

DUST- FLAKES

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LULLED BY THE DROWNING, MASCULINE GRUNTS of the washing machine her eyes drift to the mirror leaning against the wall behind her; an heirloom passed down the female branches of her family tree.

Strange how her whole family was murdered and the only survivors are glass and wood.

Sorry to interrupt, but I think it's too early for you to say that.

Really?

Yes.

Oh. I thought we should mention the family trauma now, so later they don't get too overwhelmed.

No. It's too soon. You promised you wouldn't mention my family until the denouncement...no...the debasement...?

It's called the dénouement.

No, it's called, "Hey, asshole, how about I get some psycho to axe your whole family and then decide I want to write a story about you and then bring it up too soon in that story and see how you feel?"

Okay. I'm sorry. Please stay. I like you, and I want you to keep doing things so I can narrate them.

You bring up that terrible memory before you said you would and now you want me to carry on as though nothing happened?

Look. I said I was sorry. I meant it. Can we keep going? The reader is losing patience. They'll think I'm gratuitously breaking the fourth wall when what I'm really doing is mentally arguing with a diva.

Diva? Really? I'm really starting to hate you. I wish I was in someone else's mind. Make a genie lamp for me so I can wish my way out of here.

Well, I like you. I'm sorry. Please stay.

Then be nice. Do what I want. Tell my story properly. You distract me when you piss me off.

Ok. Got it. Ready to resume third-person narration?

Fine.

A flake of dust settles on her reflection's skin. She names the flake as women name their children; with a whispered epiphany:

"Dustflakes".

Knowing that nothing can ever last, she gently runs her tongue across her upper lip but the dust doesn't move...or maybe it has. She can't tell because her breath has blurred the mirror's surface.

She licks the mirror to part her mouth-fog. The mirror tastes like the end of a battery: cleansing, new, renewing her.

Once the mirror is clean she holds her breath and leans in again.

The Dustflakes stand on her upper lip with the same defiant curve her spine has when she's waiting for a taxi. But she's equally defiant. At school she was on the debate team; she's won every argument with her husband for the past ten years (and that argument with me moments ago).

Don't push it.

Ok. Sorry. Onward.

With this in mind, she goes to the bathroom to select her weapon:

- a) Tweezers.
- b) Electric trimmer.
- c) Scissors.

Why choose when she could have it all?

She works until she's smooth, reminding herself of when she used to smother her pubic hair with hot wax fortnightly so she looked like a prepubescent girl. She smirks, and wonders if it's a type of facial tic.

Five minutes later her upper lip is furry again.

Personal grooming becomes her life for a month until she realises a doctor may have better tools.

The doctor thinks her moustache is natural hair. Our protagonist feels disgustingly pleased about deceiving her, until the doctor goes from pedestrian English to jargon in seconds:

This can happen to women of any age.

You shouldn't feel ashamed about your condition.

It's only a hormone imbalance.

Early-onset hirsutism. Androgens. Progesterone.

"...given the circumstances, I think your best option for treatment is hormone replacement therapy. This won't remove the hair, but it will gradually slow the growth rate, and also make the hair appear softer and finer", the doctor concludes.

In other words, she's giving our protagonist a band-aid until she actually knows how to fix her.

The doctor's cross pendant bobs as her chest rises and falls. Watching her, our protagonist is reassured because she was worried that the doctor couldn't breathe.

Our protagonist tells the doctor that all she wanted was some laser treatment. Jokes that then this would feel like a science project.

The doctor says that would only address the symptoms, not the cause. Our protagonist gets the feeling that the doctor isn't talking about her dustasche any longer.

She ignores it.

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One evening our protagonist pulls some books about etiquette down from the attic, gaining another inch of chin-fur in the process. The loan-history card tells her that her mother had a large overdue fine to pay. The books tell her that because she is a woman she should keep herself covered. So she goes shopping and finds a veil similar to the ones she's seen Muslim women wear.

At home she puts on the veil and asks her husband what he thinks of her band-aid. He says he doesn't recognise her anymore.

She notices the chasm between the two of them and is unsure if she should cross the gap or simply watch as the distance swallows what they were. Either way, she'd still be lonely.

But she's never alone; her hair always accompanies her.

On a day that feels like Wednesday she discovers a merman's beard clinging to the head of the vacuum cleaner. Soon it clings to her and her beard houses dead insects, crumbs, and lint.

