

from *Mice 1961*, a novel



Stacey Levine

The story of the two sisters was minted when the world's air was fresh. Many versions exist. In some, the events are barbed and hot, confused as life really is. The siblings struggle. In one variation, the two argue and fight beside a mill's cold stream. The younger one falls and drowns, but once dead, grows wings. In another version, the dead one transforms into a harp who sings.

Some follow widely-venerated plot patterns. Some stories reveal themselves mildly and weakheartedly in the face of life; some emphasize the sisters' beautifully curious, humid faces and young, swaying gaits. Other versions portray the girls as otherworldly, and the sound of their speech so striking it resounds in other stories nearby. One variation has it that the girls part in blinding rain, reuniting only after many adventures that, though invented, are true.

Some stories are dense as pudding with a set skin, no further words possible to add, none to omit.

It could start with an immediate climax in which those in power are held down and stabbed.

So many stories sprint callowly to perfunctory and false endings, tidy, uplifting, and untrue.

If told through a different lens, would it fall apart?

Often, one sister becomes more prominent in the plot, resembling other centrally figured girls, like the weakish-type movie-star: she's blonde. Girdled inside a film's frames or candied for TV, she is nervous and ever-alert, for the plot watches her obsessively, as if through a microscope. Her appetite is not for herself. She isn't hearty and has no overbite or lisp; she can't wear bulky oxford shoes.

Why, anyway, did the older sister force Mice to wear those awful, clumsy, brad-covered shoes?

A story should set out to convince the listener there's no other way.

Perhaps it's best to tell my version of Mice in a long, clenched series of asides.

Although to describe is to contaminate, I began my try.

Face it, Mice's eyes were simply not right.

Neighbors said her out-of-date blouses, oaf shoes, and the bottomless absence of tint in her skin made her a shadow in reverse—a white elephant or a ghost, they said. Those weak, wobbly eyes were the worst.

Her startling-white appearance, the result of a one-in-twenty thousand chromosomal disorder, had been a lifelong disaster for the sisters' mother Candy, who'd endured the girl's growing-up years mostly in bed, full of shame.

Now Candy was gone and Mice scuttled along the sidewalks every evening. After being cooped up through the days, it must've been a release. Neighbors gathered routinely at Parrott's Grocery near 74th or in front of Gorge Discount to watch.

Some felt sorry for running Mice, with her excessive whiteness. They wondered aloud: Is that longish white down on her limbs a sign that her life is hard, or that all of life is? Had the down emerged because of Candy? As she sped past the porch-lounging neighbors near sunset, they pointed out her tiny teeth and forehead spattered with pinprick freckles, taking care to note that Mice, whenever she coughed, turned both scarlet and blue.

"Those eyebrows!" they remarked as she passed.

At times, neighbors spoke my most atrocious thoughts so precisely.

They said the girl's thick frost eyebrows turned their stomachs; they took offense at her fuzzy, half-airborne, colorless hair, complaining that Mice ruined the neighborhood with her head and body, blinding everyone with her terrible all-whiteness to boot.

Face it, even if her older, longsuffering sister Jody had coiffed, straightened, and treated the younger girl's awful, marled-yellowish undertracts of hair and dressed her in silky sleeveless blouses, too, neighbors would've disapproved.

And face it, some neighbors maligned Mice for not being pristinely white enough, complaining that her shade, that of dullish sour cream, should be brighter.

The milkscape of the girl's neck and shoulders made them lazy and liable to shout uncontrolled remarks, they said. From the porch at Parrotts, they spoke routinely against those indistinct, twitching eyes that couldn't even function in bright sun, and they grew irate over the paintbrush-like eyelashes, too, not to mention the lashes' jarring cream-orange tips, which, whenever the girl removed her oversized sunglasses, threw neighbors into rages.

Waking and congregating earlier every day, neighbors, it seemed, had a thirst, either for the girl or for dismissing her; wasn't it so unlucky, they said, that Mice'd been born as she was and with such poor luck besides, only to be larded with problems nobody ever had heard of or understood? In addition, the language lacked words to describe Mice thoroughly.

Once, I heard Al Parrott tell the morning clutch of neighbor-customers on the porch that Mice's growing-up problems eventually had worsened to completely obscure her sight in the way seeping oil slowly ruins good wood. Other neighbors, fully confined to their points of view, told various stories of Mice while explaining that, for them, the merest mention of the girl sent immediate thrills of gratitude through them for whatever degree of vision they actually possessed.

