SHORT STORY

Snake Baby

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"Don't Look" by Kate Choi

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Snake baby came to me in a neat glass bottle, corked at the top with cellophane wrapped around it all. Mama bought it from abroad two years ago, slid it onto my table, said if you're gonna drink, drink that instead. Snake wine: medicinal, reckless, another bottle that teased the nose like vinegar, reptile essence infused into the liquor, venom molecularly deconstructed by the ethanol and turned into spiritual pharmaceutics. It's perfectly safe, it's good for you, she assured me.

But the world folds up in landscape, creases over my mother in less than a year, draws color out of her nails, her teeth. Hair gray, coffin brown, nothing to see except empty aisles when I arrive, clutching my skin together with a safety pin.

Snake baby was supposed to be dead, a cherry heart choked up, ingrained in grain. That's all it was at first, just the heart soaked in spice, but when I empty the bottle, it sours my tongue, embitters me as it washes down, numbness injects into my feet as I climb up the stairs, step after step. I lay down in my bed after — it's all I can manage after the funeral — and as unconsciousness kidnaps me, another heart beats with mine, two imprints above the bedsheets, a life inside my own. I cry and cry and my pillow goes cold against my ear; I am turned into a stone to be skipped over mild waters. I dream that I am liquid in a bottle, that I am shapeless, that I hold inside me anything at all.

The next morning brings motion. Snake baby isn't afraid to kick, flex its dorsal fins around concrete bone, slide slick in between my rib cage and pantomime compressions. When I stare at myself in the mirror, I can't see it. I know it's filling in the empty space between my organs but my body looks as it always has: skinny, five foot ten, arms thinning to bone with not a trace of snake. I close my eyes and I envision my entrails. The pattern of scales imprinted in blood, a plasma-coated serpent circumnavigating my body. Closing my eyes tighter, I turn off the lights and let the fan go quiet. Wind cuts my body, traces out Snake baby's figure in the darkness, and I press my hand against my right thigh, where the muscle pulls itself taut in serpentine fashion. Its shape materializes in my palms and I trace it down to my knee, reading the curved vertebrae like braille.

I speak to it: *You're a snake baby living inside me.*

It responds in combat. Snake baby whips its tail in the narrow space and it strikes twice, the wind-up and the snap both scald against muscle. It stings from the inside, my thigh knots up in pain and I keel over. Inhale. Exhale, let my vision clear. My leg loosens, aftershocks starting from quads and moving over my calves, tensing at the shins. Snake baby wraps around my shin, and walks me into the shower, heaving one paralyzed foot then the next. *Oh children*, I think. Snake baby likes the steam. Cozies up in the heat. To its disappointment, I regain control, lift myself up and out of the steam. *I gotta get to work, my sweet Snake baby.*

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It hangs off my collarbone, momentarily satisfied by the steam.

I'm halfway between my car and the office when I trip. I try to gather my balance, swing myself upright, but it jostles Snake baby, and it bites me from the inside. Should've called in sick to work, told the boss I was aching all over, but I never do. Once the fangs sink in, it takes just a few seconds, then I can't tell the difference between my left foot and my right hand or my right eye from the crack of my ass and everything gets tripped up like a shoelace tied all wrong, three bunny ears criss-crossed instead of two. I fall to my side and my head cracks open against the concrete. Something warm trails out from the open wound. Fatherhood is a difficult thing.

The venom numbs me to any pain. Gets me high in a way that nothing else could, all I can do is moan and grasp at the ground. Crack my fingernails against the gravel, because my spilled brain is soaking into my hair, climbing up into the follicles, tickling on the way back in. I vomit a half foam puddle onto the ground and laugh, then I vomit again. It wafts up from the cement like Cola, like red wine, like diesel smoke on the highway.

Someone sits me up and calls security. The next steps all happen concurrently, like still lifes pasted onto one scrapbook page.

The bargain-priced knitting of hospital sheets scratches my back as one of the EMTs picks me up, the puddle of my liquified brain crusty between my fingers.

I feel the cold night air before I even leave, see the hospital lights glaring above me when I face the ground.

Scoop some of my brain up, pour it back into my head with a funnel. You can't let me leave without it, I tell them.

Put my two hands together in prayer but the angels in navy collars shake their heads no, it's just blood, what's your name, they ask. The talking one holds my neck up on his palms while the other stands above me, shining sun into my eyes. The one with the palms, he looks like a tuskless elephant.

Snake baby decides to exercise then, its lithe body desperate to separate my flesh from skin and devour this elephant whole, to go one way then the other, trace the blue vessels transporting my blood with its whole body, to get lost in the stream and try to tear its way out, rip open the skin at the seams, squeeze out between the pores.

The light sanitizes me, slaps me awake as the pain takes over the high and when they ask me what my name is, I tell them there's a fucking snake inside me but they repeat themselves so I say my name is Ames and the whole time, Snake baby keeps on moving around,

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rearranging my nerves and muscles. I want to move my left leg but Snake baby has disconnected that part, paralyzed it internally. Everything else is a tangled mess of actions, movement is quizzical and impractical, my limbs sparking wired cords unplugged from their sockets.

Snake baby calms down a bit, scared of the light. Snake baby never meant trouble, so it coils up around my small intestine, says sorry through a dance along the anatomy, says it'll keep its mouth shut, fangs sheathed.

I'm telling my angels all of this in the ambulance, serenaded by the sirens and flashing red and blues. They half hang onto my moans, half stare at the hard road ahead of us.

Snake baby's not such a bad guy, I just messed up, I tell them. Tripped a little bit, fell back onto old concrete.

