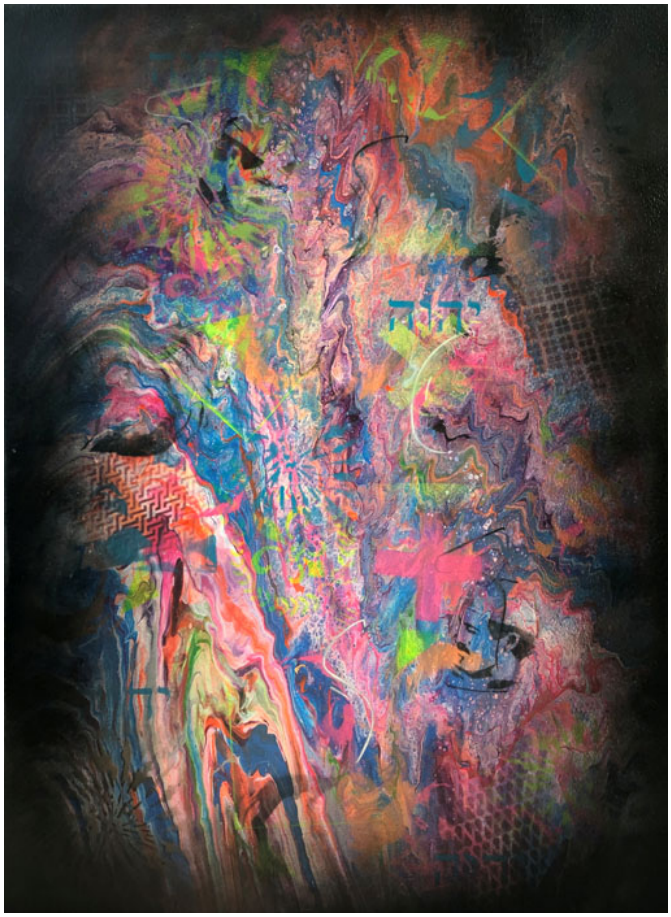
FLASH FICTION

The Puddle

by Giulia Moriconi



"Borne of Pandemic 19" by Paul Koskinen

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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The puddle has no bottom. Your foot lowers and lowers, past where the street should be. Water fills your ripped shoes more than the rain already did, sticks your jeans to your leg like a second skin, and you almost lose your balance. Making sure the street is empty, you carefully sit on the sidewalk to dangle your feet inside.

You're testing the puddle's depth; you want to know what's underneath. When you finally let yourself fall in, the water doesn't cradle you. You barely float before hitting the mud-covered floor with your bad knee.

You're in a tiny cave of concrete, trying to see through blue-gray water that burns your eyes. Thin enough to breathe, every humid inhale smells of sewers. You can taste it. The unicycle you were carrying has fallen next to you, while the juggling clubs float on top and you have to jump to grab them one by one. Would passersby see your hands sprout out of the water? Oh well, the city is full of stranger things.

There must be other organisms in here; at least a few different species of bacteria. You mentally greet them and ask if they could, very kindly, not pass you any lethal disease. You are grateful to be under the sidewalk rather than on top of it, where at night people see you sitting on a duffel bag across the street; where yesterday morning an angry shop owner chased you away for blocking the door when you fell asleep. The sounds are muffled here, and you can finally get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

It's afternoon when you climb out. You nearly get caught by a woman walking by. Luckily, she doesn't see you. She is busy fighting with her umbrella as the wind strips it down to its metallic skeleton — its frame like broken fingers that twitch while they are being shoved into an already full bin.

"This stupid rain," she turns and says to you, but more to the rain itself, and you nod. She eyes your clothes then walks away.

You look down. Not only are your clothes soaked with water, which drips from your hair into your eyes, now you are also covered in mud. Good job. Pull your unicycle out of the puddle. That'll make you feel better.

The rain stops after the sun goes down and a crowd has gathered around you. What you love about them is they don't notice your mud-covered clothes. They only see the four clubs spiraling in the air, the movement faster and faster. They only admire your balance. Normally, you would be glad for the absence of rain. The clubs don't slip from your fingers,

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your single bike wheel adheres easily to the cobblestones as it spins. But you imagine your puddle dried out and you almost wish it hadn't stopped. It's terrifying, how safety can be as fickle as rain. You wish you were a turtle, so you could carry your hide-out with you.

"Can I try?" A kid holding a skateboard has run ahead of his parents. He can't be older than ten. His parents wear matching blue raincoats; it's all you notice of them as they stop behind their son. That, and their hesitant expression: the looks they exchange that say they are not sure if they should intervene.

While you keep pedaling, you hand him a club, then a second one. If he learns, maybe the skateboard could be his unicycle. Without letting go of the two still in your hands, not yet, you show him the movements. He mimics your hands; you mimic his smile. He keeps tossing both clubs at the same time and they fall by his feet, but you don't tell him that's not the right way, because you're not sure there is a right way. He is having fun.

Once he will leave, once everyone leaves, you will walk around the corner and crawl back into the shrinking puddle. Earlier, you checked for distinguishing features to see if anyone else might be drawn to it — whether the light reflected a rainbow on it, or if the color was deeper than other puddles — but it's just a stretch of water by the sidewalk, and all you could see on it was the buildings' distorted reflection. It's not warm, or clean, but for now, it is yours.

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