An obsession buds and grows inside of her.

She's not at the stage where she'll check the lemon-coloured wallpaper for movement, but she'll rub her chin against walls, catching the dust she missed while cleaning. The friction hurts and she feels as though she could die but she also feels like she's coming home.

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Months on, she's become a human lint brush. This newfound identity gives her confidence.

She burns her veil, hoping Allah is busy baking, or patting his beard, or something, until she realises she's not an Arab or whatever she'd have to be for Allah to give a

shit about her and she's supposed to be looking out for God instead.

She wonders whether all these deities are different sides of the same person.
That God's been having a rough time after neglecting so many fuck-ups that he developed multiple personalities to give himself a break.

She decides if God's fucked-up then she would feel better, because that'd mean her problem is genetic; meaning her parents made her this way when they accidentally fucked each other.

She concludes that people are sympathetic when your problem is genetic. Always.

So instead of worrying about what she can do about the problem, she starts worrying about what she can do with the problem.

§

She takes baby steps from June to September, walking to the park in the evening and coming home at midnight feeling like a new day, until early one night when a kid whines dopplerly:

"Mummy, is that a man or a woman?"

The mother silently drags the kid along by his shirt.

"You'll learn the difference one day, kid", our protagonist mutters.

She is not a man. Not a woman. Not the third sex.

So what is she, then?

§

When our protagonist was a child, she admired how shapely pregnant women were.

She enjoys that woman —

"My doctor", she shouts, trying to block the flood of emotions.

— admiring the results of her hormone replacement therapy so much that she's been ordering more pills online. She hasn't told her doctor. Surely she's still allowed to keep secrets, have some amount of control in her life?

But she's starting to show and soon her woman...doctor will catch on.

Anyway. She's become what her mother must have been and doesn't know why people think that's so horrible. At the same time, she feels like her body and mind are walking away from one another. Who is she? What is she? How old is she? When did this begin to happen? What is happening?

Wait. Slow down. Reframe.

She smiles. Cups her breasts. Strokes her areolas.

What's wrong with self-love?

She imagines weaving her fingers through her doctor's hair while her doctor's hands knead her breasts like she's trying to stay afloat.

"No. Not there", our protagonist whispers.

She takes her doctor by the wrists and drags her hands to her clitoris.

"Here."

When she's not with her doctor, or downing hormone cocktails, she's drifting between disgust and joy in front of the mirror — wondering where she has gone. Is she a ghost, or simply caught up in reincarnation?

She pinches her nipples too hard and winces as burst blood vessels stain the underside of her skin with internal bleeding.

What's wrong with self-loathing?

She repeats this ritual for weeks.

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When our protagonist's doctor finally notices her hard work taking as many hormones as she can, as often as she can, she doesn't take the news well. Our protagonist is heartbroken, but she's heard that people can die of a broken heart, so

she tries not to let on.

Her doctor starts lecturing her about overdosing and death and blood clotting and all the other things that can happen if you overindulge on oestrogen and progesterone. She doesn't realise a simple "congratulations for being so enthusiastic about your hormone treatment", would have been just fine, or its quieter cousin "congrats", which everyone knows is what you say when you're not truly happy for another person, but are too polite to say so.

Our protagonist wonders whether her doctor would be lecturing her if she was a man.

Wait. Do I want to be a man?

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

...ok, maybe she does.

So she blurts that out instead and her doctor starts lecturing her about seeing a gender therapist — our protagonist tries to ignore the way her mind breaks that word into "the" and "rapist" — and the types of operations she could have to transform her clitoris into a penis, but either way penetrative sex would still take some effort and she'd never get a woman pregnant but our protagonist is unsure if she would want to do that anyway so why does all of this matter, and why, she wonders, why is she always listening listening listening taking taking taking swallowing swallowing swallowing like a little bitch? Why can't she give everything to everyone instead of them giving it to her? Fuck them all. Fuck fucking. Fuck fuck fuck —

Cue her annuminute mood swing. Cue her annuminute mind swing.

She imagines her doctor and her mouth again; imagines making someone else go deeper and gag for a change instead of going deeper and being gagged. Hears her doctor make impossible sounds; watches her mouth turn into a hole.

Groan.

Trespassed, encroached; trespasser, encroacher.

Deeper.

Krrrkklllgurkkkuhhlll.

