

Leaky Guts

by Kyle Hemmings

Igor's lover fed him until he felt like her only child. She fed him until he was too heavy to fly away, or to reach down in some field beyond the city and pick wild mushrooms or white buttons. If Dasha warned him about the dangers of wild mushrooms, he'd say, the Egyptians thought they'd confer immortality. But Dasha could only feel immortal in moments, when she was a cream puff during sex, especially when she felt leaking with his dough. Sometimes, even the streets near St. Marks were wet.

One day, Dasha confessed to Igor that she had an incurable illness: purple emptiness. It was the color of her insides via upper endoscopy. It sometimes went misdiagnosed, or rather, under-diagnosed as anorexia. The truth of her was down to a dime. By this time, Igor was bloated beyond repair beyond hiatal anguish. He came up with all kinds of pagan strategies: feed her through colored straws while she dreams, open her up and plant a mud pie, squirt liquid vitamins by dropper through her ear canals while she faked her own death then believed in it. When all else failed, he bought her a bird cage with a ceramic parakeet. Why not a real one? she asked.

Because this one will stay forever.

She made him a mille-feuille with strands of her falling hair in the middle. It gave it extra texture. When feeling too world weary, she made him a sloppy broth sprinkled with the few remaining shakes of her love for otherness. That night he couldn't feel her during sex. Her clit no longer dreamed of being the shaft of a firm thick mushroom. When investigated, her vagina no longer revealed itself as an open bar of fuzzy navals. In the after glow, she became a

bleeding Mary without color. Everything was becoming downsized and unfamiliar.

Eventually, she thinned out from this existence.

By now, he could barely fit in anyone's room. He could fit another human inside him and cause that human to stretch.

The doctors told him, either diet or die by your own reflux.

He considered sewing his mouth or punching his own thymus. Without Dasha, he was tasteless, runny for days. In the streets, in the back of downtown buses, behind the faces of Japanese school girls, suicide was rampant. A pot belly was a sign of hope, of having lived without timers.

In the tiny apartment, Igor threw down the bird cage. The ceramic bird stared up at him, blankly. As if to say I could be broken too.

What could he eat without Dasha? A diet of nothingness? He'd lose weight for sure, and would die without tubes and boluses. Parental malnutrition. A diet of air? Of her words? Perhaps.

He visited a tattoo artist on St. Marks. She was an elderly woman who wore her own tattoos internally. Or so she claimed. In her dusty apartment, a cat growled on an old sofa. Igor wondered if the cat was real or if his ears rang with delusions. Dasha loved cats, especially when their bellies hummed and she could feed them minced tiny fish who never believed in the worth of long lifespans. His eyes explored the room for ceramic birds. There was an orange-tinted photo of a handsome man, dark hair parted in the middle, looking like Dana Andrews.

Who is that man? asked Igor.

I still wear him was all she said.

He gave the old woman a list of food items to be tattooed on his back. They were the dishes Dasha once served him when they could both lick icing off their fingers. She would only vomit at her discretion but still kept a smile.

It took the woman hours, getting the spacing and the spellings correct. She told him to inspect her work in the mirror. He rose from the cushioned table and looked over his shoulder at the menu items etched into his striations and flabs of existence.

These words are now mine, he said.

Indeed they are, she said in a thick accent, as she shoved bills into her dress pocket. She began to clean needles and to put away the inks.

I'm going to eat my own words, he said. Get full on them.

She laughed.

I used to sleep with a sailor who was never there, she said.

She began wiping down the table. Igor wondered if she was ever a dancer on warships. He wondered what the sea and the Crimea tasted like after so many lost souls. He'd have nightmares of legs being blown apart, sown back on. Prisoners of war with stapled mouths.

He entertained the notion of sleeping with the old woman to see if he could be her only son, sea-worthy. And the air would make their lungs saltwater-sogged, their thoughts, blank, as if they were under the bottom of a ship.

Would she kiss his tattoos? Would she look younger in her sleep.
Could he see her with dream-eyes in a crazy physics of time?

Did Einstein love sponge cake?

But he left and never returned.

On the streets, he became absent-minded, light-headed. He needed
to live in rooms of mirrors. So he could breathe and self-feed.

Whenever his stomach purred, he'd locate himself before a mirror
and turn around. He would read the food items in reverse. The
deviled eggs, the pigs in a blanket. He'd take a deep breath in and
taste what was not on his tongue. In this way, he'd keep his weight
down.

The zakushi tasted like Dasha. Was Dasha. The crimini mushrooms
tasted like Dasha, browned, deeply rooted to the earth. When he
swallowed, Dasha entered him one more time. She breathed inside
him, lodged inside the pouches of his intestines.

In this way, he kept his guts from leaking.

