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FEATURING STORIES BY:
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KEPT

by Jessica Berger

The men the child knows all seem to twitch. They are constantly moving in ways that make her want to still them, that make her mother reach out to rub arms or tsk in reassuring ways. These men stroke their beards and crack their backs and repetitively tap their feet and stretch constantly, reaching for the air around them with bones and limbs, with the blades of their shoulders as if struggling to take flight, as if they still felt the need to open wings clipped long ago. The child believes that men always move like this, that there is some commonality between them that makes them fidget uncomfortably. She has considered that it is the presence of her mother, that there is something about her that causes the men to move, always, repetitively, in embarrassing cycles. Or, perhaps it is her own presence, though the men rarely seem to notice her, though she hides – more often than not – on the back step or in the kitchen cupboard when they come. Her mother is nice to the men, and so they come back. She tells the child not to fear them, that they are kind, that they are benevolent and mean them no harm. That were any of them ever to hurt her or say a wrong word, she would become like a bear and rip them limb from limb. Her mother winks when she says this, bends her fingers into claws. When the child asks why it is the men always return, her mother shrugs. They come back, she says, because they offer them peppermints and sandwiches cut into triangles, because the coffee pot is always on and their radio is tuned to a station that plays music that charms the men like the snakes in a picture

book. She tells her, too, that if they are nice to these men that great things may come to them. She has heard that these men are keepers of treasures, that many of them hoard objects from their pasts the way they hoard secrets, that these men can be convinced to offer trinkets from their pockets and rings from their reaching fingers.

The child understands these things. The child, in truth, does not fear the men. What she wants is merely for them to be still, for their bodies to have the quiet that their mouths often do. The child thinks that it is not fair that she is always being told to stop moving when she used to dance through the kitchen, that when she sat by her mother on the couch she always complained the girl fidgeted too much. The child thinks, that if she twitched like the men, if she stretched and circled and bounced her legs constantly that she would be in trouble, that for her the radio would be turned off and the sandwiches would not appear. So, the child has become very still. She sits on the back stoop and listens while the men come and go, while they talk in low, polite voices in the parlor and sip at their mugs of coffee. She tries to fill in the gaps in the stories she hears them telling; imagines the places they are from and where they speak of wanting to return, pictures the old ladies who wronged them, the faces of those mysterious rulers of that outside world. The child has never traveled beyond the yard, or, at least, has not done so in too many years. She does not recall what it looks like beyond the horizon, can see the distance she has traveled from her back stoop. There are neighbors who wave to her, people she has walked parallel to and kept eye contact with, who she has greeted or experimented with yelling random words at from her side of the fence. She does this, always, to one small boy in particular. He will wave and yell something to her. She will respond: "jack-o-lantern! Anglophobia! Sandstone! Topaz!" Sometimes the two of them laugh from a distance, sometimes they say their words meanly, throw them across the distance before running in different directions. The small boy, she knows, is the child of one of the twitching men. Sometimes his mother will wait or walk by with him, sometimes she is nowhere to be seen. The boy's mother, once, even stepped into their parlor herself. She was pretty and round-faced. She accepted the peppermints and spoke with a smile. She told the child she was welcome to visit them at their house any time, but the child knew that she could not, that her mother would never permit this.

They cannot leave, she knows this. They cannot leave because there are always visitors, because there are so many people who knock at their door each day and so many people who step into their parlor and so many of these men who twitch and talk and listen and stretch and bring her mother word of their lives. They cannot leave. They will

not leave.

One day the child asks why the visitors come and go, why the men, especially, always seem to be in the process of moving. She asks her mother, too, if there is a way to get people to stay, if there is a way to keep them in one place the way they stay, always, in their own places. The mother considers this, apologizes to the child for the boring life they lead, assures her that when the world is safe again that she will take her to see it, every corner, every place she has seen in her books, every glass tower or palace garden that the men have talked about. The child knows that the land has changed, that there are things that are different than they were when her mother was her age. She knows that once there were so many more people and that they lived more closely than she does to her neighbors, that once they were all more connected and that there was talk that happened outside of parlors and kitchens. The child has heard all of this before, but what she does not understand is why they always stay and why these others come and go. What she does not understand is why her mother prefers it this way, why they can step in but she has no interest in stepping out beyond the back stoop. She asks this of her mother repeatedly, wants to know how to lay a trap or where to keep them, wants to know why they seem always to twitch while her stillness is so required. She demands it. Demands to see the trinkets these men might bring, to know why it is they come. Her mother laughs and tells her that this is the way things are now, that the men will never be able to stop their twitching, that once they likely didn't and now they do, that it was better than the alternative. She weaves cryptic responses on how to make them stay, tells the child that it is always something different. Some can be caught and kept with delicate things, sheets of satin and swaths of lace. Others, she says, like harder stuff; cruelty and sharp points. All of them, usually, in quieter moments, like kind words and their own warm, full bellies. This, the mother says, is why they return again and again. The child likes these last things, too.

