Abstract

I entered 'A puzzle piece' in the Lightship Publishing international short story prize 2013 and nearly forgot about it. Months passed. A package arrived one evening in my mail, Lightship Anthology 3, and it was gratifying that my competition entry fee was not lost, that there were after all solace copies for non-winners. I filed the anthology and more months went. At last I got the reading list for my PhD in order, drew out the anthologies—having also recently purchased a copy of The Bridport Prize Anthology 2014—and started with Lightship. I flicked to the contents page and gaped. There was my name, right there on the list. I had been shortlisted in the top 10, published. First came a moment of outrage that no one had told me: even the shipped package had contained no note. Then followed an intensity of loss, of feeling robbed, months and months of non-celebration, of being unclued as to this notable achievement. I returned to the competition website, trawled through the web pages and discovered a shortlist with my name entered as 'Euan'. But I couldn’t help being ecstatic that this short speculative fiction, entered in a mainstream competition in which 'deviants' are sometimes poorly judged, had found place. Looking up the judge, I discovered she is novelist and a short story writer, also a Professor at Bath Spa University (2014) who teaches creative writing and courses on The Short Story. The gamble of crossing speculative fiction and literary fiction must have paid.

Key words: short story, cross-genre, speculative fiction, literary fiction

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T-MO HAPPENED exactly one week after the puzzle piece woman with 50-cent eyes.

One night, black as misery, Salem Drew stood, arms wrapped about herself, at the bus depot three streets from the IGA where she worked late shifts. A bunch of
commuters had just clambered onto a no. 146 for Carnegie and Salem found herself alone at the depot.

She waited for a night express bus to take her back to a cheerless home that housed equally cheerless parents. A clipping wind around her was just as dreary, foggy as lunacy. There, just then, the facet of a woman’s face jumped into her vision.

Salem blinked. Was the woman real or a figment of thought? Singular parts of her were easy to file as possibly real: maroon hair, lemon rind skin as rugged as it was pale. And the scar … But all put together, the cohesion was lost.

The puzzle piece woman stood head lowered, quiet in the mist. When she raised her head, silver shimmered from one good eye, petite and round as a 50-cent coin. The other eye was broken. Even though it was as smooth and flawlessly round as the right eye, it held no sight. The coin perfection of its shape was embedded in scar tissue, a disfigurement that needed nothing but a single glance to seal the hideousness of it.

If Salem thought to speak, to ask, ‘Who are you? How long have you been standing there, watching me, and why?’ the mighty keenness of the woman’s good telescopic eye, the one that filtered, turned inward, then came back at her without translation, threw it right out of Salem’s mind.

Thunder like hammering of a thousand hooves did it. Salem ran without a scream, all the way through all that night, never minding the night bus when it whooshed past. All she minded was the gobbling eye, and the unwarned sound of deep belly laughter that chased behind her.
Freedom and beyond. That was where T-Mo took Salem Drew. He foisted himself into her life, waltzed her straight to liberty.

There is a magical quality about a man who steps through locked doors, unbroken walls. One minute he stood outside her window, next he was beside her in front of a projector show on the wall, one calm hand stretched along the back of her seat.

They were watching Part I of *A Moment with God*, Salem’s parents’ idea of an unchaperoned date, inside a cul-de-sac chalet that held no sink or toilet, not even a tacky kitchen. It stood three metres from the back door of the main building, close enough for a parent to sniff out trouble. That was the little servant room the pastor had sublet to his daughter.

Even though they had been going out some time now, Salem’s still temple fluttered, as did the veins in her neck. Her gaze wavered each time it met his, all through Part II of the monologue on the wall. She shifted on the couch to create more distance from his increasingly reckless hand. So disoriented was she, it took a while before she noticed that the tape reel still rolled but showed nothing on the darkened wall except snow lines and black. Somehow T-Mo had managed to manoeuvre himself once more to within inches of her skin.

‘Life forms,’ he said.
'What?' She jumped.

'Do you not wonder what else exists in the universe?'

She blinked. 'W-what sort of existence?'

'Complex. Minds beyond human. Do you not wonder? About other existence?'

'N-no.'

'But I do.' He sat up, held her gaze. 'And I am.'

'W-what?' she said, part in trepidation of never being able to understand him, the rest in misery that at this point she really didn’t.

'Complex. A superior form that beats normal reason.' He reclined. 'Did you not wonder,' his voice drawled, 'how molecular composition tolerates teleporting?'

