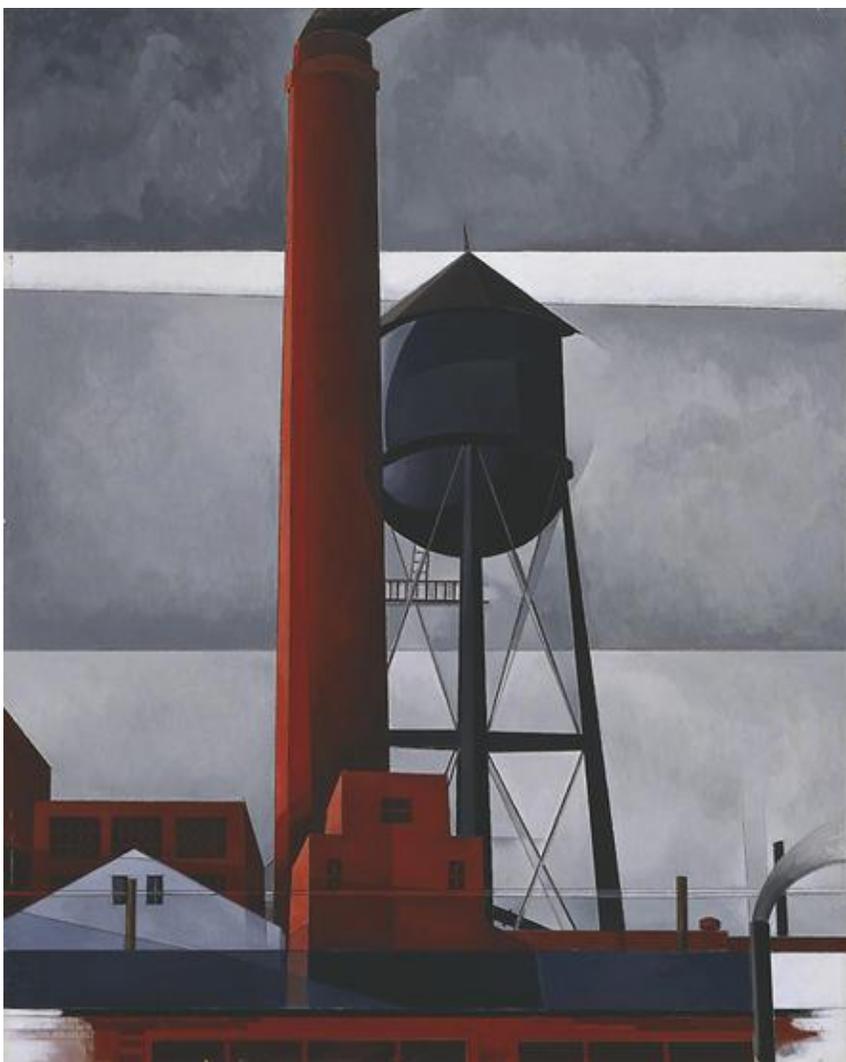


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WHERE
THE THIN WINDS
WORRY



A FLASH FICTION SEQUENCE BY
CAROLYN MIKULENCAK

OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS (O:JA&L)

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WHERE
THE THIN WINDS
WORRY

CAROLYN MIKULENCAK

Carolyn Mikulencak

WHERE THE THIN WINDS WORRY

*I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.
To you they have shown some truth.*

Carolyn Mikulencak

WHERE THE THIN WINDS WORRY

WHEN SHALL WE MEET AGAIN?

C. had just been talking about days that change everything but you don't know it until you look back and say that was the day everything changed. She had just been talking about those sorts of days and then C. woke up Monday morning to a storm. The storm had blown in from the coast. It had traveled for some time over land to get to her house, but it didn't feel like it. The rain lashed at her bedside window as though straight from the sea. It didn't help that the sisters in the house next door had erected a tent in their side yard to protect a rusting convertible they never drove. The tent was directly below her second-story window, and what with the rain and the tent's whipping tarp, C. woke up thinking *squall*.

