

New Flash Fiction from Mason Boyles: "Parched"

The hermit lived in the water tower with an alligator, both of them long-gone paler than moon. Their eyes gemmed the same pink in front of a flashlight. The hermit's skin was scaly with scabs. His gums were too big for his lips to close over them. Some speculated that these traits were adaptive, or contracted; others insisted that the hermit had been born this way. He prompted various fictions of origin. The gator was a carnival prize won with marksmanship or a mallet-strike, some squinting feat of darts and balloons. The hermit had cast-netted it out of the sound. He'd chipped a golfball into its mother's throat at a fatal angle and salvaged her sudden orphan from the water trap where it marinated. The hermit himself was a fugitive or dead celebrity. His retreat to the water tower was an act of grief, shame, or self-restraint. Lusting after a wrong object, he'd cloistered himself in that tank to confine perverse cravings. Regardless, he was up there: adrift on an inflatable dinghy, pale and long-mouthed and drained. The town coped with their bafflement by containing it in a holiday. The last week of every August the tank's door was unbolted and the mayor laddered up the tower with a mic to conduct an honorary interview. The bank closed at lunch for this. The school declared a half-day. Everyone pooled at the base of the tower to catch the hermit's proclamations crackling over the Shriners' borrowed P.A.



He began with a purpose statement. He called the dark silk, claiming the tank was his cocoon. He explained the discipline of stillness, how he strove toward a torpid and unmuscled state. He enjoyed practicing shadow puppets with the flashlight on breaks. He'd never grown wisdom teeth. His waist size was twenty-eight. He had loved precisely once, like a flood: a drowning, destructive, lung-hogging sensation. He'd cocooned himself in the tank to escape. The love ebbed, but his insides still bore its watermark, a scourged and porous stain of a shade. The hermit siphoned off the haunt of it with his own hand when he had to. He burst blindly into the damp heat of the tank.

Spectacular, said the mayor.

After the hermit's speech the floor was opened for questions. Most of these were procedural. The children wanted to know what the hermit ate. The parents wanted to know how he prayed. Their parents wanted to know if the hermit was coming down anytime soon so they could decide whether or not to keep putting up with no-starch diets, with catheters and radiation and nostrils chapped from tubed oxygen. They wanted to know

what the hermit coming down would signify. Didn't a cocoon imply a transformative exit? Wasn't it an interstitial state? But no one asked why the hermit had gone up there. They kept their questions confined to the ways that he stayed.

One year a bone-old man came around. He'd lurked unnoticed until the Q and A, at which point he raised his cane and—before being called on—began making autobiographical claims. He explained he'd been born here too far back for anyone but the hermit to remember. He'd been drowned and undrowned in that very water tower. He'd basked in the breaths of the man who'd breathed air back into him. He'd inhaled that man's exhale, a gust that silked down his throat and spun a cocoon through his lungs. The man's mouth had crawled into his. He'd wanted to cocoon the man, stow the man, hold him within until his own ribs bulged and broke with jerky ecloses. But he'd been too young. A boy only. He'd left town, but was back now, here to release the long-fluttering thing in his lungs. The bone-old man asked to be taken to the water tower. He claimed there was a kind of mistake that transformed as it aged.

Folks browed their hands over eyes, squinting. Frayed panting came through the P.A. The hermit limbed out to daylight, then, not bone-old but skin-old, his skin too small for his skeleton and sunburning at a visible rate.

"You came," he said. "You came. You came. You came."

The fire chief helped the bone-old man into the bucket of the tiller truck and lifted him up to the tank. The hermit kissed the bone-old man on his scalp, and the bone-old man kissed the hermit's eyes, which now looked less like gems than mussels shelled in his face. The hermit's gums looked like a swallowed animal striving out of his mouth.

"Well," said the mayor, and climbed down the ladder. The fire chief backed the truck away. The tellers went back to the

bank; the children went back to the classrooms, and the principal redacted the half-day. And the hermit helped the bone-old man down the ladder of the tank. They descended without palm fronds, walking off hand-in-hand-upon-cane.

The couple became the barnacle kind of locals. They sat side-by-side in porch rockers and corner booths, sessile, so still and plain-sight that folks went blind to them. Folks got the vague sense of a seal broken when passing them, the exposure of a thing stale from being too-long stashed away. There was the vague sense that holiness had a half-life; that a sacred thing left alone long enough would decay to the profane.

After a time it was posited that the water tower did no favors for the skyline. It was toppled that August, to applause, dissected by a Shriner-operated crane. A desalination plant was constructed in its place. It reverse-osmosed water from the Atlantic, straining off salt through membranes and boweling its product into flexuous tanks. There were those who claimed the tap still tasted salty. No one ever asked what the alligator ate.