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Jennifer Moore

*Ars Poetica* 132

[*Sun-Down Sky Repeating Blackbirds*] 133

## FICTION

Anu Srinivasan

*The Soul Catcher* 14

Matt Runkle

*The Story Of How All Animals Are Equal* 44

Tamar Jacobs

*White Duck* 74

Laura Usselman

*Each Year With You* 105

Gabriel Houck

*What Distant Deeps* 122

## NONFICTION

Allegra Hyde

*Banjo In The Backpack* 37

Katie Walsh

*The Eschatology Of Murder City* 95

LaTanya McQueen

*Violin Dreams* 112

## CRAFT ESSAYS

Maura Stanton

*How To Be Subtle In Fiction By Being Bold* 30

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*LaTanya McQueen*

## Violin Dreams

The brown recluse is nicknamed the Fiddleback, or the violin spider, because they have a violin shape on their backs. It's hard to see, one has to look closely, but the mark's there.

I call my father to explain about the spiders. It's been a little over a week since he left, having helped move me to Missouri for a job. We've talked on the phone every day afterwards, the most conversation I can remember since from before my mother died.

"I don't remember seeing any when I was there."

"You just forgot, or weren't paying attention."

"It was a busy time."

I tell him how I've found the spiders in the bathroom and in the pantry. I tell him how I've seen adult ones as well as babies. "Remember when you were here and we saw them?" I say. "We thought it was because the apartment had been empty, that they'd go away once I'd settled in, but more come. They're everywhere."

"Maybe you're wrong and it's another type of spider? Perhaps you're making this all out to be something it's not?"

That thought has comforted me the first few times. After I'd crushed their bodies to the point of anything unrecognizable I'd wondered if they were just house spiders, innocent and unassuming. When I turned to the traps and I saw them crinkle up on glue, I was able to take the trap and hold it close to see I was right.

"They're brown recluses. I'm not wrong even though I wish I was," I say. "This would be so much easier if I were wrong."

"I guess I was right then about that place being misery."

"What?"

"*Missouri*. Misery?" He chuckles, amused by his own joke. "Have you called your landlord?"

I explain how I've called multiple times, how the landlord has offered suggestions and not solutions, one of which being that I should vacuum because the noise disrupts their environment. "Also make sure to keep all clothes off the floor. Keep everything clean," she'd said, emphasizing the word.

"Those are all good suggestions," my father says.

"I think she believes the apartment is a disaster area. Like I'm living in some dump, and she still won't send anyone to do something about it."

"Well, keep on her. If you bother her enough she'll have to."

Persistence, remember?”

I keep my father’s advice and with enough phone calls my landlord does send someone. The maintenance man is tall, heavy-set, with slow eyes. He stands in my doorway looking inconvenienced. His cheeks are ruddy-colored and he’s sweating. “You have a spider problem?” he says.

Once he’s inside, I point to the places I’ve seen them. He nods and walks around, inspecting the carpet.

“I can’t sleep. I need you to do something.”

“Yeah, sure,” he nods again. He reaches in his bag and pulls out a bunch of traps. They are little triangular-shaped houses he has to put together. Their outside has images of tree branches. Each one he places in various corners of the apartment. “Well, there you go,” he tells me when he’s finished.

“That’s it?” I try to keep my voice controlled, steady. I’d imagined he’d come in pesticides blazing. A suitcase sat on my bed in the bedroom ready to be filled in the event I had to leave. I’d expected a fumigation at least and what I got was some DIY cardboard houses. “I have a bunch of traps already. You’re not going to do anything else?”

“The traps are the best way to get rid of them,” he says. The plastic wrappers from the traps crinkle in his hands. He crumples them into his fist and then holds it out in the air. “You got some place for these?”

Maybe they will work, I tell myself after he leaves. The ones he brought are different. I stare down at the constructions around my apartment. Maybe I’m being too judgmental, but then another night comes, and another, and it seems as if the spiders are going everywhere except the traps. Give it time, I think, but weeks go by and I find them still. They climb the shower curtain in search of water and get stuck in the tub. Whatever door I’ve closed—to the pantry, the water heater, my closets—they manage to get in. I work long hours and come home late to find them emboldened in the middle of my living room. I learn to kill them from a distance, my aim at throwing heavy objects gets better with practice.

A ritual forms. Entering my apartment the darkness inside becomes flooded with light. Every lamp, every fixture turned on. Each room gets looked at. The corners and the crevices. No matter the hour or how tired I am the first thing I do once I’m home is check for where they’re hiding.

Afterward a clear peace settles in and I forget about the world I’m living in. Hours pass and it’s not until it’s time for me to sleep when I realize that I can’t.