Snake baby, why'd you do that, I ask. *Snake baby, why can't you just use your words?*

Snake baby, the only thing I want is for you to love me. All I want is to crush up your venom and inhale it, feel it fog up my head and turn me into a dancing star, see the strobelights wash over me.

Snake baby responds by curling up onto itself into a sailor's knot. It wraps its tail around its stomach and falls over.

C'mon Snake baby, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

By the time we reach the hospital, the emergency room, the high has faded into muted grays. My head pounds and threatens to split, pressure building at the wound ready to blow like steam gasping out of a pipe. Snake baby's asleep, has been since we reached the hospital. I tell the physician in front of me one last time that there's a Snake baby inside me.

I lift my shirt up and point to the left of my belly button, where one of the kidneys should be I think, and ask him to feel it, take his fingers into my own and poke them against the fat. His fingers are cold and dry, wrapped up in a latex glove. He tells me he doesn't feel anything, but I insist, I persevere, I ask him to cut me open. Let me have your scalpel, I ask, if you're not gonna do much about it. He asks me what I've had to drink, any drugs in my system, and I say no Doc, 'course not Doc, but he says he can smell it through his mask, don't you lie to me. You calling me a liar? I ask him and he says absolutely, I'm absolutely saying you're lying, I need you to tell me how much you've had. Alcohol and anesthetics don't mix, he adds. Haven't had anything to drink, got some venom in me though, I respond. He lets out a sigh like frost from a freezer, smoke falling loose from his lips.

What kind of venom, he asks, though I haven't thought about it until now.

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What kind of snake are you, Snake baby? You a King Cobra? You're too small, your length sits snug between my elbow and my forearm, you're no bigger than my hand stretched from end to end.

I don't know, I tell the Doc, and he gets mad. He storms off, kicks up color as he walks away, leaves me all alone in the waiting room. *Now that,* I tell Snake baby, *is childish.*

Across from me, a woman with a bulging belly stares at the space where the physician used to be. I point at her, point at my own belly, tell her I get it, it's a pain this one, and she just nods at me. Snake baby coils around my heart in embarrassment, like a hose tangled around its reel.

What are you gonna name it, I ask her.

She looks away, averts her eyes like she's ashamed of me. Maybe she is.

I ask her again, and this time she shifts toward me. She takes me in, dissects me cell by cell. This autopsy hurts almost as much as when Snake baby bites.

Her, she says, emphasizing the pronoun, name is Eve.

Pretty name, I think.

My mama named me Ames, I say. 'Sposed to be French for friend.

That's a delightful name, she says. And she believes it. A smile slips out, creasing the skin at the corner of the mouth.

Sorry for talking so much, I say.

She nods, and turns away. The two of us are silent now.

Hey, Snake baby?

Its tail stands tall and raps on my shoulder like a solicitor on his last house, tired and weary of shut doors.

I love you. I'll love you 'til my heart runs out. You know that, don't you?

Snake baby's tongue flickers in response and I stop to think about how nice it would be if Snake baby could talk to me, and I could talk back. We'd talk about the way we met, cradle the words between us and share them, taking turns dipping into language. Maybe Snake baby would even laugh the silly kind of laugh, the kind that makes you giggle just from hearing it.

It takes a few moments for me to be released from the hospital. I say bye to the nice lady, and she nods at me, waves me goodbye. Everything's worn off now: the pain, the suffocation and electric closeness with death, Snake baby's injected high. All that's left is a tired me,

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and I find my way home past closed eyes.

I take another shower, rinsing the vomit and blood off of myself. Hadn't cracked anything, they'd told me, just a little bit of blood, nothing that the antee-beeotics wouldn't take care of. The nurse had an accent with pull, and it tugged me in. Almost asked for her number, but Snake baby, good boy, ran down my stomach and into that place, and strung me up tight. I excused myself, and he saved me from embarrassment.

Lying in bed, I imagine Snake baby sitting on my kidneys now, rolled up like scotch tape waiting to be pulled apart.

Snake baby, I need you more than I need myself.

It disagrees and shifts, pressing down on my bladder, and I stand up to walk to the bathroom but pause when I see the bottle and its ragged cellophane label on my nightstand. And I know this is wrong but I hold its neck and choke it out, and I slip its open lips onto mine, scouring its throat for a trace of life or being, waiting for sand to rise in an hourglass, waiting for a corpse to rise from its coffin to remind me of medicine, of love, to teach me how to rear Snake baby up so it will not find itself buried in grain liquor in the next life.

But the drop remains suspended in gaseous flight, forever evaporated into the bottle's biome, and I search for the stains it might have left because I am desperate for its spirit but Snake baby, as if reaching for home, climbs up the esophagus and grips it tight, spiraling up each organ in ladder-fashion. I curl over in pain as it reaches the stomach and the bile follows, pulled up by the tight knot of Snake baby's body. Clutching my mouth, I throw the bottle to the floor and run to the bathroom.

Everything comes loose and the lights exhale above me, door ajar to allow in air and I gasp and gasp and gasp, but Snake baby never lets up so I go again as the faucet stares down at me in stoic judgment, and my eyes look up at me against the water, begging for more.

The breathing comes late, and night has already swung into motion. Outside, a boy calls for someone, has tripped and bruised himself. His crying mixes into the air until I am unable to discern it from my own breathing, the controlled rhythm of exhalation and expulsion that dictates my life or death on this tiled floor, next to a toilet full of vomit.

You there, Snake baby?

It sits in my skull, searching for a dark corner to curl into so it can fall into a deep and anxious slumber.

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