



Blue Flamingo *looks at* Red Water

a short story by KATHERINE VAZ

That bus is going to slam into my daughter. In my stop-action memory, everything lies bare a grace note before the accident. The school bus grinds forward stupidly, a yellow hippo. Henry is at the crosswalk, waiting for me as I turn the corner. He is not holding Mary's hand.

I'm forever saying, *Remember to hold on to her*. She bolts toward the cat across the room, the crocus past the fence. She unfastens from me, too, and I have to catch her. In my arms she grows vehement and fights like a fish. We chose the name "Mary" because it is plain-spoken, classic, but after she was born, I looked it up: It means "rebellion." Even while she floated inside me, her thigh bones twitching like fire-making sticks, producing her fiery skin, she was already a grace note ahead of becoming herself, rising out of the skeletal place where our names store their forgotten meanings.

My hand goes up in a half wave, half jabbing motion to indicate that he must get a grip on her. (Only the stop-

action reveals that the warning comes before the greeting.) We are going across the street to Belinda's Crafts, because Mary loves tempera paints. Henry is tired from long hours at Ketchum & Doherty, where he is a paralegal. He has recently completed the task of threading his father, who is riddled with Alzheimer's, into an open spot at Sunrise Homes. I have just finished teaching my geography seminar at Redwood University. After visiting Belinda's, we plan to stop at Jun's for Korean barbecue. Mary is five years old. She considers the wet green seaweed a wonder.

For a fraction of a second (not available to the naked eye: I detect it only when I run the film on its slowest speed) Henry takes in a pretty blonde going down Jasmine Street and then turns to wave at me while I scream, "Mary!" She can't wait. She wants to be at Belinda's; she's on to painting the next picture.

Memory has lifted away the sound of the impact; horror first thrusts itself into my nostrils: the brew of rubber, the

ether of exhaust. I smell rather than hear the wail of the woman driver. It's all milk and oil. She's fat and lurching about, like the dybbuk of the bus let loose from its host body. Henry jumps back. It's just a twitch, an instinct, because then he throws himself forward, but I'm there first. I run with that voidance of time that puts you in the place you can see before you should land there, so I'm ahead of Henry (how could that happen?), leaning over her. He's reaching around me; tall as he is, he makes a shell for me to tuck myself inside, but I'm the animal with her probes out. Thin red stripes cover Mary, as if she wants to keep this clean and neat, but then there's an explosion of blood with my hands in the middle of it.

Henry must have pulled me away; I must have stood up. Because everything else is gone now. It is only later that Mary's voice finds me: *Blue sky. Yellow bus. Me in red, Mother.* I had been teaching her that, out of the primary colors, all pictures can be made.

I'm slower than you are, Isabel, Henry likes to proclaim, and he is. Slower to get out of a car, to add up sums, to get ready for a party, to remember. I loved it once, that slowness. It used to embody care, the tea-ceremony approach to living; care in arranging items in the trunk of a car; care in brushing my hair, slowly, until it knocked me out; slowness in kissing me.

I want her ashes buried at sea. Cold penetrates me while I sprinkle her over the San Francisco Bay. I'm wearing an apricot dress and my stockings with the black dragons, the ones Mary adored. Mary in the fire, then Mary in the water; Mary red, then Mary blue. Where is Henry? He's on the boat, but I don't see him until we're back in our tiny bungalow for the wake and he's setting out meats and hardened bread slices, fingers of carrots, a knife stuck in mustard. I'm quaking from the chill. Henry reaches for me, and I shudder. My colleagues and neighbors are not bad people, but the weight of trying not to say, "If there's anything you need . . ." causes Lucille, an assistant professor, to ask, "Isabel, aren't you part Mexican?" I know what she means: cha-cha-cha happiness, cha-cha-cha grief. Why aren't I screeching? We've seen them on newsreels, those women with their ululations, writhing like octopuses atop coffins. But after "Mary!" there isn't anything left to yell.

What's pounding the cage of my insides is a whisper. Henry is on his third beer. I can tell the thought that comes out of me hits him a glancing blow, because his head rears back and he opens another beer: *Can't you remember anything? I told you not to let her go.*

I walk outside. A bird of paradise guards our lawn and the Joseph's Coat roses. I say aloud to no one, "You forget everything."

In the fable, the barber who sees that King Midas has sprouted the ears of a jackass crawls outside, digs a hole, and whispers into it, "King Midas has the ears of a jackass!" He covers up the hole.

The barber is stunned when the plants exude the chant, "King Midas has the ears of a jackass," grass echoing to grass,

until the whisper goes inside everyone and bursts from their mouths.

The guests leave, and there's only Henry and me, two middling souls, bloated and weary. Even in the three months before Mary died, we made love only twice. A run through a dragon on my stocking makes it appear beheaded. The whisper blows in from the wide outdoors, where I left it, and scrawls itself in the air, in plain view.

Henry disappears for one day. His own whisper erupts: *You sit there without a word of comfort. It could have been you.*

In Henry's absence, Simon and Lana, my friends from the art department, arrive with a video cassette of *The Terminator*. They are married and work together on kinetic sculptures, winning grants to bring discarded bits and pieces of scrap metal to life and then drinking up the outraged howls. Lana favors velvet dresses and mud-caked army boots. "Isa-bella-donna," says Simon, hugging me. The three of us laugh ourselves sick at Arnold Schwarzenegger's murder of the entire planet.

I am alone in bed in the afternoon when Henry returns. He stretches out next to me, and I don't release the new whisper, but it's that fast into the earth and through the trees, exhaled by the leaves: *I can't touch you.* We even hold hands — a sad little unity, but the only one we have, because we both hear the words at exactly the same time.

