

A woman in our seaside town has taken a liking to me. Dark hair, sharp features, thinish, beautiful. In the mid-20s. She seems to have a boyfriend, or at least a man her age often with her in the bar. But she also seems to be trying to end her relationship with him. When I see them talking together, he looks stricken.

Every time we're in the same vicinity, she makes a deliberate effort to talk with me. Once when I showed up at the bar, one of her friends, a woman with a frizzy hairdo, said, "Oh she will be so happy you're here. Let me go tell her!"

She feeds on human blood. Somehow I know this. When she bites you—let's not say "her victim"—and sucks out the blood, you do not transform into a creature like her, nor do you remember being bitten. Amnesia comes with the bite. She understands that I know this.

The reason she doesn't mind our age difference—I'm nearing 70 years old, go ahead and laugh—is that all of the people around her, young and old, will die. She never will, so a few decades one way or the other don't matter. Blood is blood, and for whatever reason, she is drawn to me.

I live with my parents, who must be well into their hundreds. Me and this woman talk on the phone for hours. I don't know her name.

She's with her male companion at the bar, having another serious talk. He is crying. I leave hurriedly, before either of them can spot me.




One day we are walking on the beach together and she finds a stick figure made out of pipe cleaners. Her now-ex-boyfriend's boat is tied to the dock. She says, "Let's leave this in his boat with a note that says, 'No More Twisted Roads.'" I say, "No, that's creepy." I feel like the guy has been through enough already.

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No More Twisted Roads

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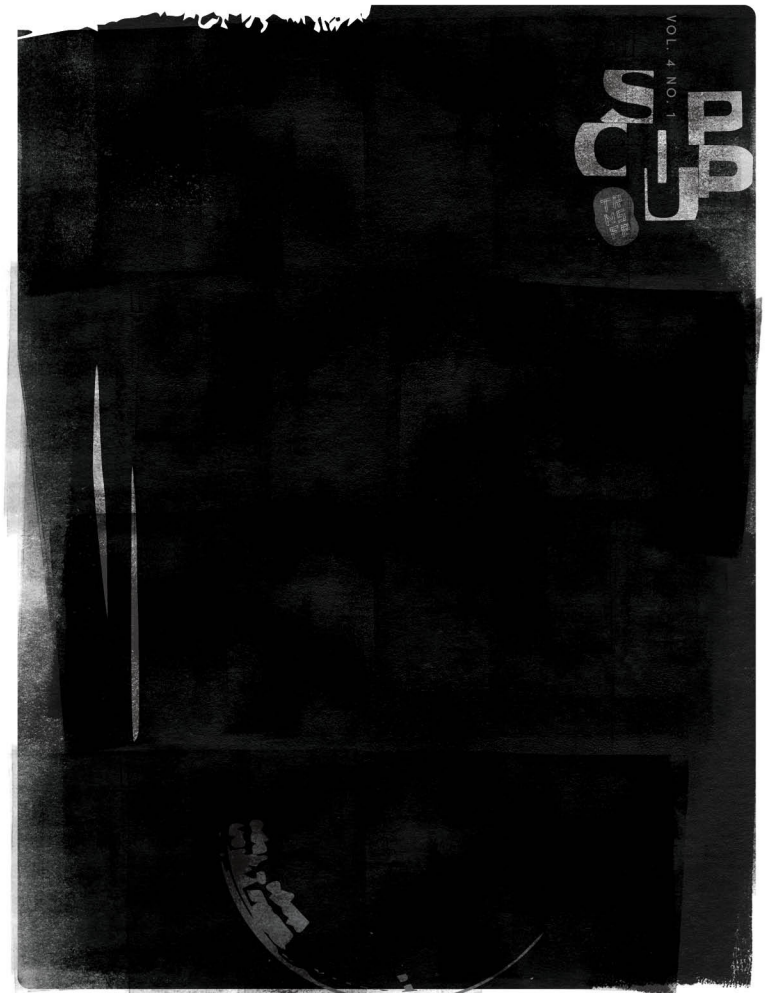
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JULIE CHOFFEL

I Think About the Boys I Loved

and what they introduced me to. Softness, talk, a hidden ledge above the trail. The public golf course at night, in its strange dark stubble, I love you, laughing. Theater, beauty, fear and insult. How to sauté, how to use butter. How to fly a kite. So many drugs. Being or becoming. So many places to fuck as you like in the city or the woods. Poems. Doubt. That book of the dead. Confidence versus misogyny. How to argue, how to leave. How to look for just one thing. How to take nothing. The mindrick of nighttime. The texture of granite and the friction to scale it. Patience and other goals. How to know the birds that sit on the water. Grief and its factions. Fictions of the self. How to build a fire with pockets for air. Love of femme, love of almost and all the way and extra. Led Zeppelin. When to listen. When to rage. Going under or over a wave. History. Bodies of work. The sickness or fettle of memory. How to choose.



