, she wears a smock covered in little pieces of hair. Sometimes the hair sticks to her, her arms and neck and face. Sometimes it takes root, grows.

What she says: you look like a boy. Chest out! You read too much. Just a minute, can't you see I'm on the phone? All girls who play sports are lesbians. Football players are a bunch of fanny patters. Oh, sit on my lap, you know you want to: you're Mommy's little girl. Don't frown, you'll get wrinkles. You could be beautiful if you wanted to. I wish I'd never had you heathens. Your father? He's in there, lying down, wishing he was dead. He wants to kill himself. Suicide, get it? It's our fault. He hates us. Don't make me hit you. Go to the store, here's a note, get me two packs of Pall Mall. Marlboro. Merit. Give me a kiss, you'll be sorry if I die during the night. Then you'll miss your mother.

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What she calls my friends: losers, lesbians, perverts. What she calls us: heathens, knot-heads, hair-brains, you damn kids. Crazy-makers. Ingrates. Little... She gives us all new names: Applejack for the brother who doesn't stop eating; Neil Armstrong for the smaller, thin and pale; Milquetoast for my father. I'm Milan. She makes us have tea parties, scoop jam out of tiny jars onto overdone toast, make small talk about our imaginary lives.

What she likes: loud music. She turns on my Goodwill stereo early in the morning and dances around, telling me *Rise and shine*, while she twists the volume: up, up, up. She likes to talk on the phone. Do her nails. She thinks the firemen at the station across the street are watching her, making fun of her. Candy bars. Every night she gets up at two or three a.m. and eats a Milky Way, drinks a Coke. I listen. Once she invited me down, too. I wait.

What she does: with switches, Hot Wheels tracks, hair-brushes, shoes—once with a coffee cup. She cries, every day for months, then she stops. She reads us German folk tales. The little boy doesn't wash his hair and small animals live in it. Another boy sucks his thumbs and the great tall tailor comes and cuts them off. She gets religion, drags us, walking through mud puddles, to church on Sunday mornings. She takes up crafts. We make toilet paper drums with felt and glitter for the Christmas tree. We string yarn through burlap sacks, glue macaroni to boards, we shellac at the kitchen table. She goes back to work, leaves us with him. He takes us to McDonald's for lunch, puts the phone in the

freezer in case she calls. When someone calls for me, she tells him, tells her, I'm not there. She asks my first boyfriend if I wouldn't be pretty if I gussied up. I hit her back. She asks another boyfriend if he's gay. She asks if I'm a lesbian. She walks in on me in the bathroom and accuses me of masturbating. She smokes. She gets a crush on a local politician. When Dad finally leaves, she tells me it's my fault.

How she is now: she wonders why we aren't close, like we used to be. I tell her we never were, not for a minute. When I try to kill myself, she asks, *How could you do this to me?* She still kisses me, once on each cheek, and rubs the lipstick in. She denies the book of German folk tales. She tells me I need to adopt a baby, be a foster mother, get rid of those stinking dogs. She tells me to put my chest out. Asks, *Do you still love your husband? Really?* She makes me ask my brother if he's gay. He tells me he's not. A few months later, he brings his boyfriend by. She is jealous of my father. You've made him into a saint since he died, she tells me, both of you. She has emphysema, quits smoking. She coughs so hard she wets herself, so hard I know she's going to die and I feel ten again, sitting outside her bedroom door listening to her sleep because she has threatened to die in the night. She ignores me, me breathing each breath with her. She pushes away the napkin I pass across the table. When she recovers, she sucks on a fake cigarette, hard. She rubs it in ash between inhalations. She points it at me across the kitchen table, and I lean back, away from her, in my chair.

HERE, WHERE WE LIVE

I THINK ABOUT HOW BREASTS are meant to be life-giving forces while peeling oranges at night in Nana's front yard—now our front yard. Since Mom's mastectomy, I miss Pittsburgh more than I did before. People there had character.

At nearly sixteen, my breasts have finally sprouted, yet I feel afraid to touch them. Mom says her lump was the size of a small loquat when she found it. She told me this while we were picking up rotten fruit in the yard.

The yard is full of fruit trees: orange, tangelo, and loquat.