Yet, the child holds in her mind the things her mother says will keep their visitors. She strays from her posts in the cupboard or on the stoop. Her mother does not notice, and if she does she knows better than to make mention of it. The child searches closets and chests, begins to collect what she will need to build a trap. She finds a sheet of blue satin, silky and light, so soft that she wraps herself in it while she plans, while she thinks through the process and collects bits of lace – doilies and table runners, scraps from a bin her mother keeps to make a quilt she never starts. She collects sharp objects, too, and there are so many in this house. Needles, dulled kitchen knives, a pair of scissors, a single shoe she has never seen her mother wear, a necklace with a long bead that stretches to a narrow poke. The child presses the pad of her thumb gently against all

the sharp points. There is nothing in them, she thinks, that would make her want to stay somewhere. She, though, does not twitch. She, though, knows what it is to be still.

The child picks the twitching man she likes the most. The one who can be the most quiet, the most still, but who tells the grandest stories. Robert. Robert has seen deserts and mountains, has seen places where people bathe in rivers and describes exotic pastries to her mother in ways that delight her. She has heard Robert speak of cookies in all colors, dyed and frosted and filled with jams in flavors from fruits she has never tasted. She has seen the fluffy white dog who walks beside Robert to their gate and has heard Robert mention the smaller, louder pup he leaves at home. Robert has lent her mother books of all kinds, often with pictures of places he once used to travel, places that stopped existing when the twitching began. Robert wears rings on his fingers, sparkling stones in his ears. He shines like the satin sheet, and so the child believes that he is one who can be kept by such things, that there is something of him in it. She waits for Robert's return.

One day. Two days. Three days. A whole week. A month. When Robert reappears, the child has stopped counting. There had been other men in the meantime, the same cycle appearing, twitching, walking themselves through their regular routines, scratching at their shoulders and tapping their feet as they stir sugar into their coffee. The child had considered all of them. She had moved herself from the cupboard to the table and sat in stoic silence, listening to the halting conversations between her mother and the men. She knew that the river was rising, she knew about the crops this season and about brothers on their deathbeds. She listened, but these men did not shine. They were not for keeping.

For the child, time has always been difficult to measure and progress even trickier to mark. She waves to the boy beyond the fence and walks parallel with the neighbors and their dogs. She yells words that become angrier, like curses from the front stoop "Nightshade! Etymology! Leviticus!" She keeps her blue satin sheet, her collection of sharp totems. From time to time, she drapes the sheet out on the lawn and lines up her implements. The child imagines that Robert will return. That he will sit with her on the sheet and tell her of the things he has seen. That he will offer her some of his shine and produce the treasures her mother says all the men have. The child wishes for golden crowns and glittering jewels and books beyond what exists in the house. She wishes that he would appear, day after day, and share tea and bread with her and laugh and retell the stories her mother had grown tired of. She wishes he would stay to talk with her mother, to bring something new to her world. She wishes all of this and pretends

that it is so, communicates with Roberts on the lawn whenever her mother is occupied. The child practices her friendship and chides her Roberts for drinking their tea too fast, for eating her share of the bread, for not waving to the boy beyond the fence. And then one day the Robert who is not her Robert appears. The Robert is different somehow than the child remembers, but shines all the same. His rings still flash and stones sparkle from his ears. The Robert twitches more than her Roberts do, but smiles at the child's tea party on the blue satin sheet. He asks her what she's doing with those sharp objects, if the other cup of tea is for him. The child is excited, tells him that yes, yes, the tea is for him, that he can sit down on the satin sheet and that he is welcome to look at the sharp objects. The child delights in the presence of the Robert, talking to him endlessly as he nods, as he is still, as he listens to the conversations she has rehearsed with the other Roberts. The child has never spoken so much. She tells the Robert everything, expresses everything, lists the favorite words she has and the places she wants to go, asks about what is beyond the gate and then paints for the Robert a landscape of what she imagines. The child becomes louder and louder, cannot stop herself from moving and running and fidgeting and jumping up excitedly to recount a curious thing that she has seen. The Robert laughs along with the child, sips his tea and smiles even after the cup has long been emptied.