It must be said that C. had an appointment with a psychic that afternoon. She had never been to a psychic before—she skipped the newspaper horoscopes almost superstitiously, let not the eye linger—and there was nothing in particular she wanted to know now, but so it was that Monday was the day she would have her first consultation with the woman who had pinned a fringed flyer

on the bulletin board in the neighborhood coffee shop. The woman's slogan: *Why not ask for what you want?* C. stood in front of the bulletin board by the bathroom where the toilet flushed violently at regular intervals and the door opened and shut. Maybe it was this: she spent much of her time wanting to talk about herself but acting like she didn't. It suddenly seemed like a good business transaction to pay someone to ask her questions and tell her about herself, in case there was more to know.

OF COURSE HER FRIENDS WERE FREE.

It surprised her how few of them worked. They would invite her over for a drink if they knew she wanted to talk. But something happened with them and there was nothing to say. If a black light were turned on, everyone would see a purple corona of silence surrounded her. It was always there. She had seen it when she was nine years old at the state fair, in the mirror of the haunted house, and the reflection confirmed what she had suspected about herself. Over the years she learned to ask questions to get other people talking so no one noticed she was not talking. Or they would notice and politely fill in the gap. But this can be embarrassing because people are smart: they see the weed and sense the elaborate root system, the underground tangle that pullulates and pushes and threatens to tear open the entire garden with *me*, with *let's talk about me*, a need not suitable for public view. So she struggled to make conversation that revealed, but not too much. And then she would mostly listen while she looked out the window. Passing delivery trucks, an empty garbage can

at the curb, somewhere, a cat: the view was almost always the same.

It went like this wherever she went, whomever she talked to, even with her friend, Emily, when the two of them sat in Emily's messy living room, a pot of water boiling on the stove for tea. Emily, who wanted to hear everything. *Now tell me everything*, she said when C. told her about maybe seeing a psychic. But what was there to tell? She had seen a flyer at the coffee shop. That's all C. had to say, and the momentum of Emily's *everything* funneled into a little dot of stagnated time, a small, leftover pool of algae-slicked time around which the fly that had flown in through the open window lazily circled and in which C. found herself only half-listening to Emily's saga about her twin brother—it was not Emily's fault; C. had made her talk—half-listening and sitting on the edge of her chair so that when she crossed her legs, she could twist the foot of the crossed leg behind her other leg. A girl in her elementary school had sat this way.

Meanwhile Emily was still talking about psychics. Her brother's psychic said that, in his past life, he had been a medieval monk whose throat was slit for apostasy. His throat was slit, Emily said. Through the vocal cords all the way to the cervical spine. So a psychic

doesn't always tell you what you want to hear, Emily was saying. And is C. worried about self-fulfilling prophecies heard from a false prophet?

But C. was still thinking about the girl with her legs twisted around each other. And why remember this? And why remember—because it often comes back to her—why remember the day she sunbathed at the complex where her father lived? There must have been many days of sunbathing and there were many apartment complexes, but this is the one she remembers. Eventually she grew bored—the pool lukewarm, a radio commercial playing from a maintenance closet—and she crossed the parking lot and climbed the stairs back to his unit and walked into the kitchen where she caught the room in the act of being entirely alone. *Behold, I show you a secret thing*, the ordinarily dreary space said. Cold air rattled a loose piece of metal in the ceiling vent. Her eyes dilated to the dark room, which revealed itself first in a dim outline and then particularized. There it was, yes, the refrigerator. The refrigerator, the sink, and the kitchen counter that her father, when on the telephone, liked to wipe down and then, folding the towel in half and then quartering that fold, wipe down again.

Okay now, he often said in moments of transition. He said it with an exhale: *Oh-kay, now*. And then he moved on to the next thing.

BEFORE WE GO ON, WE MUST TALK ABOUT THE SISTERS WITH THE OLD CONVERTIBLE WHO LIVED NEXT DOOR.