"All of this food just going to waste kills me," Mom says. Most of the fruit hangs on the branches half-eaten by birds.

We moved out West a few years ago, after Nana left us her falling-apart house that Mom grew up in. The house used to be pretty nice, but since nobody has taken care of it in what looks like forever, it has become depressing. Relatives thought it would be good for us to move and start over. Dad died working on a hotel restoration project in Pittsburgh and there is too much of him there.

Back East, people were far less attractive but colorful. Some of them were even fat. Here in Santa Barbara people appear bland and predictable as the weather—skinny and blond, walking around in beachwear. Girls with billboard

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eyes gather at the new mall on State Street, but you can't tell them apart.

"Gotta love living in Perfectland!" Mom says.

SEE YA LATER

WHEN I WANDER INTO THE GARAGE my eyes find Dad's clear plastic bins full of shirts, stacked in a crooked row. They sit next to a few clear boxes full of Mom's old plays and playbills.

I recognize one of Dad's ratty t-shirts, can just see the outline of a wrinkled dog's face pressed into the side of a bin. Mom used to tease him about how he grew so attached to clothes that he wore them until they shredded. I stand by the rows of boxes, saying in my head what Dad used to say to me every time he left for work, and trying not to think about the time he said it but didn't come home again, three years ago now, when I was twelve and almost as tall as I am now. The doctor says I'm done growing.

I say it three times now to make sure he knows I haven't forgotten:

See you later, Abby-gator . . . see you later, Abby-gator. . . see you later, Abby-gator.

Dad fixed old falling apart homes and buildings, so I imagine him plumping up the squashed-in parts of our ceiling, filling in the cracks around the windows.

Mom's boyfriend, Daniel, is no good at fixing stuff. His cologne swells up inside our living room, stinking like the bathroom in a gas station mini-mart, so I open the

SHAMPOO HORNS

“THE DEVIL’S BRAND IS ON YOUR BONES,” Dad says, pausing by the bathroom door with a bottle of Shiner and a rolled-up newspaper.

“Don’t you listen to that,” my mother whispers, and pours a red plastic cup full of bathwater over my head. “You’ve been washed in the blood of the Lamb.”

Two brown girls in too-big t-shirts and white roller skates with white laces spin in circles around me every night in the street outside our trailer, and I stole one of my mother’s rings to give to Lupe, the younger one, because I love her and I thought she would like it. My mother and Jesus have thoroughly forgiven me.

“My little Casanova,” she says, and I feel her nails on my scalp, her breath on my neck. I smell the cafeteria grease that lingers on her clothes and hair and skin. The blood in the water is from a cut I took from a steel burr on a chain-link fence I leaped over, running home, after Lupe told me her mother gave the ring back to mine because it was too nice. Outside there are broken televisions and busted toilets, pink flamingos with missing heads.

My best friend Tater Tot lives two trailers down with his mother who is drunk all the time, and sad. Tater’s small for

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his age, has a terrible lisp, and wears a blonde chili-bowl haircut that bounces up and down when he runs. My half-brother Clay is sixteen. He's rebellious and mean and I know I will never be as cool as him. Gas Pedal is a game we play where he holds my ankles and crushes my balls with his feet. Our dad, perpetually sunburned with his sports page and beer, mutters "dad-gums," "gall-dangs" and "dag-nabbits" at no one in particular. Tina is the sexy teenage babysitter in tight stonewashed jean shorts and neon green halter-tops who made me ramen-wiener stew, got herself knocked up and had to quit school, and I know no other woman will ever compare. Shep Milton owns the park and lives in the biggest trailer, a double-wide painted pink with bright white security lights attached that come on if you get too close. A family of animals cut from stone makes its home in his yard, placed there and cared for by Mrs. Milton, who always wears a nightgown and never goes anywhere further than the juniper bushes that mark the edge of their lot. Shep wears jogging pants that whistle when he walks and his belly is big but hard as a rock. He runs a fireworks stand in the summer and sometimes secretly sleeps with Tater's mother. Buster is the stray husky Dad feeds from his own plate and lets lick the salt from his sun-blistered face. I'm the twelve-year-old boy sitting naked in the bath, happy to have his mother washing his heaps of curly red hair, twisting it into shampoo horns and laughing.

