

Homunculus

by Maria Robinson

Immediately following my miscarriage, my brain took off on a week-long vacation. It happened while I was sitting on the floor of the shower. The water was pelting my face and neck and breasts and feet. It was like a hailstorm, but hotter. I was watching my skin turn pink and then pinker, and watching the blood race from my crotch toward the drain in bright swirling ribbons. It reminded me of those gymnastics floor shows where the girls tumble and dance and twirl while waving long colorful streamers. It was almost beautiful.

I heard a loud “click,” which I thought was Vick’s key in the lock but must have been the sound of my brain disconnecting itself. My head started to fill with something simultaneously heavy and light (Cerebrospinal fluid? Air? What *does* the body use as a placeholder for the brain when it skips town?).

That was Thursday, June 9th, at 6:57pm.

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The next thing that happened was my brain came back. There was something cold and wet in my mouth and the sun was so bright I thought I might’ve gone blind. I gagged and slapped at my eyes and kicked with my feet until they hit something doughy. There was a succession of sounds: glass hitting metal, metal hitting teeth, the shshshshshclatterslap of mini-blinds rapidly returning to the sill. Then Vick’s face popped up, filling my entire field of vision. Her head looked like a Macy’s Day float. Her lip was torn in the middle and a bead of blood was rising out of it like a teardrop. She looked into my eyes very carefully.

“What the fuck?” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you.”

That was Wednesday, June 15th, at 9:43am.

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Of course, that wasn’t *actually* the next thing, just the next thing I was aware of. Apparently a few things happened in between, but being without a brain, I wasn’t really party to them.

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After, I kept wishing my brain would let on where it had been. There were some clues but nothing definitive. For example, I had a sudden taste for mangoes and every time I looked at the sky the word *azul* rustled inside my ear. *Miami?* I mused over breakfast. *Puerto Rico!* I shouted after dinner, spitting coffee all over myself. *Puerto Vallarta?* I wondered incredulously while watching Emeril bastardize *mole con pollo*.

Maybe I was all wrong, I acknowledged to myself later; maybe it was something else altogether. A romantic jaunt in Bombay with a strapping Spanish ex-pat, for example, or a service vacation digging irrigation canals in Ecuador. But shouldn't I have had root-level access to whatever it had been doing? My brain's secrecy seemed a defiance of the nature of memory. Then again, its leaving town seemed a defiance of the nature of physiology.

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There were other things, too. Like:
at the corner grocer (to my neighbor): *Everyone knows onions are as sinister as nines!;*
at the doctor's office (to the nurse): *Your voice is pecking out my eyes!;*
on the phone (to my mother): *I wish, for once, you'd take your fucking cock out of my mouth.*

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That was how it went for the first two weeks. Once I got my strength back, there was even more: I wrapped myself in tinfoil and laid face-down on the sidewalk, inviting the kids riding bikes to fry eggs on my ass; I plucked out all my eyelashes so I could see better; I cut a shallow slit in the fat of my hip and stuffed it with walnuts and raisins, so I could carry a snack without worrying about pockets.

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Things kept on like that until the night I found Tiny. I was naked and cleaning cleaning cleaning cleaning cleaning cleaning. The kitchen was done and I'd just finished scrubbing all the

bathroom walls. I was about to start on the ceiling. I was feeling *potential*. I had to piss, and I decided to do it standing up—the hell with sitting down! I straddled the toilet and angled my pelvis and let it stream. It was even more satisfying than peeing in the shower.

From above, the toilet looked different, happier. My pubic hair felt damp and vivacious. I patted it dry with the hand towel. I leaned forward to flush and there she was, peeking out from under the rim at the front of the bowl. Had I not seen her, I might have scrubbed her off later.

That was Tuesday, July 12th, at 3:58am.

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Tiny was my daughter. Or what was left of her. A mucous-y chunk of what was once in my womb and then wasn't. She was bright red before, but had since dried to a dark red-black. She was also trimmed with fungus.

We talked a long time that first night. I apologized for some things I was feeling bad about: that she'd died, for example. Her attitude about it was very mature. Philosophical, even. It made me feel a lot better about the whole thing.

Once that was out of the way, we had a blast! Did that kid have a sense of humor! And the mouth on her—don't think they don't pick it up right through the endometrium, because I'm telling you, they do.

I fell asleep beside her as the sun was coming up, my hand pressed to the outside of the bowl so she would know I was still there.

That's nice, she said through a yawn. *That's...*

Her voice trailed off before she finished, but I didn't mind. By then it was way past her bedtime.

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After I found Tiny things seemed better with my brain for a while. Then suddenly not.

Like:

Vick was standing in the threshold, looking at the potato peels

and carrot tops on the newspaper beside the toilet.

"What The F?" she said.

"Soup," I said, lifting the lid to show her.

She pinched her lips together, then pushed them out with a little "pop".

"You can't make soup without onions," she said.

Tiny shrieked. She hated onions.

Vick shaded her eyes with one hand, like she was looking out across a golf course on a sunny day. "That stuff can't stay in the toilet," she said.

"I know," I said. "Don't worry, she'll eat it."

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One night my brain started telegraphing new and urgent information. Mostly names. I sat for hours trying to write them all down.

Vick looked over my shoulder, asked: "Is that the cast of the Wizard of Oz?"

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I was watching TV while Tiny took a nap. A commercial for a hip-hop clothing store came on. "The Phatest Gear in *Town*," a skinny white kid said, jerking his head from one shoulder to the other while hoisting his arms up and down in stiff right angles in a dance-off with a rack of track suits. An address scrawled across the screen graffiti-style while the kid repeated the phone number three times: 345-3453. Then he said: "*512 Hamilton Street. The only place to go when there's somewhere to be!*"

As the kid spoke, my brain stopped moving. It was like one of those Magic Eye posters, at the moment when the saturn-and-rings or double-helix or leaping dolphins suddenly burst through the opaque psychedelic squiggles. Everything in the room was crisp and dry. I was as fast and strong as a hummingbird. I could hear myself blinking.

"Hamilton Street," I said out loud. My tongue was light.

That was Monday, July 25th, at 5:18pm.

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I had somewhere to be. But first I had a toilet to clean.

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I dressed slowly in cool colors, soft textures. I tucked my hair behind my ears. I put on grey felt flats that knew the shape of my feet.

I left a note for Vick. It said: I am gone, but I am back.

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I drove the two hours and thirty-five minutes from Vick's apartment with shaky legs and loose bowels.

When I pulled up, he was sitting on the porch with a bottle of beer pinched between his knees. The sun was low and making pink and orange paths across the sky. He was looking up and out.

I got out of the car and his chin flexed, just a little.

I moved like a bedsheet. My flat shoes shshshushed across the browned lawn and scrapped one-two-three up the splintered porch steps. He kept his eyes steady and his face still.

I put my finger on the fabric of his sleeve in the place where it pouched away from his elbow, empty.

"Oh," he said then. "It's you."