Most of the memories of my mother revolve around sleep. Early on in her life she was diagnosed with Lupus, a chronic, autoimmune disease that attacks the organs in the body. One of the symptoms she dealt with was she’d be fatigued to the point that she’d sleep for 10, 12, even 14 hour stretches at a time. Because she worked at night she slept during the day. My childhood was spent in nearby rooms watching television with the volume turned low, hallway walks on tiptoe so as not to disturb her, and what felt like endless periods of waiting for her to wake up.

Like my mother, my life is primarily concerned with sleep, except for me it is the lack of it. There is also the familiarity of waiting, the difference being hours during the night instead of the day. I continue the same habits as I did then. Time is filled with distractions to keep me from thinking. Movies especially, ones where the plot lines are predictable. Television series DVDs are good because they can take several days to get through depending on how many there are. Chores make

me feel productive and I do them when I've grown bored with other options.

When all this fails I call my father.

"You want a night light?" His television blares in the background. He likes the noise, the disruption from the quiet, and he tends to watch the same movies, always action films, again and again. "Will it help things?"

"That's not funny," I tell him.

"I think it is."

"You don't understand. These are brown recluses. The ones that bit mom."

"I know. Just buy some Raid. It'll be fine."

My father—prone to quick-fix solutions and easy answers to complicated problems. He's retired military, having spent over twenty years in the Army and because of that experience it's difficult to complain to him about anything. He's slept in the woods, in the mud and dirt, in all kinds of weather. To him, spiders are nothing to concern oneself with.

Complaining to him is useless, so to fix my problem I come up with my own answers. I take to wearing shoes to bed. Boots with thick soles. I sleep uncovered, lest any lurk in between my sheets.

The bed becomes an island in the middle of my room.

My father sends the night-light anyway. I use it once, watching its subtle glow from the corner of the room. The gesture's meant to comfort, to ease my anxieties about living in a new place. The problem is I'm afraid of change and here it all is suddenly before me. Not sleeping is just a symptom.

At least, that's what my father would say, but really, it's that I'm afraid to step on my carpeted floor. I'm afraid to turn off the lights. I'm afraid to move, to look underneath the covers or to open cabinets, to pull back curtains and see movement between the fold. My fears are not made from abstractions but are very real. There's the saying that where there's one there's hundreds, and I've seen plenty. I know with time more spiders will come and so I wait. Mostly that's what I find myself doing, waiting for another spider to appear from the cracks, the traps to become cluttered with their bodies, for hours to pass, time to change, the darkness outside to slowly lighten, for daylight breaking, for another day.

Sometimes, to get peace I fall asleep in my car. Turning the radio to a pop song, I push the seat back and close my eyes. I remember the times my mother slept in this very car waiting for me.

Back before I could drive she used to take me to the mall. She worked two jobs and her illness made her need long stretches of sleep. Because of both she decided it wasn't worth the waste of time driving back home and so while I was at Foot Locker or Claire's, she was leaned back in the car's seat, taking a nap while shoppers parked and re-parked around her.

I listen to the radio until it's white noise, thinking back to all the times my mother slept in this car. Her car, the car now mine.

When sleep eventually comes it's sporadic and unfulfilling. My phone's alarm goes and it takes ten minutes before I surface from the shallows to turn it off.

Even though there have been instances where brown recluses have been known to spread, traveling inside packed boxes or furniture, they're found mainly in the central Midwestern states through to the Gulf of Mexico, but most specifically Oklahoma, Missouri, Nebraska and Arkansas. They like to hide in dark, undisturbed places like underneath rocks or wood piles. Inside homes, they'll

make homes in garages, closets, cellars, or in venting and heating conducts. They can nest among old books, stored clothes, furniture, carpets, and in the corners and cracks of rooms.

I know that there are worse problems to have. I've heard stories from friends in Texas that have had to deal with scorpions or tarantulas in their houses. On the news you hear reports about how in Florida alligators live in people's backyards. North Carolina has water bugs, a colloquial term for winged cockroaches that manage to infiltrate every home no matter how tidy and dressed up it is. I'd go home to visit my father and have to suffer his attempts at eradicating them. "Don't walk barefoot in the house!" he'd yell, and I'd regret not listening once the rash set in from the powdered poison he'd put all along the baseboards and kitchen tile.

In Boston where I lived before here, there were not just cockroaches but bed bugs. A friend of mine from college had them once. He had visible welts on his neck and face from the bites. He scratched them while telling me they were on other parts of his body as well. He told me how him and his roommates chipped in for an exterminator. A man came with a bed bug dog who sniffed and told them all what they already knew. They paid more for the exterminator to spray pesticides.