No More Twisted Roads, cont.

"No More Twisted Roads" is the title of a movie playing in town, sort of a cult classic, about a little girl who mysteriously disappears. Everybody is combing the fields and forests. Members of the search party, when they are out alone, are murdered one by one. The killer does this by sticking his fist inside the person's mouth and causing it to enlarge until the head explodes.

Is the title of the movie meant as a call for the elimination of twisted roads—no more of those, thank you—or is it saying that no more twisted roads than these exist anywhere?

I don't care if the woman feeds on my blood. Our attraction is mutual and very strong. I'm going to expire soon anyway, what's the difference. If the cost of being with her is that she drinks my blood occasionally (how often I'll just have to find out), that's OK. I need to start taking better care of myself, diet and rest, in order to make the best blood.

Late one night I return home—a lower apartment on a dusty street, west end—and the door is locked. I rap on the bare window to rouse my parents. No response. They have packed up and left.

I knock on the window again anyway, until the frame rattles, and from the dark emerges a small, almost indistinguishable face. Pale blue. It's the missing kid from the movie.

Self-Portrait as a Poorly Played Piano

TYLER MCANDREW

The most I can hope
is to be heard once
from a distance through
a window at night
twinkling clumsily
toward something
almost like a song.

Captain's Kismet

JEREMY MARKS

The captain's mother liked to hold his head underwater until he came up gasping for air. "You will never be a captain, much less a common seaman if you do not embrace the deep."

And the captain would cry, and he would sob, and his mother would barely let him catch his breath before shoving his head back into the sea.

She did this for months, many months; she would wake her son before dawn and drive him down to the seashore, strip him to his underwear, then lead him to where the sea reached her navel. At that spot, she plunged his head beneath the waves.

And for all of those months, the captain held his eyes tightly shut, unwilling to look out into the dark water, reluctant to gaze into the locker that would become his tomb.

"You will die at sea," his mother said. "And I want you to be ready for that day."

The captain saw only the blackness behind his eyelids. All he heard was the rushing of blood through his ears. His mother kept asking him, what do you hear? And all that the captain could say to her, once he stopped sobbing, was, "my blood, mother."

One morning, that changed. The air was cold, nearly as cold as the water. The captain heard a distant echoing whine coming from some creature heading out into the deep sea. It was a mermaid sound or a lonely whale. It was the song of an entombed host, a crew sliding down to its eternal rest on the abyssal plain. The sound was chilling, but it was also grating. The sound frightened the captain while making him mad. He cursed the sound in his mind, cursed the way his spine melted, and his legs went limp beneath him. He cursed how his body sat on the seabed before welcoming the way being seated in the numbing sand caused his mother's arm to go slack. On the seafloor, in a few feet of water, the captain had finally slipped her grasp. Despite knowing this, he kept his eyes closed. Then he stood and cursed her.

"You're an old hag," he said. "It's no wonder my father is dead."

"Your father died at sea, you coward. He died the way a sailor should die. He went down like a captain."

"You're an old hag," the captain repeated. "You brought me here to have the sea carry me off, to follow him in death. You're a hag now, but you were a siren once. You lured my father to the rocks where he died."

To his surprise, his mother laughed. Then she took his head in her hands and held it, almost tenderly, before plunging it back into the sea. This time, the captain opened his eyes.

At first, he did not see anything save the briny black. But slowly, a sight emerged.

In the distance was a ship, with all its portholes lit, dropping down to eternal darkness. Its lights flickered, winking a patterned wink. The captain heard the whinging of the hull as the pressure of the water was stressing its joists and rivets, as it tortured the bulwark and snapped the prow. Then the lights went out, and the captain watched the ship shed its smokestacks, jettison its crow's nest, and cast off its cargo crane before disappearing.

The captain stood up and released a long exhale. He had seen his ship, had witnessed how he was going to die. He looked at his mother: she was now a full head and shoulders shorter than he was. He held her head gently in his hands and kissed her on the forehead. Then he said, "you're a hag, mother," and forced her head underwater until her body rose to the surface, floating limply on the waves like a black manta ray.

Now his mother was harmless as an old cloak adrift on the tide, quite unlike the captain's kismet.

Utterly unlike his life.