So, because of Mice, neighbors grew more sure of themselves. They slept better each night.

Watching her speeding furtively at dusk past the storefronts' ruby bricks, riling up the dust up so it coated her hands and arms, or spying her while she sat on the apartment stairs at night without even a handkerchief beneath her and furiously stripping down radios, they complained that Mice was too tiny or large, or simply

bothersome with her padded hands and outer ears so peel-thin and devoid of the folds that normally characterize others' ear-tops. Neighbors also disliked Mice, they said, because of her habit of asking abrupt, off-topic questions, not to mention the fact that her eyes were small and blue, twitching under duress and at most other times, too.

They couldn't agree, either, as to what Mice actually looked like or what she was doing on Reef Way. Some thought she could see fairly well at close range, but not across any distance; others said her eyes were overall adequate but her biggest defects were her offputting all-whiteness, animal laziness, and selfishness. Some swore she was stone blind, and in the end, no one really knew what Mice could or couldn't see.

As I lay in my place behind the lint-colored sofa, I studied her often as she sat emptily at her hobby table, touching her wooden boxes of radio parts, the peppery freckles across her nose and cheeks a little mask of runes that made me wonder: Are patterns, by the fact of their existence, asking to be observed and deciphered, or do they just blindly occur?

What color were Mice's small, flat hands anyway? Strawberry-pink.

threnody for south Louisiana



Marthe Reed

We deeply regret the wonderful Marthe Reed's recent death.

1

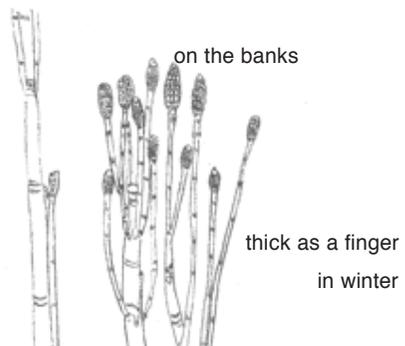
knowing how this will end
such an awkward alliance
an ache that is not pain
magnolia sweet

raising the levees again and again
shelling boiled peanuts
bowing a fiddle
getting there all along

amid the soak and flow
a good life
up and down the coast
barges and rigs

oilfields
gambling on spring and summer
drilled that hole, toolpushing
and quit come trapping season
boat in the water
boat in the water

it gets away from you
this senseless thrashing



2

I keep the contents of my heart
stacked in wet clay
heavy with downpour
an all-consuming rut

the swamp has nothing
on moss and daub
or the shovel buried in my chest
mostly wet

and showed up late
a long cry from there
adjusting to the heat
shrivel and bloom

an abandoned churchyard
headdown in the rain
I think of plumeria, waxy and fragrant
horsetail woods

leaf-and-catkin wallow
against the rear door of the church
no matter
empathy only gets us so far

behind the grate the small
eyes of an armadillo
muted reek
of urine and feces

3

waiting it out, we might as well
 forgive the loan
 sorrows stacked like cordwood
 under the stair, a sow's heart beating

at a closer angle, the water's ink
 becomes translucent
 breaking the surface
 and the horizon flips

I push through a maze of dry
 lotus pods, rattled and brash
 distance eroding with the trees
 though everything is up for discussion

the action unfolds off-stage
 a rancid aftertaste
 devoid of future
 a habit of water and erosion

inevitable as the terms of the contract
 tucked into an opposite moment
 rising gulf headed north
then no longer exists

the slow pulse of tidal force
 I am growing into myself
 moss leaf twig stem
 adrift on the wake

4

wind measured as
movement
through a live oak's limbs

this gray branched body
tossed green
against what seems

nothing
at all
a form of memory

what we ask
one another
cultivating time

leaf clatter rising in
morning sun's
urgency

blue jays
brown thrashers
parasitic ferns

morning
displacements
twist into light

warm water's
melancholy weather
like an afterimage of rain

where I find myself
giving way
bruised and awake

Réponds: And what would you say if you could?¹

purplish, every one
a fine, thick
rose
and all the following
along the rivers
Curages
smell like honey
plenty
to the bees



¹ Language excerpted from *Florula Ludoviciana*, entry for Smartweed. Title taken from Bhanu Kapil's questions in *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*.