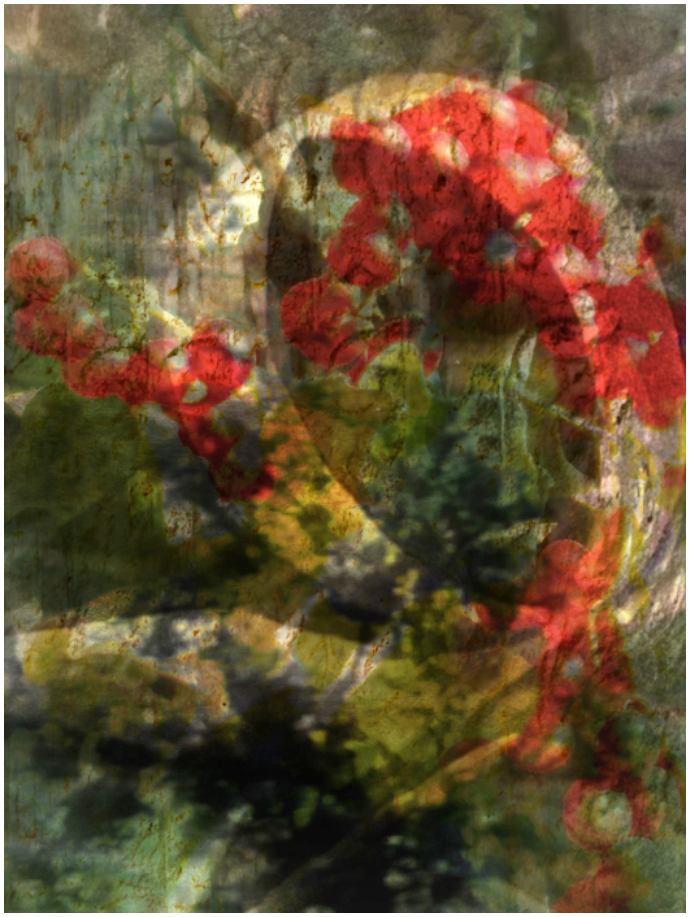
SHORT STORY

Abandoning a Pet

by Áron Bartal



"Heavy Balloon" by Taylor Daukas

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He was gonna be the rest of my life.
I was his and he was mine.
We cut through the forest, like blades.
Our edges defined us.
I was sixteen and he was too old,
but we didn't mind.
The more they talked
the more of ourselves we felt
present in them.
He and I were unstoppable.
But the questions we praised ourselves for,
were also to be our end.

When you move fast,
the smallest moments can take you
to farther edges than you forethought.
Now I know that those who praise growth
seem to wish for its control too.
His corporate look came with the job.
A package deal,
me not included
I can't even recall his name now,
even if I wanted to.

He was lying there on the dilapidated mattress. The yellow stains under his back were spreading sluggishly. He felt like dust. I tried to hold onto the respect I had for him, but no parental love can hold a candle to the coarse reality of dying. It was his last day; we both knew it. The room had a dimly lit haze, with the yellow sun peeking through the silver blinds in hopeful rays. The air was heavy. "How are you holding up?" I asked.

"Holding up…" he answered with words crawling out of his throat.

"I've a date tonight." I said, trying to cheer him up. Remind him that life went on.

"That's good… Ask your mother for advice." His eyes were shutting off. Gently but with an invisible and unstoppable force.

"Did you take your medicine?"

"Ask your mother." How could he forget? It should have been less than an hour ago.

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“I’ll ask her.”

Neither of us had the energy to talk beyond this. I just watched him breathe. He could barely do that, with every breath taking such strength. Yet they were still just breaths. No difference did they make. But he needed every ounce of willpower left in him to take them.

With a scratchy voice, he said, “Ask…”

And he was gone. The moment froze in me. He became an object right in front of my eyes. I gave a heavy sigh. We all knew this was close. Nobody would be surprised at my stoic response, yet I still felt guilty for not crying. The only thoughts I had were about how suddenly I was alone in the room now.