'Teleporting?'

'See me walk through that door?' he pointed.

'N-no.'

'Well, then.'

She blinked, studied him anew. The man whose eyes were full of space when they were not holding something wild. They were chameleonic, shifting appearance with light, as did the colour of his skin.

Sometimes he seemed quite tanned, sometimes tan lifted to grey. The first time she saw him, she was sure it was an ailment. How creased, so youthful a face: it had to be a disorder. The disorder soon became art under her study, and the more
she analysed its pattern, the weaves and crossings of the cells on it, the more confounded she became by it.

Salem wasn’t sure at first what it was that drew her to him, because he wore the same fossil skin then. She was 19, he looked 40. But the jazz in his eyes made her whimsical. She wondered about this man of darkness and light yet who felt more natural than wind. How did he measure up to her father’s barometer?

She knew that choices needed to be made. She could never go back to *Milk is Available Here*. Not the IGA again, never.

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Before T-Mo, Salem was a little turtle locked up in its shell. Her parents conversed with her on a need to know basis. Her mother had stormed out of Nana Modesty’s womb the very night of a Christmas pageant to earn the name Pageant. Her father... she could think of no other name that suited him better. No one set eyes upon his righteous face and felt no need to go: Ike! He was a militant man and raised her so.

Both parents were immigrants, 2nd or 3rd cousins to each other but singly raised in Spartan households by equally migrant grandparents. Ike and Pageant found themselves tossed together in a flight-to-freedom march, thousands of miles on foot as refugees, an army of them, sometimes fearful, often cold, always hungry.
Fleeing war from a troubled country. Soon as they found peaceable settlement in a place called Balby, Ike clasped a hat in his fist and told, not asked, Pageant to be the mother of his babies. Marry you? she said. Yes, he said.

Growing up, Salem nurtured dreams of abandoning her parents. But her ventures outside of the house were a visit to the dentist, the library, church.

When she grew up enough to earn the chalet at the back of the main house, her social life was still confined to church fetes and family bees, where she swallowed lemonade that looked and tasted like cough medicine, and nibbled finger food with tongue-tied girls and polished boys who never wore bad socks or carried a single hair out of place. But they were boys who knew enough of Pastor Ike Drew not to mess around with his daughter, or his parishioners’.

Secretly, Salem continued her fantasies, dreaming not just of escape but of white gold bracelets and knee hugger boots, the kind Pastor Ike would never tolerate. But for all her fancies, she was wrapped like a nun at the local IGA shop, nurturing runaway thoughts in a stifling hot room. No wonder her mood was not right, when he happened.
She processed a pack of cigarettes at the POS and looked up to announce the cost, and her heart went soft. The man who stood before her, who regarded her with a careless smile cracked something inside her. A sense of something imminent grabbed her in so ruthless a fashion, it rendered her immobile.

‘Your curls,’ his gaze touched her hair. ‘Soft as the feathers of a baby bird.’ That tied her tongue too. He might have touched it, her hair, or perhaps only his words touched it. He at once captured her with his impetuous nature and pulverised any restraint she might have shown, and the beat of her heart sped to insanity.

He glanced at the reader and slipped out a note from his pocket. So hypnotised was she when he moved away from the queue, she rose from her stool behind the counter to follow him. Where? To a place filled with radiance.

How much for a dozen? A female voice severed her entrancement and Salem turned to face her, eyes astonished still. A dozen? the woman said. How much? Clearly impatient. Salem lifted the bar of almond soap. ‘Was the price not on the shelf?’ she said. She glanced up briefly and her man was gone. She turned the bar of soap until she found a barcode. Beep! the POS reader. ‘Three dollars twenty for a dozen,’ she said. Her hands were shaking.

She signed off the till two hours later, sank in desolation at not having spoken a word, not even a croak, to the man of her dreams. He was waiting for her at the car park opposite the IGA entrance.

At once she brightened. ‘Y-you?’
He pointed at a red sign on a white background at the top of the IGA door:

Milk is Available Here

‘That true?’ he said. She nodded, held helpless in his gaze. ‘That’s true anywhere. They have to proclaim it?’ She smiled.

She liked him. She liked him very much.

At the rapture in her eyes, he spread his hand and gave her that winning smile. He held a careless jacket across his shoulder. His eyes indicated towards a silver soft top parked in a slot. ‘Care for a spin?’

‘Holy moly,’ she said in wonderment.

‘So cute. First girl I ever heard say holy moly like that,’ he said. ‘You say jeepers creepers too?’

