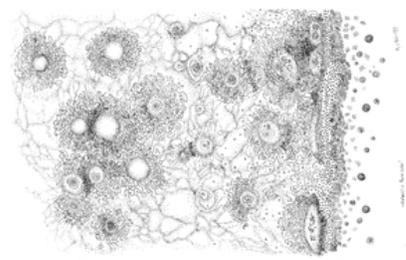


Prick of the Spindle



Guest artist : Regina Valluzzi. Graphic shown above right: 'Entropic Repulsion'

Current Issue ^{Vol. 8.3}

[Interviews](#)

[Archive](#)

[About](#)

[Galleries](#)

[Guidelines](#)



[Kindle Edition](#) | [Fiction Open Competition](#) | [Print Edition](#)

[links](#)

Follow us: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

[articles](#)

Silent Running

By Leonora Desar

You would never know that fall is coming. Not in the throaty grip of summer in that seaside town. Here, the carnival unspools like a grainy, silent film reel. You can stretch out on the sand forever, grinning like a cat in the sun.

I am calling your name from a low point on the horizon where the boardwalk never ends, where it stretches into twilight thick with the yellow smoke of hot dogs and cigarettes. You and mom are up ahead and my child's legs are racing to keep up. But I fall behind into your long, angular shadows, my voice crying, "Daddy."

We are flying.

We are flying past the funhouse with its dumb, painted cartoon lips.

They open wide, swallowing us whole, spitting us back out again beneath a fading poster of Andromeda, who, you whisper, was eaten by the sea monster after all. We ride the roller coaster in a flimsy car and snake up metal vertebra, one by one, all the way up to the sky.

Your screams ring out when we shoot back down again. Do you know right then that you are going to live forever?

Your last trip back to the shore is in the trunk of my car. Your ashes sit in a bag sealed up tightly inside a green cardboard box, nesting like a Russian doll. You stay like that for three days, brushing mutely against the dull plastic of my suitcase. When I can no longer look at you I hide you behind the red and white swirls of a beach umbrella, in the shadow cast by the weathered orange plastic of a pail and shovel.

For days I forget you, walk the boardwalk beneath fast clouds and gauzy teal skies. Tokens for arcade games still sing in my pockets but the horizon is clear, crystal clear, the yellow vapor of hot dog and cigarette smoke having lifted long ago.

Do you watch over your memorial, ecstatic, on that clear, coral evening? Hundreds of people with eyes like flames come just to talk about you, only you—the knighted professor who changed the field of social work as we know it—no, who changed their very *lives*.

"Jeff was so brilliant," they coo, crowding my mother, your widow. She sits there with that tight, pursed half-smile, her eyes trained on a small coffee stain in her lap.

You know why I can't come, don't you? You know me. I wouldn't be able to stop myself. No, that's not my father, I would say over and over again, not satisfied until the light died from their eyes. That charismatic, caring, effusive, man? No, that's not him at all. I never met *that* man before in my life.

When I am five I ask if you believe in God.

"There is no God," you exhale, your words hanging heavy in the air.

"But what happens when we die?"

"Nothing happens. It's all about what we do right now."

You amble over to the ancient bookshelf, balancing your scotch glass in one hand and plucking a thin volume that I can't read in the other.

"It's all right here," you slur over your shoulder, waltzing out the door. "As long as you are alive you have choices."

Tell me, what am I supposed to do with *that*, now that you are gone?

I go looking for you.

I go looking for you in the long, thin living room in the old Bronx apartment. Mike and the Mechanics' "Silent Running" floods air already choking with pipe smoke and ash, pleading, *Can you hear me? Can you hear me calling you?* You are pacing, relentlessly pacing, until the floorboards fissure underneath your feet. What is it that you're dreaming?

Are you eighteen again with black eyes flashing, stalking tall, reedy boys with the silver edge of your switchblade, faster than a shadow, the cops hot on your feet? Are the handcuffs cool against your wrist bones? Are your prison nights long? Do you remember?

Maybe you are twenty-two, rehabilitated into a shiny, minted coin and newly married to my mother, who starches your white linen shirts clean and smooth. She hovers by your side, helping you solve chemistry equations sketched out in your spidery scrawl during community college class lectures. You want to curl up your fist and shut your eyes tightly until it all bleeds out of focus.