This date had to be good. The wasted time felt heavy on my heart. Days can’t go by like they did for him. Hollow with a purpose stolen. I trashed through my wardrobe, looking for the box with the new shoes I got from him for Christmas. In the back, it lay there in its coffin, ready to live. I was happy that it was still clean inside. As if a corpse would get young again once placed in the dirt. Almost inspiring.

I put the shoes on, a size too small. I made sure to lock the door behind me. My light illuminated the pavement. The city was silent with its soundscape. The cars made no statements as they ran by. I had no music in my ears, so the city lacked the charm it would otherwise have. The urban living grey boxes emanated no harmony. Pure ergonomics. In this desolate land, I saw what was hiding in the warm light of the bar’s window. He was just a silhouette. A figure with no statement either, yet I could feel him. Strong, like the buildings that surrounded us. Solid, brutalist, well-built structures. He greeted me with a confident wave.

The bar was a blend of rustic and cheap. Exposed brick and hard plastic cups. Rusty nails and paper-thin chair cushions. Faux poverty. The lighting put a filter on my vision. Colours were washed away and uniform in their yellowness. The smell of sweat and booze was faint, but heavy if you wanted to feel it. I didn’t. He had a tight black shirt on with the buttons up all the way. His jeans felt like they were expensive and smart shoes that shone as brightly as my new ones. I wonder if he got them out of a forgotten box for today too. “Hi,” I said meekly.

“Hi,” His voice wasn’t as deep as I imagined. “You look great.”

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“Well, thank you!” I hid my smile behind my fingers. As if I was too shy to show affection. I knew he would like that. My facade was hard to keep up though, as my feet were in immense pain. I tried to ignore it on my way here, but now that I stopped walking, it felt more present. My pinkies squashed together all the other toes. I tried to hide this, hoping he wouldn’t think it was him who caused me pain.

We talked about the mundane parts of life, to which he seemed indifferent. His answers were meticulous with little to no questions and always complimentary. Nice enough to support, but vague about his own stance on the matter. His fingers were solid, his eyes loose.

“Do you have any hobbies?” he asked.

“Not anymore. I used to write poetry back in high school, and I liked to go swimming. Now though, I have too much work to do anything besides vegetate.” I tried to laugh that off as irony. It wasn’t.

“Were you any good? In poetry.” His first follow-up. I waited with my answer.

“I wasn’t. I think I felt more important to myself than I was. Lacking what good poets had.”

“I see. What is that?”

“…Good poets invite an audience to experience an emotion. So good poetry is for the audience, not you.”

“And you were doing it for yourself.”

“Well, more like about myself. Which didn’t leave anything for an audience could latch onto. I could have just also been bad, I know plenty of people who write about themselves and make money.”

“I see.”

And then silence once more. It hung, lasting. We said goodbye shortly after and agreed to meet again some other time. I felt exhausted, like I had given a seminar about myself. I wanted to end the day. The world didn’t agree though, as on my way home, I stepped into a puddle. The shoes got ruined. The city lights reflected in the puddle and shone brightly over my darkness.

I was lying in the bathtub, letting the water cool. Staring at the wall, the white tiles reflecting the colour of me, a partial shape. A ghost of me stared back. I took my pink hand towel, wiped my face and reached for the drawer under the sink. My arm dripped with water