Her mother was a preacher’s wife, she blurted, the first thing that came to her head. Her father was, well, a preacher! She giggled nervously.

‘Is he, now? How about that? A preacher’s daughter. Get in the car.’ She paused. He shifted his foot. ‘Would you like to come for a spin with me in the car?’ he said.

‘Okay.’

His smile was musical as a lark. It penetrated straight to her heart. He escorted her to the car, palm lightly brushing her waist. When he tightened her seat belt, his hands lingered. A flood of warmth climbed to her cheeks and suddenly, she had to fill the space between them with words.
She lived in a custom-built house of basic detail; on the generosity of the faithful. Pastor Ike could never spend on tiles for a new bathroom. No music no radio no TV: just bible hour after dinner, she babbled. He never swore, either; the only time he did was when a visiting preacher from a nearby parish floated to him the idea of a Jazz Society for the youth of East Point to keep their hands from bedevilment. Even then (she glanced at her hands) Pastor Ike’s swearing fell short of ‘f’ or ‘s’ words and he said ‘drummer’ in place of ‘bugger.’ She spoke and spoke until he pulled the car to the side of a road and silenced her with his lips.

The kiss was as delicious as it was troubling. It filled her with a cavalcade of emotions, squadrons and squadrons of them. And she felt something new. Freedom. The man who made the sky resemble a crystal ceiling and the ground at her feet a fairy tale, he, only he, had taken her to freedom.

But that was no surprise, she later thought after their unchaperoned date. There was something magical about a man who walked through doors... He travelled between worlds. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. So on a whim, the first daring one in her life, she presented a man to her father with intention and announced her plan.

‘Father, you have met T-Mo,’ she said, ‘I am going to marry him.’

They stood in the space between the back door of the main house and Salem’s servant house. Pastor Ike eyed the man beside his daughter, and the ripe plum colour of his sleeveless t-shirt that carried bold white words on its breast, words that said: Hearts & Beds. He regarded the way the brazen boy or man stood, reckless,
how he held his head, how a strange curiosity spread in his eyes. He noticed how his rainbow smile widened to make his looks fetching despite dinosaur skin.

Might have been the hearts or beds not the sleevelessness of his t-shirt or was it T-Mo’s smile? Whatever it was, it immediately squandered any goodwill Pastor Ike might have had. Gator skin or not, that alien dyke standing with hair as yet uncombed beside his daughter… Pastor Ike had one question.

‘This T-Mo,’ he said. ‘Does he have a second name?’ He spoke to his daughter, who stood there with a tumultuous heart, but did not remove his gaze from T-Mo.

‘I am sure he does, father…’

In the deathly silence that followed, Pastor Ike purpled and a pulse pumped furiously on his neck. It calmed, the pulse, and ceased being noticeable. Pageant fled into the house. She had looked and felt desperate at the boldness of her daughter; now perhaps she would hide her joyless face under the kitchen sink, and clasp dismay in her trembling hands.

‘And you are going to marry him?’ There was no reprisal in Ike’s voice.

‘Yes father.’

Ike’s preacher face acquired calm, not sag, and with no more erosion of control than that which he had already displayed, with no dislike or hatred in it, he said to them, ‘You are both strangers to me. Get out of my house.’
Calm words; but they knocked two people out of the house. Not a grand or gracious house, just a sturdy two-bed custom-built that was no longer home to Salem.

That night, that same one of the homelessness, the soft top shot through the road. Headed for a place where power lines dissolved and there were just shrubs and space. Sometimes the car swept past trees that hugged their leaves tight and stood tall like closed umbrellas. Sometimes shorter ones took their space and spread wide like amethyst curtains in the horizon below a blackening sky.

T-Mo drove and drove, as if they were headed to the end of the world. He gazed at Salem sat beside him in the car, and she cast him eyes so full of personal appeal he could restrain himself no longer. The car slid to a halt beside a road sign that said No Left Turn. Or was it No Through Road? Salem couldn’t tell, half blinded by tears. It was as if this were the most tragic turning point in her life, and not the liberty she had so yearned for, for which she had almost been ready to fight and die.

Why was she weeping? he asked. She didn’t know.

She knuckled a tear away. But more came. Endless tears splashed down her face and she did not have enough knuckles for them all. She turned her mind over and over, questioning. It came back at her with every reason why this man who possessed her thoughts, whose touch on her body was akin to a spinal tap was better than home.