The child has become something new. She is bright and alive as she talks to the Robert. She has caught some of his shine, taken something from him. She does not see her mother watching them, does not see her step outside and her smile turn to an expression unfamiliar, clouded. She does not see that her mother stands so still in her place at the stoop, she does not know that her mother had, somehow, always expected the child to remain passive, to remain quiet, to be still and near and kept. The child plays for the first time. The child hits the Robert with a teaspoon lightly on the skull and tells him to eat his bread, she taunts him and squeals so shrilly that her mother rushes from her place at the stoop. The child watches as her mother appears, seems to materialize at her side, as she becomes a bear, as she takes the dulled knife from the satin sheet and tears the Robert limb from limb until he is perfectly still, until the child sees that there is nothing in stillness, that there is nothing.

Jessica Berger is a Chicago-based fiction writer, editor with Grimoire Magazine (www.wearegrimoire.com), and occasional critic whose work has appeared in Pank, trnsfr, Gamut, The Spectacle, Midwestern Gothic, Maudlin House, Moonsick, and elsewhere. She has routinely failed to cross "create a personal website" off of her to-do list.

TINY WOMEN

by Ingrid Keenan

Every day, the women got smaller.

Lucretia had suspected it for a while, but who could she tell? No one was going to believe a thing like that. But she knew she wasn't imagining it; in fact, it seemed more noticeable with each passing week. Monday morning at school drop-off she could actually see the difference from Friday.

Lucretia pulled her minivan up to the crosswalk and released the locks. "Loveyoubye!" a boy called out as he tumbled out of the back seat. The red lights of the minivan in front of hers went back to nothing, and the minivan moved off, but Lucretia stayed put, staring at two women in yoga pants who were chatting in front of their parked cars. A red-headed mother walked by and said hello to them, and Lucretia saw that the three women were only barely taller than the kindergartner holding the red-headed woman's hand. A horn blared behind her, and Lucretia drove off.

At the supermarket Lucretia ran into her friend Aemiliana. Almost literally: Lucretia only pulled her cart to a halt when Aemiliana jumped up from behind the cart. Her little blonde bob was no higher than the pile of cabbages she was buying. They chatted for a while, and then Lucretia paid for her groceries and went home. She cleaned things up a bit, and tried to do a bit of work in the afternoon, and then she had to go back and get the kids from school, and then she started dinner, and her husband came home, and they watched some Netflix after the kids had gone to sleep,

and then they went to bed, too.

The next morning was the same deal, but this time Lucretia parked the car so she could get a better look. After she walked the kids to the door, she turned back and almost tripped over her friend Eudoxia.

"Hi!" said Eudoxia, and Lucretia had to both bend down and squint to hear her properly. "I'm off to the gym – wanna meet me there?"

Lucretia had to work, but she said "Sure! Maybe! Sounds fun!" Eudoxia smiled in a pitying way before she hoisted herself up into her minivan.

Lucretia went to get a coffee first, though, and at all the tables in the café drop-off moms swung their running-shoed feet, like they were on swing sets.

That weekend was soccer, and the tiny moms sat in a row along one side of the field. "Give me a hand?" one mom asked Lucretia, and Lucretia gave her a boost up into her green camping chair. Next to her, another woman sat on her husband's lap. Lucretia stood, and cheered for all the kids, regardless of the team.

As they drove home, Lucretia at one point had to grab her husband's arm and screech "Stop!" when a team of tiny women breached the traffic light and flowed onto the road ahead of them. They all smiled their thanks and waved, their runner's bibs flapping in the wind, their neon shirts disappearing into the woods, like a flock of naturalized parakeets.

The leaves fell, and the snow came, and the women continued to shrink. Lucretia worried about them in the snowbanks, wondered how they were finding boots to fit.

At the Christmas concert, Lucretia stood with the fathers at the back of the classroom while the mothers sat criss-cross-applesauce on the carpet at the front.

At the Valentine's Day party, the other class mom stood on the table, placing Hershey's Kisses one at a time into each of the sixteen Dixie cups arranged in two lines. She ran back and forth the length of the table, a Hershey's kiss in each hand.

"This'll be great for my biceps!" she chirped.

"Right?" said Lucretia, and rolled her eyes.