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as if I oozed. In the drawer, I found what I was looking for. I took it from its tomb, as I rarely needed it in the bathroom. My hands were trembling a little and my heart felt as if it turned to stone, its beating sinking deeper and deeper. My mind, however, had settled and was contemptuous of the outcome. I took the scissors to my right pinkie and cut it off. The pain was striking. Never knew how much absence could hurt. What was also strange was how calm I stayed during all of this. I even surprised myself on that front. The blood felt like it was leaking in gallons, but my set eyes stared only at the other lump of flesh, still sticking from my left foot. I took the scissors and went for it. The first went easy, but this one wasn't giving up. I saw my skin meet muscle, but I just couldn't get the bone to crack. Tears burst from my eyes, but I couldn't scream. After too many unsuccessful tries, I decided to drop the scissors into the murky dark water and use my hands to twist and tear off what remained. With a crack, it came off too. And there I was, resigned to bleed out if I had to. The room smelled like copper. The water, now opaque and viscous, buried me. Not even the waves I made as I got comfortable had any effect on the seamless entity it had become. The thick water swallowed me. I could feel one of the toes slide along my right calf as I moved. My eyelids sank.

Shockingly, I woke up. The water and blood had somewhat separated, and I could see the red marks dried to the side. The bathroom door was a tiny bit open and I could see that it was still dark. Miraculously, though, the pain was gone. I reached for my feet and by touch alone, I could feel the fresh new skin that took the place of the gaping holes my toes left. It felt soft, but that might have been my fingertips as they had been soaking in the water for hours. I was drowsy and still a little out of the whole scene but as the cold of my exposed wet skin hit me, I managed to wake up. I used my hands to hold myself up and slowly used my right leg to get out. It slipped immediately. I could barely control it. My foot felt like a cylinder. I tried a few more times to stand, but it was impossible to balance so I ended up crawling out of the tub, reaching back to open the drain. Sluggishly, with a wet diluted red mark trailing after me, I got myself to the living room. There I curled up next to the radiator and took a moment for myself. I could feel how my body absorbed all that water. My physical self, more present than ever. My alarm clock ticked away as my naked body shivered. All I could feel was fatigue. No regret, self-loathing or clarity came. I stayed just as I was. Change seemed to escape me beyond just something physical. So, I lay there in my cold puddle.

For the next few days, I was a shell of my old self. My apartment was a rotten corpse of its former glory. Dust settled. Flowers I had bought, for not insignificant amounts, wilted and dropped their petals on the ground with an elegance I lacked. I crawled from room to room, eating what I could from the fridge and sleeping inconsistently. All the meaning that time used to have had been lost on me. 3 am and 5 pm were just numbers now. Though I turned

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my clock face down after a few days. I couldn't bear watching it tick down. It didn't work though, and the sound remained. Tick. Tick. Tick. My body became a mess too. I was losing a lot of hair, letting it collect in the corners of the room. Whenever I moved them from my face, a bunch got stuck in between my fingers. I stopped putting on clothes. I couldn't. But what worried me more was that I didn't want to. There was nobody here, my faults were for me alone, and if I didn't care… then they would never be fixed. Under my sweat and grime, the skin just became another layer. I could live in this comfort forever.

This was the final straw. I looked in the mirror and realised the extent of my madness. So, I picked a jar from my kitchen and with some help from a stool as a makeshift crutch, I reached into the bathtub. My toes were right in the middle of the bloody lines leading down the drain. I picked them up and put them in the glass jar. They were bloated and rotten beyond repair. Even when I touched them, they almost melted in my hands, their texture viscous. I couldn't think of an idea where to hide or dump them, so I put them in the freezer. A new burst of energy jolted in me the second I put away the jar. This urge to clean kicked in. It was time to live again. I washed the scissors that were still left in the bathtub. With the same stroke, I washed the rest of my dishes too. Then I cleaned the bathtub. The crusts of blood came off in flakes. I tried my hardest, but the drain still had yellow, washed-out marks leading to it. I opened the window to get some fresh air. It was light, very much how city air tastes. It felt great to be with a purpose. I lit all the candles I could find in the bathroom and went to the next thing. I cleaned everything. I felt useful to myself, and so at the very end, I turned my clock's face up once more. Tick. Tick. I was ready to live again. Work again. Date again.

"I honestly didn't think you wanted another date." Most men would sound desperate when they say that, but his body told a different story. He was relaxed, lying back in his chair. His eyes didn't break contact with mine. "I had this feeling that you really didn't wanna be there."

