

## **FIRST-PRIZE WINNER**

GAVIN TOMSON

### **SOMETIMES THEIR PARTS FALL OFF**

SCANDINAVIA IS DROWNING in a heat wave, and I've started dreaming of the apocalypse.

I don't have any other dreams, actually. It's just the apocalypse, all night, as though my unconscious were a specialty TV channel, dedicated to biblical levels of violence. In the dreams, the moon yellows and rots like an apple. Colossal comets fall from space. Children fly.

The strange thing is that in the dreams I desire the apocalypse. Not since my childhood have I witnessed something so present, so full of being what it is. In the dreams, things open themselves and show their insides. The sea is wedged from the innermost blue.

Two weeks from today my brother Andrew will fly for the first time to Oslo, in order to meet my daughter, Malin. Meanwhile Tora is pregnant with our second child, a boy this time. We'll name him either Geir, after Tora's Icelandic father, or Allen, after my English Granddad. I should be doting on Tora, as I did the first time she was pregnant. But this time, our roles are reversed. In the night she wakes and calms me.

*It's just a dream, she says, stroking my hair. You're fine, okay Andreas? Everything's fine.*

I get out of bed, slip on my slippers, shuffle into the living room and let in the sun. Afterward I stand by the kitchen counter. I open my notebook and transcribe the dream.

The temperature of a penguin's insides is 40°.

The temperature of summer in Hawaii is 29°.

A hot spring in Iceland is 75°.

The bottom of the Norwegian Sea is -1°.

The idea of a dream notebook would have appealed to me in my early twenties, when I wanted to become an artist. (I settled for becoming a graphic designer.) Nowadays it's no longer romantic. It's necessary. This is the inverse order of the way I expected my life to progress.

I use the notebook to separate my dreams from my life outside them. The notebook works, though not entirely. I've developed a fear of swimming. This is one consequence of the dreams. When the water reaches my waist, I tremble. I ought to swim. My daughter Malin is learning the breaststroke. Instead I stand on the shore and say:

*That's it, Malin, there's no reason to be scared.*

*That's it, I won't let you drown.*

*Trust your water wings, Malin.*

*That's it, I'm here.*

Nine days from today, Andrew will arrive in Oslo. I've started sleeping on the pullout couch in the living room. Tora says she needs her rest.

Malin wakes me to a room of sunlight. It's the middle of summer, so instead of setting, the sun glows beneath the horizon for a while, as though shy. I turn my head and see an empty fireplace. Strange: this means I'm on the floor.

*Papa, Malin says, her hand on my knee. You had a bad dream.*

*She puts a thing in my hand. This thing is made of Play-Doh.*

*It's a slug, Papa. I'm making a colony.*

*Out of what?*

*A shoebox. It's called Sluggony, and it's rained by—*

*Ruled by—*

*It's ruled by a king and queen slug. Also, there's a princess slug, the one you have: Princess Slug.*

*Why thank you, sweetheart, I say, holding the slug to the light. I'm honoured. But it's four in the morning. You should be in bed.*

*I don't want sleep, Papa. I want to make my picture story.*

*OK. You can finish one drawing, but after that, it's back to bed. Do we have a deal?*

*OK.*

In four days, my brother will visit. Tora's started shopping for a bigger mattress. She says a bigger mattress could mean better dreams. Also, she says her back hurts—it just started to. And she wants more space to stretch in bed.

*I want to starfish first thing in the morning, she says, without worrying about hitting you.*

On weekdays, Tora visits shops to test different mattresses. She's on maternity leave, so while Malin's at *barnehagen*, she has much time to herself. There are five key considerations when shopping for a mattress: (1) comfort; (2) size; (3) support; (4) durability; and (5) price. Generally, there are seven types of mattresses available: (1) Innerspring; (2) Pocket Coil; (3) Pillow Top; (4) Euro Top; (5) Adjustable Top; (6) Adjustable Base; and (7) Memory Foam. Tora prefers Memory Foam, because it's apparently best for our posture. Also because the colour reminds her of hot springs in Iceland, where she spent her summers growing up.

Tora plans to buy the new mattress before Andrew arrives in Oslo. Andrew's arrival is big news, not only to me but to all of us. Since dropping out of medical school, Andrew rarely leaves his room, let alone London. To see him inside my home, then, will be to see something out of its element, like a deer inside a mall.