She thought of them collectively as Boobs because all three of them were very large chested. They were not large chested in a sexy way or in a maternal way. It's hard to explain and perhaps unkind, but the way they were large chested made them appear dumb, and, worse than dumb, backwoods. Backwoods is not an expression C. likes to use to describe a person because she grew up in a rural town in a house near a rusted water tower, and, although she did not feel shame during the years she lived there, now that she is six hundred and sixty- three miles and two decades removed, she worries she might say or do something that gives her away. Like when Emily saw her using her index finger to taste the last of the ketchup on her plate. *That's trashy*, Emily said in a conspiratorial tone, like they were friends enough to tease each other. Perhaps she meant it as a compliment, something along the lines of daring and authenticity. But a person who is hiding something essential about herself can never take a compliment.

For a person who is hiding something essential about herself from herself, everything means something, and so C., twisting a napkin around her finger under the table, wondered in what other ways and over how many years she had been exposing something secret to the watching eyes of others.

So, this.

But close her eyes, and C. is at Rodger Higginbotham's bus stop again where the low and mangy trees crowd the road and, just beyond the trees, the old pencil water tower rises from the cow pasture. Was the water tower actually painted to look like a pencil? Or, is this something she has imagined? Has she been her whole life fooling herself to see pencils where there were, in fact, none? It doesn't matter. We see what we need to see, when we need to see it. And C. needed to see pencils, so she saw one in the water tower, the tower that signaled Rodger's bus stop. The tree branches dragged along the windows as the school bus slowed to a stop. The doors opened with a pneumatic sigh. Rodger rose from the back, exited, and then disappeared down a dirt road that was rumored to lead to a river but was probably just another creek, maybe flooded from the spring rains. C. never went to look for herself. This memory might sound

unpleasant but it is not because it is
from her childhood.

BUT ALSO SOMEHOW FROM HER CHILDHOOD, THE BOOB SISTERS.

The Boob sisters, their brindled cat Nikki, and three dogs they never walk. Instead, they let the dogs into the yard beside their house at all hours of the day and night. The smallest dog, Jacques, tortured by eczema, has rubbed a bed into the dirt under the tent under C.'s bedroom window by writhing on his back with his paws in the air. When let out, at all hours of the day and night, he goes straight to this dirt bed under C.'s bedroom window yelping and writhing, as though in the throes of a protracted birth or death, either one, it cannot come soon enough.

It might seem too many things have gathered under C.'s bedroom window: first rain, then a tent, and now a dog. These, and so much more that has not yet required attention. For example, the purple-flowering weed that has taken over the narrow stretch of grass between the side of her house and the chain-linked fence of the sisters' side yard. If she were honest with herself, she would say the responsibility for the invasion—if someone had to

claim it—lay with her mother, who bought the plant at the hardware store during a visit even though the man checking her out warned her mother the species was invasive. Never mind, it's pretty. And the purple flowers did look pretty potted on C.'s stoop for a month or so until the sun killed them. C. never did water plants. Still, the seed and their progeny lived on in the shade under C.'s bedroom window where they went wild and attracted the mice, who needed a place to hide from the possums in the palm trees, but maybe also from the rats running the power lines, the street cats that darted out from under parked cars, and, of course, the sisters' dogs, whom everyone was hiding from, specifically, it seemed, the sisters.

ARE WE BEING UNFAIR TO THE SISTERS?

Perhaps there are those who enjoy walking a dog and those who do not. C. tries to look at the trees and all that. She tries to enjoy the dog walk as an exercise or meditation, as her husband might say. Because it is also true that C. has a husband but he is not part of the story in the way that you rarely dream about those people you see everyday. So, to start over, although she tries to enjoy the walk as a meditation, the last thing she wanted to do on this Monday morning, as the room darkened into thunder and the rain lashed the tarp outside her window, was walk her dog. Yes, she has a dog too, a dog she walks and cleans up after instead of letting out into the side yard at all hours of the day and night. And the absolute last thing she wanted to do was get out of bed and walk the dog in this storm. In this squall, she thinks. Another flash of lightning and it's off. The dog can pee in the house. The dog can pee in the house and it's a relief. It's almost something she wants to happen in the way she finds herself hoping for the worst. The way you think—when the worst doesn't happen—that the worst is a gift into a new way of living you

could never have imagined for
yourself. Instead of the worst, the
daily life. The dog whines at the door
downstairs. It's time.