"I liked you; we just don't seem to get the timing right." It has been nearly four months since the last time. I was expecting him to have moved on.

"That we don't. You look great!"

"Well, thank you." That was no accident. I realised that it wasn't just my fingers that I could cut off, so I started getting rid of the less admirable features on me. Some excess fat and a few birth defects, but nothing much.

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The conversation went on like this for a while. He wasn't any different from last time, yet he felt brand new. "This is a very nice place," I said.

"One of my favourites. You must try the seafood. Best clams I had in years."

"I'm not hungry, but thank you."

We sat in silence for a little.

"You know I thought about something you said last time," he continued. "About what you think makes a good poet. I didn't like it." I just stared at my feet. I felt embarrassed. "It wasn't bad, I just think it's not true. Leaders lead by their own head; their power comes from individuality. Artists lead their works, CEOs their companies and so on with their own lives. They value that above all. That's what can keep them going."

I was a little shocked at how much he was saying, so I just answered, "I see."

"Da Vinci said that art is only abandoned, never finished. So, if you don't put yourself into it, you will never find its edges."

His words hit close. I was reminded of my kitchen. I was starving, my stomach made that clear. I had been wearing the same shirt for four days. I was desperate for food, but there were no leftovers in my fridge, no pizza in the freezer, not even an apple. I looked everywhere but all I had was some uncooked pasta and no sauces. I didn't want to make anything. The decision felt distant and too heavy. I just stood there, my stomach crawling its way out of my chest. The kitchen light's surgical white colour felt inhuman. How could we make this? Its colour was something nature would disapprove of. I looked in the fridge again. Everything that I would need to make a sauce for the pasta was in there. Tomatoes, pepper, ground beef, olive oil on the counter, spices in the leftmost drawer. The cabinets next to the fridge had this wooden texture. I touched them and, for the first time, they felt fake. Untrue. I was still starving. Minutes must have passed as I stood there. In my fake kitchen, covered in the sickly bright white light. It was annoying me so much that I had to turn it off and let the setting sun come in. Yellow strokes illuminated my apartment, with shadows stretching endlessly. I took off my shirt and threw it as far as I could. I really liked this shirt, so I didn't want to get it messy. I opened one of the drawers, which turned out to be the wrong one. I was looking for my knife. The big one. I found it in the dishes, so I wiped off whatever might have been on it with some napkins. It wasn't particularly shiny, and still quite wet. Very cold to the touch. I held it to my stomach, slowly letting the knife poke my skin and tear it. Blood leaked gently but it gained momentum the deeper I thrust the knife. I could feel its cold in me. I was used to this pain now, but that made it no less awful. I moved it lower and slowly created a gap for my hand. I dropped the knife into the puddle of

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blood on the floor and thrust my hand into me. The second I stretched the cut, I screamed a little. I looked with my hands. I felt all sorts of soft flesh clumped together, yet I couldn't feel the shape of anything. They were all so delicate, as if I could squash them with just a light breeze. Finally, I found something that felt like a large sack around the area it should be. I desperately hoped it wasn't a lung. With a quick and confident pull, I yanked it out of me. It barely fit through my incision. It was my stomach, with its purple veins and dark maroon body. It was dripping blood and God knows what else. It was a lot smaller than I thought. I looked at it in the sunlight and then dropped it. The sound was also smaller than I hoped. After this, I wasn't lucid for a while. I woke up in my bed and went right into cleaning mode.

"I do like it when I can finish something." I told him, "I love cleaning my place. It's not too big, so I can always manage to get it done in a few hours, and you can really see what you accomplished."

"My job seems to never end." I had to break eye contact, so I looked down at the floor, my feet elegantly in the shoes my father gave me.

"Don't you mind that?"

"No." His answer was quick with no hesitation. He waved down a waitress. "Hi, we are both having a Negroni." The waitress said thank you and left. We hadn't even talked about the order.

