

FLASH FICTION

The Moth and the Moon

by Elina Kumra



"Fluttering" by Vanesa Erjavec

He only had eyes for the moon, but I fell in love with him anyway...

The night we met, he fluttered across the café table littered with teacups and chocolate croissants from which a dark hazelnut filling oozed. Hovering inches from my face, his wings flickered against my cheek. A chance endearment that meant the world to me.

In a few billion years, he said, the moon's glow will fade from the Earth's skies and dilute its tides to nothing. I wanted to hear more of this final dissolution, but he was already taking his leave and heading homeward. Transfixed, I watched the scales of his exoskeleton shimmering like an iridescent pearl as he basked under the Super Moon.

We exchanged email addresses and midnight texts: light, moth, and winking emojis, names of bookstores and moonlit wooded paths we'd explore together in silent rapture. He suggested a rental beach house in Hurghada for the Winter Solstice. We laid by sand dunes sharing a woolen blanket: I watched as the Snow Moon lavished him with affection and kissed his silver skin sleek with shimmers. I was enraptured by the sight, but clearly out of my element: shivering to the point of numbness as the cold sank into my bones and took me over.

In an effort to revive me, he let me kiss him, ambrosia drunk and dizzy with the lunar light trapped in his gleaming scales, but the deep chill only intensified. Emboldened by the embrace, I urged him to come back inside the beach house, barely three hundred yards away.

He stared at the house, doubtful of its confines, but I doubled my pleading until he relented.

Once inside, I led him upstairs to my room where he lay down on the bed, arching back into the feather pillow, moonlight spilling across his fragile frame as the window refracted its chalk-white patina. I had never seen him so inert before and it seemed to me that the whole room vibrated with the displaced energy of his stilled wings at rest.

He slept with his back to me, facing the open window framing the western skyline — poised to bid farewell to the moon. Nestled beside him coaxed into the deepest of slumbers, I dreamed I was journeying on a ceaseless path leading to a vanishing point, lined with fields of night phlox, bathing in surreal moonless night. In the dilating twilight, under the shock of stars, the lunar moths were drawn to each other.

Waking up I had thought to meet him halfway, creating a twilit state in which we could both flourish, enjoying the best of both worlds. However, those lofty aspirations could not survive the sight of his passive surrender. I set aside my lingering modesty and sought to put the moon in its place, descending upon him from above until every last trace of it had been wiped away.

In the following hour, I came as close to that crazed ambition as any mortal is ever likely to get.

The bedsheet was littered with his molted scales, which had not survived our frenzied encounter. I gathered their flakes together in a pile, like an ant hoarding its bounty, and then ingested every last trace of them, grinding them into a powdery mash that tasted of wormwood and lye. My tongue swelled with the splinters and I savored the sting in my throat with each swallow.

The effect was almost instantaneous and I succumbed to a high that no drug could ever equal. Flush with it, I flitted from the bed, refusing to look back and reflect on the desolate aftermath; all that had been wrought by our ravening tryst.

In the kitchen, I set about my single-minded task in a state of exultation. I clipped out scales of silver silk in the silhouette of moth wings before stitching them to my spine and neck. The needle sank into skin and tissue, and blood stained my false wings like a wafer-thin blotter where all my earthbound desires could finally coalesce.

In the throes of my fever dream, I sought to drown the moon for good. Deal it a lasting blow. Undermine its sorry influence. Falling to my knees, I swept up the room's shadows, as with the desiccated wings before them, until they were piled high enough to block out any extant trace of light. For several moments I could not locate myself in time or space. It felt as if the triumph was absolute. The world went dark completely as if I had brought a total eclipse to bear.

When the vision retreated, I returned to the bedroom and found him sobbing in an old rocking chair, a pathetic shadow of his former self. With his wings having crumbled to dust, he presented a vision of pure desolation. I train-rattled my faux wings like a peacock's plume, hoping to enchant him in turn, but he stared in horror at my glorious handiwork.

Who would do such a thing? he wailed in agony, unable to look away.

Any lingering sense of rapture deserted me. There was nothing left for me to exult in. I fled down the stairs, tearing off the sham wings stitched to the blades of my scapula. In the hallway, I collapsed in a heap and started plucking the scales from their base layer, one by one, recalling those acts of childish divination I'd favored all those years before, the lines of *effeuiller la marguerite*.

He loves me, he loves me not.

And yet there was no uncertainty for me to cling to.

I knew that his revulsion would never fade away.

I stared down at my own disfigured torso, dangling thread marking my chest like so many snapped cobwebs. One wing still cleaved to me, hanging by a single stitch which I yanked at violently, causing my spine to quiver anew.

The back door was still open and I could see the wan outline of my love rival high above the emerging horizon. The moon's sallow corpse hanging over the waves like a goddess of all things broken that pointedly refused to die, wretched and frigid and alone.