At the Easter Egg Hunt, one of the Moms hid herself among the plastic eggs nestled at the base of a tree. A sharp-eyed robin almost plucked her away, but luckily her daughter saw her first and snatched her mother up and placed her safely in the pocket of her floral dress.

By Mother's Day the women were so small that you heard them before you saw them: little bursts of thankfulness when they opened the single chocolates their children gave them as presents. "Orange Cream! My favorite!" squeaked Theodosia, although her son had to help her unwrap it. She smoothed out the sparkly orange foil, and folded it neatly to use later. Theodosia's son had shared one box of chocolates with all the children in his grade, each child fighting over who would give which

chocolate to their tiny mother. It really saved money for the kids, but it was a disaster for the chocolate industry.

But anyway: "I can't! I really mustn't!" said the tiny mothers over their giant chocolates.

Lucretia, still enormous, said "Oh it won't kill you," but she was so damn big, and her voice was so low and distorted that the tiny ears of the tiny women simply didn't hear her words. And so they held back on the giant chocolates and they got even smaller, and by the last day of school they were little pin-pricks of light floating around their children. The children didn't know that though, they just thought their mothers had fallen down a drain or something. They never did learn the truth.

Lucretia pressed on, in her great hulking body, the only mom in town.

Ingrid Keenan lives with her family in a small college town in Upstate New York. Her stories have appeared in Room, The Puritan, The Carolina Quarterly, Iron Horse Literary Review, and The Rusty Toque.

MOTHER NATURE

by Dóra Grőber

Have you seen the ghosts? Those slender, black creatures following you around wherever you go? Or am I the only one who knows them?

No, I'm not talking about my own shadow. I'm not a child anymore. My ghosts are bigger than me. They're almost liquid and their white ribs show through their black skin. There're so many of them. And they're all different. They don't have names, they aren't Anxiety or Fear.

(Insanity, maybe.)

They're everywhere. On the walls, on the ground, everywhere people have ever been to.

That's why I love nature. The virgin, faraway wilderness is the only place they never follow me to. Maybe they're scared there, where everything's full of pure life. Maybe black cannot conquer green.

When I cover myself in mud, I like to think I don't exist. Or that I'm one with the wet soil weighing on me. It's so relaxing to breathe in unison with the rhythm of nature.

I drink as much as I can. From rivers and from lakes. I think, this way maybe I can take enough nature with me so that they won't see me when I go back to the city. So that they won't come close. I keep small fish and shells in my mouth but as soon as I get home my stomach acid kills them. Mother doesn't like me doing things like this. They don't follow her and I want to be like her. She puts soup in front of me and I eat it even though it's in the same dotted, cracked plate I used when I was 4 - before I realized Luke uses it too. I use the spoon I take the liquid medicine with.

When I'm alone, I wear mother's robe and I pick her hair from the hairbrush. I don't believe that if you eat someone's hair you will possess their powers.

I'm not a child anymore.

When I last saw Luke, he wore a black turtleneck and his mouth was shiny from his lip balm when he smiled at me. Or maybe it was spit. His mouth is always too wet.

I apologize.

Mother loves him or likes him so they're friends. You understand, yes, Robin?

When I'm sitting on the floor I can hear them being friendly and I suddenly remember that there were exactly 213 black dots jumping around on the ceiling that night. Some night. I did see the ceiling. I paid close, close attention.

Maybe they were mothers too, the black ghosts' mothers. But of course, children always outgrow their mothers, right, Robin, you grew taller than Mama.

They run across the walls and they resemble the veins on the man's hand. The ghosts. They penetrate everything, even if you lock your door or hide in the sheets. Come on, don't be childish. Every big boy does this. Every man loves this. And you are a big boy, right, Robin? A real gentleman.

Robin, Robin, Robin. Isn't that true?

I think I'm not a child anymore.

Dóra Grőber is a Hungarian writer. She likes writing about boys, wounds and anxiety.
She recently started the online literary/art journal, SCAB.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear readers,

Spring has finally sprung out of the dark; fresh shoots are appearing, and strange things are growing. It's impossible not to think of these stories in light of May Day—a day of celebration and gathering, things that don't quite happen in these stories.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson wrote: "It's not nice to think of children growing up like mushrooms, in the dark." It's not nice to think of children hoarding sharp objects, towering over their shrinking mothers, or passing time watching shadows slither along the wall.

These stories dance with our notions about children and mothers: what could better suit a spring day?

Thank you for reading, and thank you for writing,

CB & LP
editors