

Segue

online literary journal

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Segue

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God's Wife

She can't remember who she is. Being toppled will do that to you. Statues of bronze, terra cotta, marble hit the hard ground, shatter. The headache lasts for millennia.

Here's one scenario. She wakes up in a dark room, hands pressed against throbbing temples. The door used to be locked but the hinges have rusted off. She pushes it open and staggers out into a passageway.

Courtiers and guards see her, throw themselves cowering onto the stone-paved floor.

Oh get up, for earth's sake, off your knees!

They flutter around her as she walks, she's trying to get her bearing, steadies herself against a wall, one of them is saying, "You're probably annoyed about the divorce," which makes no sense. She comes to an enormous chamber lit by torches. Slowly her blurred vision clears and she focuses on a small figure sitting on a throne: a minor sky-god, she seems to recall.

Far-away humans, tiny as ants, rattle spears and march into battles. The sky-god is on their side, they think, their piled-up corpses are sure to please Him. They don't see His glassy-eyed indifference, don't know that all those bodies are hardly enough for a matchhead to light a torch in His throne room.

The courtiers watch her anxiously. "He's not deliberately misrepresenting the facts when he says he's single," they say. "He genuinely has no recollection... it was long ago..."

She is nauseated. Back in the small dark room she squats against the wall, she needs to plan her strategy. There is a sword strapped to her hip—has it been there all along? It's heavy, and the hilt is rusted. She pulls it out and the blade is as bright and sharp as you could wish for in any epic.

∴

Why am I telling you this? Stories are a crucial element of the universe, no matter how you name the ingredients. Earth, air, fire, water, and stories.

Cosmic dust, superheated gas, stories.

Matter, energy, stories.

Think of me as the ultimate omniscient narrator.

∴

They gather in secret, pore over blueprints of the castle, which is conveniently full of secret passageways and trap doors. Her followers bask in righteous anger, they're going to right a wrong, unseat a usurper. Their queen is everything they could wish for in a goddess-warrior: flashing eyes, armor-reinforced leather bodice and form-fitting skirt.

They fight their way to the throne room. She knocks the cutlass from the sky-god's grip and backs him against a wall. The point of her sword is at his throat, she has only to lean on it to

drive it in.

“You told them I never even *existed*,” she says.

He mumbles excuses, eyes glazed. “I have no recollection of that,” he says. “That statement is now inoperative.”

There’s something she’s been trying to remember since she first woke up in the small dark room, it nags at her like a thought interrupted. If she had a little quiet she could chase it down, but who can concentrate amid shouts and stomps and clanging swords?

“Silence!” she roars.

She closes her eyes. Breathe. Pulse.

She would like a change of scene. So would I. Let’s do that.

∴

She sees herself hobbling away from the castle. She relaxes, feels herself expanding, multiplying, and it’s time to picture a new scenario:

A conference room, polished oak table, upholstered chairs. Dry-erase boards on easels. The Executive Committee.

Coatlicue makes a gavel appear, slams it down. “Can we get this meeting started?”

“Where’s the agenda?” someone says, and they all laugh. Being deities, they’re not good with imposed organizational structure.

Carafes, thermoses, and glassware are still being passed around, goblets for ambrosia, mugs for coffee.

Baal tastes a doughnut and grimaces. “They’re greasy,” he says. “And heavy. Can’t we manage to produce fluffy doughnuts?”

“The oil wasn’t hot enough,” Morana says. “If it’s not 365 degrees Fahrenheit, no amount of godliness will keep a doughnut from being heavy.” She points to a dry-erase board and on it appears the List of Immutable Things, the fourth item of which is:

Temperature of Cooking Oil for Doughnuts

Brigid looks around. “Someone’s missing.”

The Wife rests her head in her hands. The headache still hasn’t gone away. She’s not sure who she is. Someone calls her Asherah, which sounds familiar, but then again, so do Anath, and Astarte.

And it’s hard to concentrate. Beside her the Trickster keeps changing shape, he’s Raven, he’s Eshu, he’s Anansi.

Also distracting is the cross-chatter, the kind you’d expect at a confluence of divinities:

“Have you tried incarnating as a bull? I recommend it.”

“You know what I never get tired of? The aurora borealis.”

“I like the solar winds myself.”

Muyingwa nods toward the empty chair of the minor tribal sky-god. “Where’s he gone to?”

Gyhleptis shrugs. “Is he gone? I hadn’t noticed.”

“I heard him say our organizational chart is too chaotic,” Pan bellows from the other end of the table.