Why are you so restless? What are you looking for when you gaze over my mother's shoulder and into the distance, unreachable?

Maybe for your own mother, with her hollow, china doll stare and rosebud lips glossed into a movie star smile. You are three when your father dies and leaves you with her in the railroad apartment that you come home alone to night after night while she works to make ends meet. Your metallic house keys burn against your birdlike chest on their black, fraying string. Are you afraid when you turn the radio on as high as it can go, trying to cast out the shadows as they lengthen beneath your bedroom window?

Do you find what you are looking for after I am born, in the woman with the tumbling mass of coal black hair and eyes so still that you can see your own reflected there, as dark and as deep as the bottom of the ocean? You bring her home one night for dinner, my mother cooking for the three of you in the next room. I am hiding in a shadow. Watching.

Mom said—still says—that she didn't know. But *I* know when the three of you sit down to eat on the worn brown couch, mom's body so tense, so motionless, just to keep herself from shaking.

I wait for you to leave us but still you linger, skulking beneath a doorframe, silhouetted. Here is the picture that I keep of you: the ash of your pipe falling like

snow from the widow's peak of your lips, your scotch glass pausing in mid-air.

I wish you had left because of what happens next:

Photos of young women, four, maybe five years older than me, spreading out like a fan on the bookshelf, unhidden; mom's sobs catching in the bedroom walls; your chair sitting empty next to my hospital bed when I am 17 and almost die on Father's Day.

But I keep looking for you. Because when you finally do leave us—your mistress' face dissolving, the last thing you see as your heart spasms, shudders, stops—I feel nothing.

Do you feel it coming? What are you thinking as the room goes black? Do you think of me?

I look for you in yellowing photographs. Your eyes, as old as mine are now, arrest my gaze across the gulf of time.

I look for you in other faces, in the edges of dark men with narrowed eyes framed by inky, jet-black hair.

I look for you in the crumbling wood of boardwalk promenades, in the wispy tendrils of pipe and cigarette smoke, in the strain of "Silent Running."

What would you think of me now? Would we walk the length of the boardwalk together, pointing at the pale, fading posters of that time way back when? Would you talk to me about God and death and choices?

"It's not really about hell at all," you reveal when I am eleven and full of the secrets of that slender book you had handed me so long ago. The words "No Exit" glow a deep, florid red on the cover. They blaze like a warning.

"Sartre didn't believe in hell," you say. "Only that hell is other people."

"But what about heaven, daddy?" I ask, wide eyes shooting out beams of adoration. "Don't you need other people for heaven too?"

You smile, a warm, bold, brilliant smile.

"That's my girl."

I don't have very far to go to find you. You are right here in our strides, lean and feral as we stalk the length of a room. You are written into the code of our long, thin fingers, in the swaying pendulum of our moods. You are here too in the voices of other people when they dive into our eyes and come up empty: "Where did you disappear to this time? Why can't you ever just be right *here*?"

You are best at filling in the silences. After the hospital, you, not mom, are the one who understands my night terrors, the sea monsters lurking beneath a film of sweat and fever. We walk together silently through Greenwich Village avenues unfolding like a picture book, flat and dreamlike. You are the shadow beside me as we scale side streets, wind up sloping hills—running, silent running. Who could possibly understand the darkness better than you, daddy?

You finally face your darkness head on, not knowing that you only have two years left to live. At AA meetings the clouds fall away from your eyes like cobwebs. They finally meet my own, bright and lucid. Sober.

I am still running, silent. I carry you down our beach in my arms, weaving through valleys of sand. The roller coaster illuminates the hard, glittering surface of ocean with bulbs that flicker on one by one, reflected in silver waves as a constellation of limitless night sky. I am searching its configurations for Andromeda, for words you

once said to me.

I release your ashes to swim with starfish. They are coated in salt and silence, in a cradle of burning stars.

Still, I can't stop calling you.

Can you hear me?

Leonora Desar's work has appeared in *Psychology Today*, *Narratively*, *Parenting Magazine*, *Business Insider*, and others. She lives in New York City and is a Master of Science candidate at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she received the Richard T. Baker Award for magazine writing. She is currently working on a poetry collection.