WOULD IT HAVE BEEN THE WORST IF THE DOG PEED IN THE HOUSE?

Yes, it would be the worst.

Why?

Because she remembers walking across the living room after her father moved out of the house. She remembers feeling those patches of carpet no one had thought to clean. She remembers fleas. You pick them off the dog's belly and drop them into an empty vase on the coffee table where they jump until they die a white porcelain death. The world is more ordered now. We are more vigilant. The dishes are all washed before bed, even the pots. The sheets are folded in the closet. The dogs are walked.

THE DOG WHINES AT THE DOOR BUT REFUSES TO MOVE WHEN C. OPENS IT.

He also doesn't want to go out in the rain. The rain, which has released the odor of Boobs' side yard. C. smells it when she tugs the dog down the steps and out onto the sidewalk. Or maybe it's less that she smells it and more that she *knows* what the side yard smells like, *knows* how the essence of the smell is released when the rain makes moist what had been fossil, *knows* as though she stands near one of those fossilized piles, one here in the weeds, another by the rotted rubber tire of a car that was last driven in 1985, in October, the month when the blooms on the rain tree in the sisters' front yard turn into pink lanterns that fall underfoot on the sidewalk, reminding them—if the rusted covered car were not enough—that they once had a father.

Yes, Boobs have a father, an electrician who drove a convertible until one day he didn't. Until one day in October, he left for the West where he had a job to wire a strip mall in the desert and never came back. *Oh, he said he would be*, declared the mother,

because it is also true that Boobs have a mother and did not, as it seems to C., emerge from the prima materia of their own breasts, so large as to be ancient, so prehistoric as to be hidden under not layers of dirt, but ratty sweatshirts that obscure the nipple and curve by turning the breasts into one lump that merges into the other lump of their stomachs, for all three sisters are chubby, although the youngest a little less so. The mother, on the other hand, wavers behind the screen door, a thin flame, the three daughters having taken all that they could from her. She hangs out at the screen door and makes small talk with those who don't know to cross the street. She has no breasts to speak of and what is left is withered behind a floral smock that reminds C. of the Cuban Missile Crisis. *He'll be back*, she has told C. many times. *They always come back*.

THE RAIN IS KEEPING EVEN THE MOTHER FROM THE SCREEN DOOR TODAY.

Or C. doesn't turn to look. Habitually, she walks the dog in the opposite direction. Even the dog knows to make the right from the front door. So they make the right into the rain and wind and the wail of a distant siren, and then they make a right again toward the main road—they're making the block—and that's when C. turns the corner and sees something that she is uncertain she is seeing. She sees Boobs the Youngest under an umbrella. First only her, and then the long red leash, the retractable kind with leeway for the dog to nose around in a front garden out of sight until, seeing C., she pushes the button and reels him out from under the oleander and back to her feet. It is only Jacques that the Youngest is walking, not the other two dogs—oh, C. could go on about those Shelties, especially the molting one—but even she knows the other two dogs are not the point. It is Jacques who wakes C. up with his contorting; Jacques at whom she had thrown a hairbrush yesterday with his yelping beneath her window; Jacques whose name she yelled so loudly that

even the sisters must have heard from somewhere inside their house, maybe in the room with its window opposite C.'s bedroom window. The mini-blinds in that room are bent and haywire from the cat but for the most part forever drawn down. And on top of that, a plank of wood is nailed across the outside frame to protect the glass from a hurricane that passed over decades ago.

WHO NAILED THE PLANK?

Who exactly nailed the plank is something C. thought about and didn't think about when she looked out her bedroom to that opposing window. *The ghost at the feast*, she had told her husband, who is not part of this story. He did not hear her anyway because he was gargling mouthwash in the adjoining bathroom. She immediately regretted having thrown the semi-expensive hairbrush out the window where it only bounced off the tent. That regret, plus the sudden cawing of lost seagulls flying overhead and then the rumble of the city bus making its stop on the main road, all this had put her in the mood for ghosts.