“Organizational chart?”

“That’s what *I* said.”

“I’ve seen a press release.” Kuan Yin waves a small leather-bound book with gilt-edged pages. “It appears he’s claiming he’s some kind of Big Boss, and anyone who doesn’t believe that gets eternal damnation.”

“Which is?” says Yemayá.

“Not sure, maybe it’s in the appendix.”

“What an ego trip,” Osiris mutters.

They can’t help giving sideways looks at Changó, another virile, male, bolt-hurling deity.

“Hey,” he says, “we’re not all alike. That guy has no sense of humor. And he can’t dance.”

The Wife realizes that the worst thing about the small dark room is that she’d forgotten these others, caught up in her domestic drama. A particle flung off from the whole.

She’s been on the front lines. The others don’t even know there *is* a front. They don’t know they’re in danger. Her headache is subsiding now. All she can think about is how much she wants to protect them.

“He’s claiming that the rest of us don’t exist,” she says. “And that he’s the equivalent to Ultimate Reality.”

Murmurs of astonishment.

They decide to form a subcommittee. Atabey and Mithra start a sign-up sheet.

“He’s only been gone five minutes,” Athena says. “How much harm can he have done?”

Soon they’re bored. They start levitating the conference table.

∴

Back at the castle—no, are you tired of the castle? So am I. Let’s have a scene on the beach.

Sunshine, white sand, crashing waves. You fill in the details.

The Wife sits at a rolltop desk just beyond the tide line, reading page proofs of the minor sky-god’s press release. The desk is made of quarter-sawn oak, stained golden and varnished to a high gloss, the kind you see in museum-houses where the furnishings of great men are preserved, so perfectly solid and ponderous, so authoritative. But it only seems that way, because remember the crashing waves? Inevitably they will smash the desk to flotsamy bits or wear it down like they do with rocks, so if someone were to analyze the sand on this beach one day they would find microscopic grains of stone, pulverized shells of sea creatures, bits of rolltop desk.

At her feet sits a follower, a foolish little person, who wants to write a story about the fall of a male sky-god.

“You think I have no right to be angry?” the follower asks.

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’ve been cheated. Growing up, no one ever told me about you.”

“I was there, shrunk to size. In stained glass and tapestry. In stories.”

Stories, the stuff of the universe. She speaks to gods, births a god. In a garden she reaches for fruit, defies unjust orders in her hunger for wisdom. She spreads a cloak full of red roses.

The Wife examines the page proofs. She’s going to make changes in the new edition. If

generations of monk-scribes could do it, so can she. Rifling through the pages, she finds a place where the god is jealous, angry, hurling threats. *Go ahead and dance for the golden calf*, she pencils in. *I'm the calf, the gold. The dance. The dust your feet kick up. Gentle, motherly woman with blue cloak and halo? That too. I also dance in cemeteries, naked except for necklace of skulls, headdress of snakes.*

"You keep changing shapes," says the foolish little person.

"That's because you're not sure what I look like."

"Shouldn't *you* decide that, being the deity and all?"

The Wife flips through the pages some more. That garden story, she always felt it could use an alternate ending: You can't *throw* me out, I'm *leaving!*—something like that.

The follower is sulking. She kicks her toe at the sand. The waves churn up, leap toward them. She scrambles backwards on her elbows, water swirling around her.

"You can't just change the pronouns, make me Boss Lady," the Wife says. The desk is starting to float. "If I topple him from the throne, the throne vanishes too."

The follower gives up and lets the waves grab her and twist her around before tossing her back on shore, limp and bruised. She sits up, picks the seaweed out of her hair.

"And maybe he needs to be rescued," she tells the foolish little person. "Have you thought about that? Maybe he doesn't want to be up there in the sky, he's woozy from the height. Waiting for someone to help him."

Memo

From: Executive Committee

To: You

Date: Today

Think of an eyelash, a fingernail, a lung cell. Why should your eyelash worship you?

The follower doesn't have a polished-oak rolltop desk, but at least she *had* a notebook, a pen. No more. She needs both hands to climb the ladder.

She has only one question, and it couldn't be simpler. Why?

But the sky-god's busy trying to construct people out of different materials. He tries particleboard. He tries bread and honey. He refuses to answer her and she's annoyed at his arrogance, but maybe the wind stole her voice, she thinks, maybe he's confused. He keeps changing shapes: burning bush, scowling marble sculpture, fresco of white-haired man.

She waits till he turns into a simple wooden statue with fading paint, then she grabs him and tucks him against her hip. She looks down at the vast amniotic ocean from which they came, the warm, dark, salty tides. They jump.