We lived for many years in a rented trailer in Galveston, facing the sea, but Dad saved enough through hard work

and sweat to buy this ready-made trailer and park it on a densely treed lot in a mobile home park in Seaview, Texas, a place nowhere near the sea that smells always of slaughtered cattle and manure and rendered fat from the meatpacking and processing plant that sits just upwind and blots out the sun with great white plumes of smoke. "The cloud factory," Dad sometimes calls it, but I know better. Seaview exists mainly in the peripheral vision or rearview mirrors of folks passing through on their way to Corpus Christi or Padre Island or someplace altogether better.

BIRTH

ON THE DAY OF HER BIRTH, she opened her mouth and instead of a cry or a gurgle or a precocious giggle, she spoke her name. It was the first mystery of her life, this self-naming, in September of 1884. Her father would not have liked the name she gave herself, but her father was not there; he'd left Chicago for Montana to pound the line through. Her mother was alone with two sons, alone to give birth with the help of female neighbors in the back bedroom of the squat brick house, in a neighborhood of dark and crowded bunched-up two-flats on the south side of the city.

The mother, on her own, intended to give the child one of the names agreed on by her absent common-law husband. A boy was to be Arthur, after the mother's father, having already passed on the father's family names to two sons. For a girl, the mother favored Fanny, the name of her own mother, but the father wished for the more modern sounding Dorothy, hoping someday to call her Dotty, a name that bespoke the promise of the next century, with its ticks and tacks, its coded electric signals. Dots and dashes and lines drove through.

The labor was hard. The mother thought that births got easier as you had more, and her second boy had taken less

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time than the first. But the girl was slow in coming. In the close air of the big room on the ground floor, curtains closed, stove lit for water, the mother sweat and bled and shat. Her water broke in the parlor, soaking her dress, her underthings, and the rough carpet with fluid, sweet and salty smelling. Holding her belly to relieve the pressure between her legs and on her unnamable inner parts, she walked to the front door and called out to the first person she saw, a five-year-old girl named Annie, to get the women who dealt with these things, and say that the baby was on its way.

When the girl was born, late and fat, when her chubby shoulders were through by pushing and the rest of her was pulled swiftly out and the cord cut and the afterbirth burnt in the fire and the sheets pulled off and with the newly stained chenille cover put in a tub out back to be washed, without asking, by the neighbors, and new sheets and blanket put on the still damp bed and the little girl wrapped up in a soft cloth diaper and the little crochet hat that the mother had made located and placed on her bald head, the baby took to tit and drank. The feeding was easier with the third child than the first two because her nipples had swollen and elongated and the thick liquid of her first milk passed easily through the mother's skin.

After the birth and her first meal, in the calm of the dawn of her first day, with her little head still funny shaped from coming out and laying on her mama's bosom, the baby said her name, clear and ringing as the word itself.

"Bell," she said.

The neighbor women had left to their own homes and the boys were off with an old woman who gave them candy and put a poultice on Abe's face, and so the mother was the only one who heard. Alone, the mother considered what her infant had just done, her breath lifting the child on her chest, one hand under the baby's bottom and one laid gently on her neck.

She considered and simply, softly, and without question said "Bell."

"Bell," said Bell, the tip of her new tongue flicking the dental "L" off of her toothless gums.

"Yes," said her mother, but she wondered.

The bells of the new day sounded, and the mother held Bell to her and the newness of the baby girl, flesh loose on small, soft bones, put a sweet pressure on her heart.

MOM

IT WAS A CLOUDY DAY IN EARLY APRIL, and Mom was swimming in Lake Michigan. She was neck deep flapping her arms in pain, not because it was early April and snowing, and not because her body was numb and blue, and not because she had fallen off a boat or been discarded in either a cruel practical joke or an elaborate ransom drop-off.

No, Mom was out there screaming because she had just begun giving birth to me.

Dad and my brother Matt were watching her from the beach and, just like that Stephen Crane story, they waved back at her. Even our dog, Peggy, showed more concern. She ran onto the dark sand and barked at Mom before the tide rushed over her paws and sent her cowering back to the beach towels.