Because C. has never seen the father.
Because she cannot picture him.
Because she cannot believe these midnight creatures had been sired. To trick herself, she imagined one of the sisters on the ladder, most likely the eldest, who is the most efficient of the three, the one who is forever hosing out the trash can in the driveway. C. imagined her balanced on the ladder with a hammer and nails but, at the same time, C. also knew it was not any

one of the sisters. It was the father. It was the missing father who nailed the plank. He must have climbed the ladder and boarded the windows after a short drive to the lumber store, back when the wood smelled fresh and the wind was just starting to stir the palms and he cared about the safety of daughters. Now that same plank is dry-rotted, haunted-house wood—no one to take it down, so why bother? Boarded windows, mini-blinds drawn, the Boob house is a house that tallies its losses, closes its ranks, and keeps mum.

EXCEPT FOR THE BOOB MOTHER.

Mothers are always the exception. Mothers want to weep and wail and hash it all out and ask how you're doing and ask if you're sad. Mothers want to hang out behind the screen and know where you're going and when you'll be back. But between daughters and fathers, a pact of silence. A deep ocean floor where a lone crab scuttles. Understand that C., also the daughter to a father, never talked to these girls. I mean, really talk in the way neighbors sidewalk talk. In the way that the Boob mother talks. C. knows, for instance, the mother's interest in planting basil, she knows the mother's opinion of the sycamore across the street—a garbage tree—she knows, of course, about the electrician and his strip mall, all the knowledge cluttering C.'s thoughts like the hairpins and crumpled receipts C. must dig through at the bottom of her bag to get to what she really wants.

What do you want?, C. imagines the psychic asking her. She will part the beaded curtain, she will sit in a velvet-upholstered chair. The psychic will reach across the table and take her

hand. *What is it that you want?*, the psychic will ask.

Understand that the sisters do not engage in conversation. They walk from front door to car door. Do they not even say hello? No, they do not say hello. They move in silence and sweatshirts. This silence makes the occasional thing they do say sound prophetic, like the time Nikki, so often perched on the windowsill between the mini-blind and the pane, got out. Nikki made a break from the house and how they called for her as outside grew darker, as the streetlights clicked on. A cat cast out in the night, a house cat with compromised peripheral vision. She could not protect herself. She was declawed! She would starve to death! C. filled in the details of their desperation or maybe the mother told her from behind the screen, either way, C. didn't care about all that because since when was a cat ever lost? Cats choose to go. Cats choose to go to deliver a message from the bowels of the home that holds on to them, the home that clings to them—oh, the sucking power of that original belly-vessel we call home—but Nikki had made a break. Nikki got out.

And Nikki, Nikki, Nikki come home!

C. heard the sisters call for the cat in the street. She heard them combing

the side yard, calling *Ni/ke/i*. They picked up the edge of the car tarp, revealing only rotted rubber and oil stains. They climbed the chain link fence, they parted the purple flowers and crawled under C's house into that dark crawl space to deliver a message, ostensibly to Nikki, but C., up in her bedroom and listening to it all, couldn't help but feel they were delivering a message to her.

IS IT THE CAT OR THE GIRLS DELIVERING THE MESSAGE?

She tells herself it doesn't matter. A light outside her open window clicked on and off and on again, a wandering sister slinking back and forth and setting off the motion sensor the father installed to protect the rotting convertible before it was rotting. It doesn't matter. Either way, a message is being delivered from the house of Boobs. It wants her to know something and so C. listened in her bed in the on and off light. One sister stood in the side yard and commented on the other sister's progress as she crawled into the dank non-space under C.'s house, so everyday as to have a rake and a weed whacker, yet so under-worldly with its dampness and dirt, its sightless tubers, its beetles, its insistence that there is a flipside to every minute lived, a silence beneath every word spoken.

Do you see her, the sister in the side yard was saying. Tell me if you see her.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Carolyn Mikulencak lives in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her writing has appeared in the *Oxford American*, *Yemassee*, and *Southwest Review*, where her story “Lonestar Overnight” won the 2018 David Nathan Meyerson fiction prize.

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