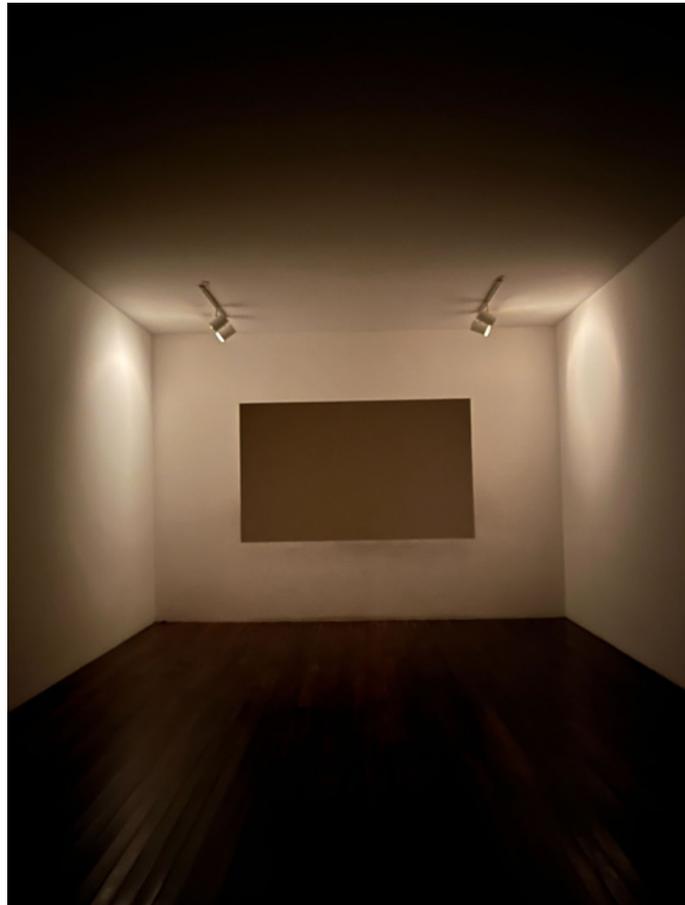


FLASH FICTION

Pandas

by Phi Scheiber



"Foggy" by Leslie Benigni

I'm in my boss's office. It is a featureless room. So featureless, in fact, it even lacks walls. It's just a white expanse. No chairs, no table. My boss sits on the floor. He hasn't offered me to sit down and it would be rude to ask or to just sit down without asking so I remain standing, towering over him. This creates kind of an awkward inversion of our power dynamic. He is talking to me — I see his lips moving, but he is so far below me — he really does seem so small that it is hard to make out any words.

"I cannot understand you," I boom down at the tiny figure cowering at my feet, but he appears to not hear me either. I want to read his lips to get some idea of what this is about — I have the distinct intuition that it is very important — or that, at the very least, I am expected to care. But I am distracted by the only other object in the room, which oddly enough I've only just noticed now.

Calling it a framed picture of what I presume to be my boss's husband and daughter would not be entirely accurate — it is a picture frame containing a slightly chubby man and a young girl, but literally. A life-sized rectangular frame with two life-sized, *alive* people chained to it. They writhe in pain.

Something brushes against my leg. I look down to find my boss stroking my bare calf with an envelope. This annoys me, so I snatch the paper from him, cutting my finger on it in the process. The amount of blood gushing from this small cut is astounding. It rains down on my boss in a night torrential downpour, staining his white shirt and soaking his hair. He seems to enjoy this — he has his face upturned, mouth open, tongue stretched out, quite like a child trying to catch snowflakes in their mouth.

I watch him for a while, then turn my attention to the envelope. It, too, is stained with blood — soaked even. I open it very carefully not to cut myself again, but the paper has gone soft and mushy so there's no real danger of further injury.

The envelope contains two brightly colored ads — one for a new HP printer and one for some premium green tea — and a handwritten note addressed to me. The parts that have not become utterly illegible read:

[Something something] *the deepest regret humanly possible that I have to inform you that your services in growing spare hearts, eyes, and tonsils for sick orphans will no longer be required, since this venture has been deemed no longer economically viable. Because of your [something something] I have managed to convince our board of directors to reassign you instead of terminating your position. For this incredible act of kindness and bravery on my part, I expect your romantic and erotic devotion and love [something something]. Your new position will be that of a panda actor at Hertzreef zoo.*

You start immediately.

Before I leave, I look back at the people in the frame — the little girl has stopped moving — and at my boss who is lapping up my blood from the floor. I worry about not being able to leave his office on account of its stretching seemingly infinitely without any walls or doors, but I manage.

At the zoo, an attractive young woman hands me a panda suit.

“It is of utmost importance that you do this job right. The public must not find out about the extinction of the great panda. It is a matter of national security,” she informs me. “The documents you have signed allow us to shoot you without warning if we see you engaging in non-panda-like activities. If we have reason to suspect that you told anyone about the extinction of the great panda or your employment here, you will also be shot immediately.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I remain silent.

“Any further questions?” she chirps. Now I don’t want to disappoint her by not asking a question; I don’t want her to think that I am not taking this seriously. Also, I don’t want to be rude.

“What are non-panda-like activities?”

“Any activities that do not fall into the standard behavioral repertoire of the great panda.”

“But I don’t know what great pandas do or don’t do.”

“Did or didn’t do. They are extinct now.”

“Right.”

“But you are not allowed to tell anyone.” Her expression is fierce as she says this.

“Right.”