She remembered how the dinosaur on his skin smiled to put butter in her knees. How T-Mo would vanish, be gone from her view, be a distant voice in feral
wind, then a swift darkness and he would be there. Right there facing her. Not only could he travel through time. He was time.

She remembered how despite the ghosts that haunted his face, she felt lost without him. How when she timidly smiled, he completed the laughter for them both with something deep, wholesome. How husk filled his voice when he said something plain, words as simple as ‘Care for a spin?’. How her heart rattled so loud at the sound of that husk she thought the whole world would dance from the music of it.

She trembled at his approach round the car, a little scared. But his musical-as-a-lark smile when he opened her door tossed away her unease and she melted into his arms. His fingers were tender as mist when he drew her away from her seat, from the car, from… anything that kept her from him.

Together, they moved as far as they could from the road, any road. 50 yards or 5000, didn’t matter. When at last they stopped, her head felt light but he guided her swoon to the ground. There, on a carpet of ivory hydrangea, he peeled every single layer of clothing from her and her shiver was not from chill or a deep, terrible fear but from an overwhelming need to be complete and free. She found, in his arms, that she was both: his and free.

It snowed. Snowdrops like immaculate blooms gliding from the sky. Moon collapsed into a veil of mist. Darkness, black as octopus ink, rose above the fog, and then stooped low to swallow it. Salem quavered but T-Mo calmed her unreasoning fear as only he could.
Lanterns in his eyes guided her, fingers nudging her gently. Hands like wings cradled her, lifted her from the ground and transported her to a place of awakening inside the feet of frost. The wings laid her gently on an enchanted dais. Breathe soft as summer rain not just raised the temperature of Salem’s skin: it spread her feet, arched her back and took her to the diadem of rapture.

Somewhere outside her sleep, as her head rested on T-Mo’s chest beneath a sky full of murmuring, a sword of lightning across the night sky chased a blast of thunder that rolled like belly laughter. Just then, right there, in the instant lighting of the firmament, Salem saw a clear silhouette a few metres from her feet. It was the puzzle piece woman with 50-cent eyes. Head lowered, her feet apart, the woman’s broken eye was smooth and round as when Salem first saw it. As for the gobbling eye—the good one, it keenly filtered, turned inward and wondered.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research background

Short fiction can be misjudged. Single- or multi-author collections are often geared to a particular audience, for example fans of horror, science fiction or fantasy, ‘who tend to be both voracious and knowledgeable readers’ (March-Russell 2009: 55). Anthologies are used to highlight the best in short fiction, lending ‘disposable’ stories as published in newspapers and journals some permanence (2009: 54). The success of a single-authored collection of stories relies on the author’s profile, selling if the writer’s name is already familiar e.g. as a popular novelist. Author Paul March-Russell fondly posits the short story as the ‘literary fragment’, one whose size emboldens people to dismiss the complexity of forming riveting narrative in constrained space (length of the writing) and time (timeline across which events occur). Tessa Hadley, who judged the Lightship short story prize 2013, must have applied her ‘unerring eye for what is true – in everyday human behaviour, thought, and relationships’ (Kidd 2013) to honour the competition rules of ‘no restriction on
A puzzle piece (Lightship short story prize 2013) when considering 'A puzzle piece'. It is a privilege to be shortlisted by a writer whom The Guardian describes as writing 'as a masterly illustrator might draw', as one whose 'eye for detail is penetrating' (Kellaway 2013); whom The Independent describes as 'that rarest of novelists' (Kidd 2013). I would like to think that Hadley found something deeply personal in my speculative fiction piece, one of stories-within-a-story for the work that forms the artefact for my PhD. It is promising that small press publishing, writing competitions, creative writing programs in universities, e-publishing and online journals that source anthologies continue to sustain the short form’s distinct place in creative practice, in creative writing as research.

Research contribution

A puzzle piece is an integral element of stories-within-a-story comprising a creative part for a PhD in writing by artefact and exegesis through practice-led research. This story crosses borders of genre fiction by fitting the categories of literary fiction and speculative fiction, and by targeting young adults (aged 12 – 18), mature young adults or new adults (aged 17+, capped at 25) and adults (aged at least 18). As one story-within-stories, A puzzle piece is attentive to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) resonating principles of the rhizome: connections, heterogeneity and interconnections.

Research significance

This story was shortlisted (top 10) in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in Lightship Anthology 3. Lightship is an independent publishing company that aims to promote and develop new voices through annual international writing contests.

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