The arrival of Jacob Meyers at our bereavement group one Saturday morning causes a shifting, a tremor of discomfort and excitement. Even in a basement room at Redwood University, there is a ranking and collating, an assessment of celebrity, a hierarchy stuck over the wet mess of pain. Jacob Meyers is a famous attorney and a single father whose eleven-year-old girl, Dawn, was tortured and left disemboweled near the highway outside Sacramento. Betty, whose infant died after his insides refused to grow, scurries to get Jacob some coffee. She has given up asking me where Henry is. He says, "Those people didn't know Mary, so I don't want to know them." I am not beyond admiring that sentiment.

Jacob takes the cup from Betty. He's tall and hesitant, dark and sharp featured, and where most men seem to be a head and hands and clothing, he is a body barely contained by what he is wearing. He was in the search party that found Dawn, and he offers a detail that we did not read in the newspapers. Betty gasps, and hands fly to mouths when he says, "A rabbit had jumped onto Dawn." Dawn, though brutalized, was still offering a living thing a place to rest. I understand for the first time that line "Every angel is terrible." I burst out with, "She was lovely!"

My words cleave the room. Coffee quivers seismically in people's Styrofoam cups. Betty may swoon, and Andrew, whose son died of cancer, might strangle me. Right as I am about to apologize, Jacob says, "Yes, thank you." Desperate to find the words that will destroy the grotesqueness, he says, "It was like her, what she did, holding on to something alive. That's it; that's Dawn."

The meeting does not last long. The group disperses, and I see Jacob in the hallway, lingering and looking at me as I walk toward the ladies' room. His hand is on the water fountain, but suddenly it is too much for him to bend over for a drink, and I put my hand on his inclined back and say, "I . . ." I keep my hand there.

It is such a short distance to lean into him as he rises to meet me. We open our mouths against each other to deliver the words coming from our throats.

We go to the Pine Resort Motel on the Redwood Highway. I hold on to his arm while he drives, and he pulls me toward him in a way that almost lifts me off the seat. Inside the room, I stay lifted up. That is the marvel of him. The carpet is worn in spots down to its beige grid; an aerosol scent of lavender makes a dome over a staleness of smoke. He presses me against the wall to kiss my neck, and my hands are all over him, and I say, *Wrap my legs around you*, and I am thoroughly in the air. I used to try to guess: is it the man trying to crawl into the woman's hide, or the other way around? With Jacob gliding in and out of me and me pouring wet down the front of his thighs, I see that it's both at the same time. All that desire rammed up against cauterized nerve endings, deadened in order to get us through the day. *Is everyone like this?* I wonder — and still do. I think: *Yes. Flail off my skin. Kiss me until I feel teeth. Crack open my chest.*

We collapse together, sleep, and then, still holding on to each other, we go into the bathroom and take turns peeing, like an old married couple. I touch the underside of his penis, the liverish patch where the doctor's knife miscut him when he was a baby. It is time to go home. Out in the light, we blink. The highway and the rushing cars, blue and red and yellow: the landscape faint but filling in. Where am I? What's here? Where is my daughter? I want to talk to her — not about this, but about our need to watch out for each other, since I'm given to bolting, too.

Jacob leads me to his car and opens the door for me. I don't want to climb in and make this be the end of us. When his hand sweeps the hair out of his eyes, it is like that first gesture we make in the morning, coming to, recalling ourselves. My head rests against his shoulder. His hair is a disaster area. I like his tallness, his dark eyes. I like all that he is, down to the history of himself that even he doesn't know. I put my hand on his chest, and the tremors are still going through him: the remainder of loving me, the great, fine habit of the body to retain the memory of its finest hours. His fingers go through my hair to my scalp. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he says. "I don't mean to hurt you."

There's only us, with throbbing stars crowning our veins. The sky looks as if it's been swabbed with erasers. I'm blindingly, out of my skin in love. "It isn't hurt I'm feeling," I whisper. He kisses the spot where the water pours out of my hairline, as if there's a fissure there.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he says. "It is. That's what it is." He adds that I'm pretty, that he likes the light in my eyes, and says, "I won't forget this. I won't forget you." Today is the day that everything else must fit itself over.

I elicit a promise: Will he call me every year on my birthday — to see how well we manage to fit time over today?

He says yes, he won't forget.

As he takes me home, we agree, yes, nothing is better than when joy curves so far around it sucks on its own sorrowful tail.

But in the night, knives come at me and worry the body's slits: eyes, asshole, ears, cunt, mouth, nose, nipples, navel, pores, leaking everywhere. Henry comes home late from work, while I'm asleep, and wakens before me the next morning. He calls from work to say, "Were you drunk? You wet the bed. I thought that was my job, wet dreams."

I say, "Getting drunk is your job," and hang up on him.

How can you go on? That's the implied question whenever an outstretched hand hovers over my skin, worried that a mere touch might detonate me. People don't mean to be cruel. They're just not as lucky as I am. No Mary or Dawn to reveal to them that memory only seems locked in the past to disguise how it streams forward. I live in a constant thrill: What will Mary do next? Life twists the paths begun in childhood: her vehemence might turn into a romantic fervor, doomed and hidden. She comes to me with her eyebrows — black and heavy, like mine — plucked into a thin line, the result of a lifelong project of badly taming herself. Why does it persist, this invented memory of Mary wearing a mortarboard and graduation gown, this perpetual finding her on the verge of something? It seems to grow out of Mary in her water wings in the backyard pool. I ask Henry if he thinks Mary would have been as good a swimmer as he is, and he stares at me before he says, "She already was." Henry's grief has a sadder twist; he can't dream her forward, so he has left her stuck in time.

(end of excerpt)