Inside, inside my mom, I heard those tiny barks, and I remember asking, “What are those beautiful sounds?”

Mom swam toward the beach, her arms making huge splashes.

Dad laughed and said, “Look at that, Matt. That’s your mother for life. What do you think about that, smart guy?”

Matt looked down at his feet and imagined what would happen if they suddenly became giant crabs. He wondered

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if he would have enough control over them to claw my dad apart, or if they would simply scurry down a little hole and suck the rest of his body after them. Then he wondered if they even had crabs like that around here, and by the time he was done wondering and Dad was done laughing, my mother was already on the beach, lying on the cold sand panting, pushing me out.

During my birth Mom swore a lot, but not like in the movies. She swore a lot even when she wasn't giving birth. She used to swear at me when I did bad things and also when I did good things. When she said, "Oh that's fucking great," to me it could easily have gone either way, and at three it was a true test of my intellect to discern the subtle changes in her tone. I so often failed those tests that I was not able to have an honest conversation with her true voice until I was a teenager. When I turned thirteen she said to me, while she was sick at the hospital, "You're not a fucking baby anymore," and I understood exactly what she meant.

During my birth, Dad did not have a video camera. He didn't faint at the sight of blood or at the sound of his wife in horrific pain. No, he did not faint that day, but he did, as he lovingly continued to do for the rest of his life, drink beer out of cans until he passed out. Before they left the house for the beach, he had filled his big blue cooler with giant silver cans of beer. After he had finished loading them in, he said, "You could never get away with a cooler like this in July, not with all those shorts-wearing beach cops checking under cozies and sniffing water bottles, you

won't. Going to the beach now, with this cooler, is like getting away with murder."

He told Mom he was going to lie down for a while and was snoring next to his cooler about five feet from her as Matt very carefully removed one big can of beer after another to use as load-bearing poles in his giant frozen sandcastle.

A few hours later when I finally fell out, I landed in a hole Matt had reluctantly dug for me on Mom's orders. I landed there in the amniotic fluid, blood, and water that had washed in from the lake. Peggy kept trying to drink out of the hole, but Matt kept pulling her away, her mouth dripping yellow and red liquid into the sand. Matt kept saying, "Bad dog, bad dog."

I remember thinking to myself and trying to ask, "What is that beautiful thing?" but all that came out was a little baby scream.

Mom picked my little red and blue body up and I was covered in sand from head to toe as she held me in her arms whispering sweetly, things like, "Hi there, you cute little shit."

"Wake up your fucking father, Matt," she said.

"I'm awake," Dad said, opening his eyes.

"Don't you want to see your goddamn son?" she asked.

"I can see. What do you want to call him?"

She cleaned some of the sand off my face and asked, squinting her eyes, "Who does he look like?"

Matt looked at me and said, "I think he looks like a sand monster."

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Peggy barked at Matt like she was trying to say something and then chased a white cup that blew by my birth. And when I first opened my eyes, I saw her there, her mouth filled with a bloody Styrofoam paste.

Mom looked to Dad and said, “Shit. Aren’t you going to say something?”

“Like what?”

“Like, maybe welcome him into the goddamn family?”

Dad looked at me, took my tiny hand in his and said, “Welcome to the goddamn family, sand monster.”

WILEY

MATT BROKE HIS LEG SLIDING DOWN THE BANISTER. So we got rid of the banister.

I broke my arm flying off the stairs. So we got rid of the stairs.

We all slept together on the pull-out couch, and Dad ran the microwave as our alarm clock, so all night we heard that round glass tray circling in vain.

After a week everyone was bothering everyone else and Dad was on the phone hiring back the guys who took our stairs and our banister, but before they could come, Matt realized that nobody had been feeding Wiley, his fish. He stood where the stairs had been and yelled up to Wiley, telling him where his food was and advising him on how to hop out and hop back in his tank; telling him how long it was safe to be out of the water and asking if he wouldn’t mind closing the window so the rain didn’t get on his baseball cards.

For a while I thought Matt had really lost it, because he wouldn’t stop laughing and crying at the same time. Mom finally calmed him down by telling him that Wiley was fine, “Because the ghosts are feeding Wiley. Because that’s what ghosts are for.”

We all very much liked this explanation.