The temperature of the moon during the day is 107°.

The moon at night is -153°.

A human brain is 39°.

Boiling water is 100°.

My brother speaks four languages: English, Norwegian (our father is Norwegian), Spanish and French. At Oxford he studied Languages, because he hoped to become a translator. After graduating, however, he involved himself with theatre and decided he wanted to become an actor.

My brother was gifted. This was obvious. He was cast in the first play he auditioned for and I still have a clipping from the only review:

Andrew Auber-Magnusson was outstanding in his role as the insomniac paramedic. His understated performance in the first act lent all the more weight to his character's horrific explosion at the play's end and he was magnificent in his confrontation with the mirror. This is an exiting new actor and certainly one to see.

For six years, my brother performed in plays and twice in short films, doing part-time translation work between. He performed in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Suburban Motel*, *Hamlet*. In his sixth year, he performed the lead role in *Night Watchman*. This was a new play about a young man who guards an empty Swedish manor house and it received only positive reviews. Afterward playwrights and directors told my brother they hoped to see him

again in the near future. My brother took this to mean they'd cast him in their plays. None did, though. So my brother returned—or in his own words *regressed*—to performing again in smaller, lower-paid venues. Then one night, while drinking champagne at a friend's engagement party, a middle-aged man who'd switched from playwriting to TV writing after becoming a father told him *What every actor ought to hear*.

Malin's picture story is a mess of crayon drawings and capital letters. She began making it in June, the same day she watched a show about tropical islands. After the show finished, she developed an obsession with temperatures. I'd be searching the mudroom for a battery when she'd appear at my knees and ask, *What's the temperature of the sand in Cuba? What's the temperature of a lion's lungs?*

Malin calls her story *Island*, and it's set on a deserted island. The story is about a man and woman who live alone together there. The man and woman don't live alone because they want to. They live alone because they must. This is because the man is fragile. When he is sad, his body parts fall off. Usually small parts like his fingers or toes fall off when, for instance, it rains. But when he is really sad, bigger parts fall off. The man is unable to put his parts back on himself, for reasons Malin hasn't explained, so the woman must do it for him.

*That is why, Malin says, she must always be there for him.*

Let's swim, Papa.

Malin and I are walking toward the water at Sognsvann. This is a lake in the north end of Oslo, twenty minutes from downtown by *t-banen*. In three days Andrew will arrive at the airport. Malin wants to practise her stroke before he sees her swim.

*You go ahead*, I say to Malin, nauseated before I even reach the water.

I place two white towels on the sand and unfold them. The sand is so hot it pinches my feet.

*Go swim*, I say.

*I don't want to swim here*, Malin tells me.

She jumps onto a small mound in the sand and balances on one leg.

*Why not?*

*Too many other people. Everyone is looking at me and it's bad.*

*No one's looking at you, sweetheart. You're just a child. They're looking at the water, the trees, the sun.*

*Everyone is looking at me and I know because I feel it.*

*OK, then, is there another place you'd like to swim?*

*No place. I don't want anywhere.*

*What if we find a dock?*

*I don't care,* Malin says, and she loses her balance and kicks up a krone.

*Hey look what you found!* I say, picking up the coin. *You know what this means? It's an omen.*

*What's an omen?*

*Something that says good things will come your way today.*

Play-Doh. Malin must have taken the idea for the plot of her picture story from playing with Play-Doh. When she builds little people with Play-Doh, sometimes their parts fall off.

What happened to my brother after the talk is cloudy. From what I gathered, he kept to himself, alone in his room. Probably he did translation work to pay rent and groceries. All I know is that after a year of near solitude, he flew to Scotland and enrolled in medical school there.

*I feel great,* he wrote to me in an email after his first semester.

*I feel like I did when I first started acting, like I'm doing something holy, you understand? It's like I'm a channel, like a light is passing through me. I don't know how else to explain it. And is it ever cathartic, to know I won't have to worry about money anymore. Just to know.*

At medical school, my brother achieved high grades and changed his way of dressing. He quit his hobbies and replaced them with new ones, like playing squash, making lasagna, drinking organic green tea, watering plants.

