

B R A N C H
by JAMIE CAMPBELL

I cut the tree and the brown length is separated.
Falling and breaking; the branch is dying.

Turning on itself.
Turning on me.

Air blows hard through the green leaves
and the limb lies cut open on the forest floor.

There is red blood around it.
Blood that's my blood.

F A B L E
by HOPE JENNINGS

It is not certain if he'd ever been there to begin with, but she waited for him. The place where she waited was a mildly sloping grassy knoll, several yards from the concrete building in which they'd shared a tiny cubicle, which now held no significance for her without his solid presence. In this interior space the matter of living had always been executed without much consideration for the time that slipped beyond either of their comprehension. So she waited for him on that spot of ground for hours, just outside the entrance of what was no longer their home; and every day that she waited seemed no different from the first day when he'd failed to appear as promised.

She often blamed herself, staring down the paved pathway towards another building, another door, through which she knew he'd entered but could not bring herself to follow. She hadn't seen for herself whether he'd actually left her in this way, but she was certain that was the only place he could have gone. She herself should not have gone down out of the house without him. They should have left, as usual, together, holding hands, laughing over something negligible, unmemorable, then they would still be doing the same things together.

Or she blamed him. He had lied to her. Told her to go on ahead without him so he could disappear without a trace more conveniently. Without words, tears, or looks of recrimination and blame. But there were traces of him...

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She saw these traces, or rather sensed them, just on the periphery of her imagination. The smell of his flesh, a smell that had no discernible name, but reminded her of freshly upturned earth. The snort of disbelief he made when he laughed at something silly but charming coming out of her mouth. The rough sandpapery skin of his elbows; the sharp incline between the jut of his pelvis and belly; the smooth dip of his skin where she used to nestle her head in the place where his scapula joined his arm to his collarbone. The metallic brine of his sweat on her tongue the time she bit into his shoulder because she could not bear the distance between them. The smile he gave her when he was sleeping, dreaming of a world beyond her reach. The cobalt of his eyes, a blue so startling she never quite believed he was looking at her, but into a vista of infinite desire that only her body was able to materialize for him.

Then one day he was walking towards her. It was his face...

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The face, as it neared, changed into that of another's – but the eyes were his, staring out of a strangely deformed, androgynous, indefinite creature. The eyes recognized her and told her to be silent. She was not allowed to acknowledge him, yet she could not accept this denial. So she had no other choice than to follow his vanishing form into a line of grotesquely altered humans that had somehow taken precedence in her own line of vision. She did not think they could even be called humans; for though they walked upright on two legs, they had the faces of beasts and walked on hooves, paws, talons and claws. She followed them nonetheless, on her own upright but undoubtedly human legs, stumbling clumsily down the pathway, through those doors, and into an echoing corridor.

At the elevator, where they all filed in, crammed on a massive ark descending into the earth, she stepped in with them, right in their midst. She began to accuse each and every monstrous one of them of being him – demanding each unnameable creature to step forward with his name – and when they denied it, each of them, unfeelingly, especially the one with his eyes, she collapsed and wept, finally, and with a panicked desperation she had not allowed herself to feel before.

'I want to go where he is alive. Please. I want to go to the place where he is alive!'

The words were not precisely the ones she'd intended, they did not even sound like words, only a distorted bubbling of breath rising from underwater.

The creatures stared down at her as if they understood. And the one who was unmistakably in control of this nightmare, forcing them to drag their feet one after the other out into a pulsating cavern, where no light had ever existed, turned to her and said yes, perhaps that can be done...

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They put her inside a small square room with no windows and no ceiling. She thought she might have struggled, but soon lost all memory of ever resisting the cage she sat in. She stopped calling herself by name and began to believe her body was as bestial as the bodies of those who kept her in captivity.

Once she sat and chewed on cardboard for hours. She chewed so long she forgot what she was chewing. It was in the action of repeatedly chewing on something inedible that consumed her attention. The motion of her jaws, the grinding of her teeth, continued until she realized what was in her mouth and then she spit it all up, regurgitated all of it, every small bit of flotsam from her belly now unrecognisable, a pulpy mess of mucus and refuse. It was no longer cardboard but something else, transformed by the force of her demented mastication.

Some time later, she began writing on every surface of the walls, and with chalk that had appeared in her hand as if by itself. The chalk compelled her to write the same words repeatedly in a script that was not her own:

I am trapped inside four walls. I have wings. There is no ceiling. I cannot escape.

Each morning she woke to discover the writing had vanished, erased by some unseen hand. She was not so much concerned with who was responsible for this theft, but rather worried over whether she had written the words in the first place. She blankly stared at the empty white walls. The writing itself, she thought, had been no more than an exercise in memory, and now even that was slipping from her grasp.

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So she returned to waiting for him again, reliving every detail of his body, his scent, his laughter, that last day together, waiting for him on the mound, watching both the back and front entrances of their building because she'd always suspected he would attempt to vanish from one or the other. She remembered how he was going to pick out one of his favourite films for them to watch later that evening. Perhaps that was what was happening now. They

were merely watching a film. This was the film and she was trapped inside of it. All she had to do was get out, wake up, and he would be there with her in the flesh, his flesh, again.

She woke to that same creature staring down at her with his eyes, and it informed her: 'This is not a film, this is not a dream, this is not a fairy tale, wake up.'

She clawed out his eyes, and later they found her holding them in her open palms, staring down at them and holding a conversation with those disembodied pupils as if they were still attached inside her beloved's skull. They decided to reconstruct his body, his face, with those very same eyes put back in their rightful place. They put the two of them together in a room where there was no door.

They observed.

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She believes now that he has finally been returned to her and that she is no longer forced into waiting or searching for him. Yes, he has come back for her, finally, and they are living out their happily ever after. They are caged in a room inside a fabricated reality, because of course this is not him, nor is it her, but merely two creatures reassembled with a simulacrum of their former bodies and desires.

And if you are still wondering and waiting to find out what really happened to him, then go back to the beginning and start all over again.