Is it rape if it's in her mind?

Is there any difference between those streets she sees on the news and her mind?

Two sharp snaps issue from two fingertips on two sides of her head.

There is purity in the sound's symmetry, sequence, repetition, clarity, and her favouritism for the number of times it was made: four...she can reach four and leave four using only even numbers if she wants to. Four is two plus two is four minus two is two minus two is zero...four always divides smoothly, evenly, exactly; that's your half, this is my half, neither half is bigger, nor smaller, and nothing remains, so nobody gets less or more than they deserve...four was the amount of members in the family she wanted to recreate one day; parent 1 and parent 2, child 1 and child 2, because despite whichever member she mentally shoots nobody is left behind on their own, unlike that day when...no...and the other days when that memory drops into her mind like a spider...no, you're getting too close, no, I have to go, excuse me, sorry... "Can I help you?" when she was a child, an only child, not in the traditional way, but in her own way, she made four frenzied footsteps in each square of the path outside her childhood home and she was always left behind "FUCK", because she always fell over because she was moving too fast but she couldn't move on until she did this "SUSAN", every time, because she felt ahead afterwards, if only for a moment, because it was the only thing that kept her in the moment...remember to forget, remember to "TAKE THE KIDS AND RUN", forget, because it is easier than this, easier...remember...that distant gunfire, like a morning alarm without a snooze button...no, not that..."JUST GET TO THE PANIC ROOM", remember, re-member, become a member again...ah, fuck me, she bleats in her mind, let me rethink, recollect my thoughts, "BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE, JUST" — "

Come to.

Her doctor crosses her legs and resumes fingering the cross around her neck; cheating on our protagonist with God.

"Where did you go?" she says eventually.

"Nowhere."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"No."

"Would you like me to repeat myself?"

"No."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No."

In that moment, our protagonist knows that this relationship is over. First her husband, and now her doctor.

So soon.

Too soon.

She counts fifteen pairs of ticks and tocks on the clock and then excuses herself to go to the bathroom, but she goes home instead. Unlocks and opens the front door. Her body crumples over the threshold and her legs stick out like "look over there, no, look over there", but all she does is cry.

All she wanted was for her doctor to be quiet.

All she wanted was to be comfortable.

All she wanted was to know what she wants.

So she makes her body stand up and go upstairs to tear through books about gender: judith butler *she's not there: a life in two genders* jennifer finney boylan naomi wolf inga muscio *how sex changed* joanne j meyerowitz *the feminine mystique* betty friedan *female masculinity* j jack halberstam *orlando: a biography* virginia woolf julia sereno *the vagina monologues a history of sexuality 1 through to 3* michel foucault *women who run with the wolves* clarissa pinkola estés *germaine greer the awakening* kate chopin *a vindication of the rights of women* mary wollstonecraft bell hooks *the body project* joan jacob brumberg *the second sex* simone de beauvoir...

The list drones on and the only thing she remembers is Simone de Beauvoir declaring that if a woman pisses standing up, then her perception will change. Our

protagonist could do with a change in perception, so she starts teaching herself how to pee while standing.

Straddling the bowl is too sexual.

Squatting makes her legs hurt.

Female urination devices are too artificial.

Eventually she finds that her hands are best. At first she struggles even with two hands, but soon she can do it one-handed.

Here's how:

Find the urethra.

Locate the labia.

Make a "V" with your index and middle fingers.

Spread the inner labia so your pee comes out in a stream instead of trickling down your leg.

Pee.

Wipe.

Reassemble yourself.

Wash your hands.

Her list of party tricks increases, but she doesn't party, so nothing changes...for now.

Stop fooling yourself. Remain hopeful.

§

What's the matter? Did I forget to be nice again?

No. I did.

What do you mean?

I haven't got anything else to tell you.

You don't?

No. I'm sorry.

Don't be. That means we're done; we've told your story.

We have?

Yes.

Oh.

What now?

I...I don't want to go now, but I have nothing to say. What do I do?

You and your Dustflakes can stay, if you want to.

Oh. Okay. Good.

Biography

NATALIE HARMAN is a writer primarily interested in social transgression and, to a lesser extent, the human psyche. She has previously had her short stories published in *Showcase* and *in.tense*. These two anthologies are produced by the University of the Sunshine Coast, at which she is currently completing her final semester in a Bachelor of Arts (Creative Writing and English).