Then one day, three weeks into his third semester, he was buying yogurt at a 7-Eleven when he collapsed, bringing down a magazine rack. The cashier hid in the back room, fearing a robbery. Another man entered the store, saw my brother on his back and called an ambulance.

My brother spent a week in hospital, hooked up to an IV and medicated. Afterward he moved into our parents' house in London.

*I'm fine,* he wrote to me in another email.

*I just need to figure out why I'm here and what I'm doing. I need to figure out who I am before I make any moves.*

This was seven years ago, before Tora gave birth to Malin. My brother still lives in our parents' house.

After I give Malin the *krone*, she wades into the water. On the black surface her water wings glow like airplane lights in a nighttime sky. She dips her head under and blows bubbles. She splashes for air, scans the beach, dips her head under again.

*What do you think the temperature of the water is, Papa?*

*Let me think, I say, stroking an imaginary beard. How about 19°?  
23°.*

*That warm?*

*Yes. Why don't you come in?*

*I don't know.*

*Why though?*

*Because of the dreams.*

*But your dreams aren't real. They're just a TV show in your head.  
Tor Bjørnson has these dreams about spiders—*

*Who's Tor Bjørnson?*

*A boy at school. He has dreams about big spiders that step over houses and knock things over, like school busses and gardens. And he has to run away from the spiders and hide beneath swing sets because spiders can't see through swing sets, or milk cartons.*

*You're right, I say. There's no reason. I'll put my feet in the water, how's that?*

*Okay.*

*And if I'm okay with that, I'll walk until the water reaches my waist, how's that?*

*Okay.*

I wade into the water, until it reaches my kneecaps. I try to take another step forward but don't.

*It's warm, I say to Malin.*

*Yeah really.*

*It's surprising.*

*Are you scared?*

*No. It's surprising.*

*Will you swim?*

*I don't know. Is it supposed to be this warm?*

24°!

*I thought you said 23°?*

*Maybe. Will you swim?*

*I don't know.*

*Okay, Malin says, dipping her head under again. But if Uncle comes, you have to swim.*

*Okay, I say. Next time. I promise.*

*I return to the shore. I stare at the sand.*

Recently, I've found myself staring at Malin. I find myself staring at her from my reading chair in the dining room while she works on her picture story. I find myself staring at her from her bedroom doorframe while she rearranges her socks according to colour and length. Sometimes, I feel a hollowness rise up in me, cold and croaking, and I wait for something impossible to happen, for my body to rise into the air, for Oslo to fall into the sea.

Tora has narrowed down her choices for a mattress to Euro Top and Memory Foam. She has made a list of the pros and cons of each.

**Euro Top**

Pros

Less expensive

Five zones layers of BluTek gel

Extra support for hips and lower back.

Cons

Apparently not as good for our posture

**Memory Foam**

Pros

Apparently best for our posture

Will adjust to my back after the baby

4-way stretch knit cover

Ventilated mesh border panel

Dust-mite resistant

Colour of a hot spring in Iceland.

Cons

More Expensive

In two days, Andrew will arrive in Oslo. Last night he left a message on my phone:

*Hey, I'd hoped you'd pick up, but no worries. I'm thinking about taking a taxi to your house, if that's all right. Thanks for offering to meet me at the airport, but I can manage getting to your door on my own. Buh-bye.*

My brother's name is Andrew and mine is Andreas. The English version of the name for our English parent. The Norwegian version for our

Norwegian one. When we were children, people confused us. We not only behaved and looked and spoke alike. We also had similar names.

The temperature of a jet engine at takeoff is  $877^{\circ}$ .

At it coldest, Antarctica reaches  $-93^{\circ}$ .

A human mouth is  $35^{\circ}$ .

The warmest soil found on Mars is  $27^{\circ}$ .

Tomorrow Andrew will arrive in Oslo. Tora calls me at the office to say she wants to buy Memory Foam, as she predicted, but before she pays, she wants me to try it out.

I leave my office and get in my car and drive toward the mattress store where I meet Tora. She and the salesperson give me space to test the mattress on my own. The mattress really is the colour of a hot spring in Iceland, ghostly blue and green somewhere deeper. When I lie down, I feel myself sinking, further and further, past layers of rock, toward the core of the Earth.

I would like to imagine the core of the Earth as a round rock, hard and impenetrable. But the core of the Earth is over  $5000^{\circ}$ .