When I woke up to clean the kitchen, an old memory kept coming back to me. We were hiding out in a forest. We had to stop because I lost my shoes in the chase, and I stepped on an old nail. The rust is poisoning me slowly. It's all still so clear to me. The sun with its washed-out yellows, filtered through the green tint of summer leaves. The smell was so clear and heavy as the trees oozed sap, and the ground gave away with dry mud and bits of dead branches. He was close to me. I remember his hand being cold, but maybe it was just my skin that was warm. He got close to my ear. So close you could feel his soul inside his mouth as he whispered, "Can I pull your teeth out?" I threw him off me and told him that that was disgusting. How dare he suggest that? I didn't know him like this. He wasn't him. But he was him. He couldn't have been anybody else. And after so many years now, I'm starting to understand what he meant by this.

When I cut something off, I always put it in a glass jar. I never had any idea as to what I should do with these rotting body parts. I carried them around even when I moved in with

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him. So, I never really got rid of them in the end, just put a degree of separation between us. I got better at cutting too with scalps. Skin came off like clay. It takes a lot out of you to find what needs to be changed. Even if the change is good, the mindset, which makes you look for what it is you do need to change, drains you. I was drained to say then, empty. So, on one dim and cold December day, when the snow was violent outside my window, I waited for him to come home and offered up my scalp. He wasn't confused. First, he took out my eyes.

We fought a lot. I ran off a few times, but I always came back. He had confidence in his behaviour. He knew how far he could go; what he could do that wasn't lasting. I screamed and threw shit at him. He screamed back and hit me. Hard. My mother knew about it, and she tried to be comforting. Telling me that she is okay with a divorce. That I should be happy and just let him go. Yet I couldn't. Life with him was so different. Comfortable. Slowly, things calmed down, and though he never got better, we both got older and a little more tired each year. I know that my words will never carry the soul I wish to share, but believe me when I say that I found comfort in him. He periodically took me apart and fixed me. He gave me parts which I longed for. This is what kept me with him for all these years. Shackled, with long chains, to his great hands touching me up and sewing me together. A part of me knew that this was all wrong. There was the same voice inside my brain as there was for everybody. That was something I couldn't cut off. I asked the same questions myself. Where do the new body parts come from? How did we have so much money? What were those papers he made me sign, that he was too scared to put his name on? Even if I only saw the troubles through frosted glass, their silhouettes were worrying. The mind can live in contradiction and smile without a hint of awareness if the happiness of one moment provides enough reason.

Then, even he got tired of cutting me up. Less and less would I wake up with missing fingers or pieces of bloodily strained fat on the bedsheet. Though I hoped this would strengthen our relationship, somehow it created a bigger wound. The less he fixed me, the less he cared, the less I cared to fix myself, too. We ended up with two children. They, to me, felt more like myself than I have in years. They were still malleable, still fluid. I handled them like they were the world, but he seemed not to care for them. Like a husk, he haunted us with ghastly eyes that lacked what the heart was beating for. Looking for something that he wanted, yet having no words to describe what that was.

Then something changed when the children got older. He would shout and beat them. He wanted to see himself in them, too. Beat his idea into their skulls, even if he had to shatter

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them to get it in. Yet he failed. One ran away like I did at that age. The other left us for a job. They left him. With his machine body, he wandered the world. Long, desolate sandy landscapes stretched in front of him. His purpose was unfulfilled in our children, so he dedicated his life to seeking those whom he could change. I was no longer his muse.

To me, after that, only flashes of my life remain.

A few car rides.

And elections.

An argument or two.

By the end, I tried to figure out what went wrong, but things lost their consistency. Yet their elements were similar. As if gravity pulled me, and I was a prisoner of its flow.

Slowly, the waking days turned to sleepless nights, and somewhere between the lines of living and dead, I ended up crossing to the other side, with one image in my mind.

My shape in those white tiles while I was sitting in the bathtub.

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