My friend eventually had to get rid of all he owned, starting over from scratch like a pauper. Purging was the only sure-fire way to rid himself of the bloodsucking beasts. The whole ordeal took months, ultimately ending in him starting over in a new place. Being so traumatized from the experience he'd taken to buying new clothes to wear every few days. The expense kept him from continuing the habit, but I imagined if he could—if it'd been even close to an option—he'd have continued.

So, yes, I know there are worse things; still the spiders are terrifying. They're known to be hunting spiders, at night venturing out from their hidden spaces to feed. Instead of spinning webs in the crooks of walls and doorways, they crawl along near the baseboards in search of food. If they find nothing it hardly matters, for they are resilient, being able to live for months without food or water. In some ways they're like the cockroaches of arachnids. Unlike other spiders, they don't lick their legs or antenna so pesticides often fail. The poison just falls off their bodies for other insects to eat and then die, thus providing a further food source for the brown recluse.

They're quick, you have to be nimble and accurate with killing them otherwise they scurry like lightning back to their hiding places and you have to wait until the next night to try and kill them again. Their movements are chaotic. Schizophrenic. Unlike ants or centipedes that follow a straight line while trying to escape, brown recluses follow no recognizable pattern of egress. They move everywhere all at once. Killing them becomes an experiment in chaos. I throw shoes at the floor, aiming at nowhere and hoping for a hit.

Of course, there's only so much of that before the neighbor's come knocking, so I learn to be both stealthy and creative. Aside from the sticky traps, my vacuum cleaner has become my greatest weapon. I vacuum twice a day—in the mornings as I get ready for work and in the evenings before I go to sleep. When I see a live recluse, I use the vacuum's hose to suck it up. When I find *anything*—dead fly, a bit of leek, or crumb—I suck it up too, hoping to starve the spiders into submission.

And I search for new strategies. In my reading I learn even more about them. I read about a woman in Arkansas who explained how brown recluses send out a distress signal when they're dying. The call gets other spiders to come and eat them before they're dead. The woman realized this when, after the first few traps,

she decided to let the carcasses stay without changing the traps. She waited to see if others would come and they did. Before long her traps were filled.

For this reason I am determined to not keep any I see on the traps for very long. The fear of hundreds coming because of the distress signal of one is too upsetting to imagine. When I'm home whenever there's a pause in what I'm doing, a change or shift, I find myself going around and checking to see if any more have come. At night I'll manage to sleep for a few hours but once I'm awake I'm getting out of bed to look.

One night I stumble in the bathroom. Without my glasses my vision is bleary but I'm able to make out the dark spots on the trap against the wall. On a closer look I'm able to count six that have died during the few hours I've been asleep.

*This is it*, I almost yell. Going back into the bedroom I slide on sweatpants and grab my keys and go out to my car. It takes three different Wal-Marts before I get to one open twenty-four hours. I have one purpose, one goal as I move through the bleak and empty aisles beneath florescent lights beaming down on shiny buffed floors.

I clean the store out, dumping at least thirty packages of sticky traps onto the cashier's conveyor belt. In addition, there are bottles of Pine-Sol, containers of lemon-scented Pledge, and a tube of caulk.

The cashier eyes my purchases. "What is all this?" she finally blurts out.

"I have a spider infestation," I mutter, saying it quickly out of my own shame. "Brown recluses. I'm trying to get rid of them."

"Oh, I have them too," she sighs, her tired eyes growing bright. "The damn things are everywhere. I'm at my wit's end trying to deal with them. I find them everywhere. They're in my bed. I can't sleep. I transferred to night shift here because I couldn't sleep in the dark anymore."

"I know the feeling."

She rings up my purchases, taking time to look at each of the items. I can see her making a mental tally of what I'm buying to go back later and get it for herself.

"I don't know what to do about it anymore. Does any of this stuff you're getting work?"

"Not sure," I tell her, suddenly sympathizing. "Going to find out tonight."

"Well, you come back here and let me know," she says. "Like I told you, I'm at my wit's end."

It takes about another hour to complete the job. I use the sticky traps to make an outline of my bedroom, putting them all along the baseboards. I also make an outline around my bed, putting extra around each of the posts. The Pine-Sol I pour all along the carpet, so much that the apartment reeks of the smell, giving me a head-ache for hours long afterward. I spray Pledge along the walls. Finally, I caulk up every crack and hole I can find. In the corners where the baseboards meet I add an extra layer. I caulk until I've sealed every opening, until my apartment is—in my imagination a fortress.