Author Notes

Rosalie Morales Kearns is a fiction writer of Puerto Rican and Pennsylvania Dutch descent, with short stories published in Painted Bride Quarterly, Fringe, Kalliope, Natural Bridge, and other journals. She is seeking a publisher for her story collection and is at work on a novel. Kearns has also published a scholarly article on creative writing pedagogy, and is planning a book-length project exploring what instructors of creative writing can learn from feminist and postcolonial theory, composition studies, and teaching practices in the performing and visual arts. Kearns received her M.F.A. from the University of Illinois. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer at the State University of New York at Albany.

About the Work

My writing is glacially slow, and my memory poor, but I'll try to reconstruct how this story evolved. About ten years ago I was copyediting a book manuscript on pirates and came across a quote from an 18th-century "history" in which a pirate's nagging wife is blamed for driving him to his life of crime. That accusation irritated me, and I always wished the wife could have rebutted it. I was also thinking about how there are certain words that many of us automatically picture as describing men: not only *pirate* (despite the existence of female pirates) but also *warrior*, *sage*, and so on. I thought about doing some stories from the point of view of the wives of these men. Thus evolved a story cycle called "The Wives," with a revolutionary's wife just as brave and fierce as her husband; a pirate's wife who also longs for the freedom of the open seas; and a priest's wife (had to go back to 10th-century England for this one) who is much more intelligent, spiritual, and profound than her well-meaning but somewhat dim husband, a semi-literate village priest.

The original plan was to do each story in first-person, with different modes; for instance, a traditional first-person narrative, and then one in which the narrator is addressing a specific character; then perhaps a dramatic monologue, etc. The plan quickly went awry. I felt claustrophobic in this point of view, with the result that only "The Priest's Wife" is consistently in the first person (she addresses the Virgin Mary throughout). In "The Revolutionary's Wife," the wife is answering questions from a reporter, interspersed with a third-person narration describing her life before exile. "The Pirate's Wife" has an omniscient narrator in a fabulist mode.

I always knew that the fourth and last part of the cycle would be "God's Wife," evoking the pattern of demotion the goddess underwent in patriarchal traditions: originally a stand-alone goddess-mother, then the mother of a male god, then the wife/consort of that god, and then poof—she disappears.

I had nothing beyond a few fuzzy ideas for this while I wrote the first three stories. I thought at first that this wife's voice would be blissful and expansive, as I might feel if I were a deity. Then again, wouldn't I be annoyed that I'd been displaced by a junior male? And wouldn't it be fun to overthrow him?

These ideas took me only so far. First of all, I thought that something whimsical would be more satisfying to write. After all, the universe doesn't take itself so seriously. Plus, having her angry about her dethronement, or triumphant after battling the usurper, would have left me with a one-note song, and I wanted something more complex. I also wanted to play with metafictional

techniques. So here was my opportunity for that (“She would like a change of scene. So would I. Let’s do that,” etc.).

I had a lot of fun writing “God’s Wife.” For the first time I placed myself inside a story: “a follower, a foolish little person, who wants to write . . . about the fall of a male sky-god.” I also had fun evoking elements of the first three stories in this last one. The revolutionary’s wife, an atheist, makes a disparaging remark about the cheap furniture that is all she can afford:

they take the little odds and ends of lumber and grind it into sawdust. Then they mix it with water and press it into whatever form they want, tables, chairs. Before you know it God will show up and form it into people. Maybe better than our kind.

The pirate’s wife, on the other hand, imagines God as indifferent. When she climbs up into the sky to confront him, “all she can think to say is, ‘The king is in the counting-house, counting out his money.’” This evokes the nursery rhyme, the next line of which is “The queen is in the parlor, eating bread and honey.” So in “God’s Wife,” when the follower climbs up to God to ask her question, she finds him “trying to construct people out of different materials. He tries particleboard. He tries bread and honey.” Waiting for him to turn into a statue evokes the priest’s wife, who takes a statue of the Virgin Mary out of the chapel, tucks the statue against her hip, and sets it down in a forest stream. And of course God’s glassy-eyed non-responses (“I have no recollection of that”; “That statement is now inoperative”) could have come from any number of White House press conferences during the Bush-Cheney years.

Rosalie Morales Kearns on the Web

www.terrain.org/fiction/22/kearns.htm

home.comcast.net/~wapshot1/fall08/Fiction.Kearns.html

www.cezannescarrot.org/vol3iss2/wildwood.html

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