"That'll do it," I say aloud, feeling satisfied and accomplished.

After a few days, the Pine-Sol smell fades. Stains appear on the carpet from where I've poured. Twice, I get myself stuck to the sticky traps. It hurts like hell.

What makes it all worse is that through it all and despite my best efforts the spiders still come.

The brown recluse, along with the black widow and the hobo, is one of the three most venomous spiders found in the United States. The venom is known to cause loxoscelism, symptoms of which include nausea, rashes, and more importantly, necrotic tissue from the bite. Their bite kills flesh.

It's this last symptom that haunts the internet. Images online depict people with gangrenous body parts. The infected tissue has become greenish-black. There are pictures where the tissue is completely gone, only a void or deep dimple in the flesh marking the place of the bite.

The literature says that these images are extreme cases, rare examples most often occurring in those among children or those with immune disorders. The stories you hear about dead skin and losing limbs are for the most part urban legends.

My mother was twenty-eight when she was bit by a brown recluse spider. Like me, she was also living in the Midwest, Oklahoma specifically, with its miles of flat land and dry heat. Pregnant and married to a military husband, she spent most of her days alone. To help ease her loneliness my father bought her a puppy, and to fill the time she took him on walks. It was on one of these walks when she got bit.

My father says she hadn't noticed at first, that it took her weeks to even realize there was something wrong. They flew to a hospital in Texas where the doctors wanted to amputate her leg, saying they were concerned about gangrene setting in. Instead of listening to them, my mother took my father's advice and flew to Duke, where instead of amputating the doctors cut out the necrotic tissue, leaving a hole in her ankle that she had for the rest of her life. The stress from the combination of her illness, the spider bite, and the surgery caused her to go into premature labor close to four months before her due date.

That is the story I've grown up with, being told it multiple times over the years. My parents would tell it in times of my own distress as a reminder of how far I've come, and it's one I'm reminded of living here. I've managed to somehow come full circle, being the same age as my mother was then and now living in an apartment swarming with the causes of my premature birth.

Brown recluses are shy, afraid of people and movements. They don't want to be bothered. They are avoiders.

"They're just like you," my father says in response. "It's almost endearing when you think about it."

"Ha ha," I tell him.

"They don't sound like anything to be afraid of. Remember, they don't want to be around you as much as you don't want to be around them."

"They're dangerous."

"The landlord should spray then," he says. "Haven't you called them?"

"We've went through this already."

"Well, other than that there's not much else you can do. No sense in worrying about it. What good is it going to do?"

"Nothing I guess."

"You know, with your mom, it wasn't the spider bite. It was a combination of things—being pregnant with you, the Lupus especially. Her immune system was pretty poor. Really, she could have bitten by anything and it would have caused a problem."

"Well, not anything," I say.

“Like with the cancer. She might have been able to fight it better had it not been for the Lupus. The kind she had, it was always going to be a sort of waiting game.”

I don’t respond, instead the silence lingers. And in that silence I glimpsed that maybe I’d gotten so used to black and white thinking—thinking that this was the cause, the problem, and not realizing that life was wrapped in subtleties. There were a hundred reasons that led to what happened and I had fixated on one.

“My point is that you shouldn’t be afraid. It wasn’t just the spiders.”

“I know,” I say, hoping there’s enough conviction in my voice to make him believe me.

“Well, winter’s coming,” my father says, attempting to change the subject. “All you have to do is wait. They’ll be dead soon anyway.”

Weeks pass. Winter comes, and I’ve not been bitten. I tell myself that even if I was, the outcome would not be the same.

I still dream. It’s always the same—hundreds of them crawling along the walls, sneaking out from the cracks and underneath the carpet. Multiplying. In bed, I am fragile and helpless. All that’s left to do is wait. Along the carpet I’ve cleaned hundreds of times they come. Up the bedposts and into the covers. Their long, dangling legs reaching in the dark.

I always wake periodically throughout the night. My eyes get adjusted to the light and I feel my pulse as it slows. The air conditioner kicks in and the hum becomes the only noise I hear. There are marks on my body but from my own doing. Scratches caused from the imagined feeling of spider legs against my skin. My fingers rub over the broken skin, feeling the tiny blood clots beginning to form.

Once the fear has subsided I get out of bed. The habit of checking has not been lost and I still go from room to room. I open closets and peek inside. I look under furniture, inspect the curtains. Lastly, I check each and every one of the traps looking for the familiar carcasses.

When I find one I take the trap, dump it in the trash, and then find another to put in its place before going back to sleep. Somehow, I feel this is progress.

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