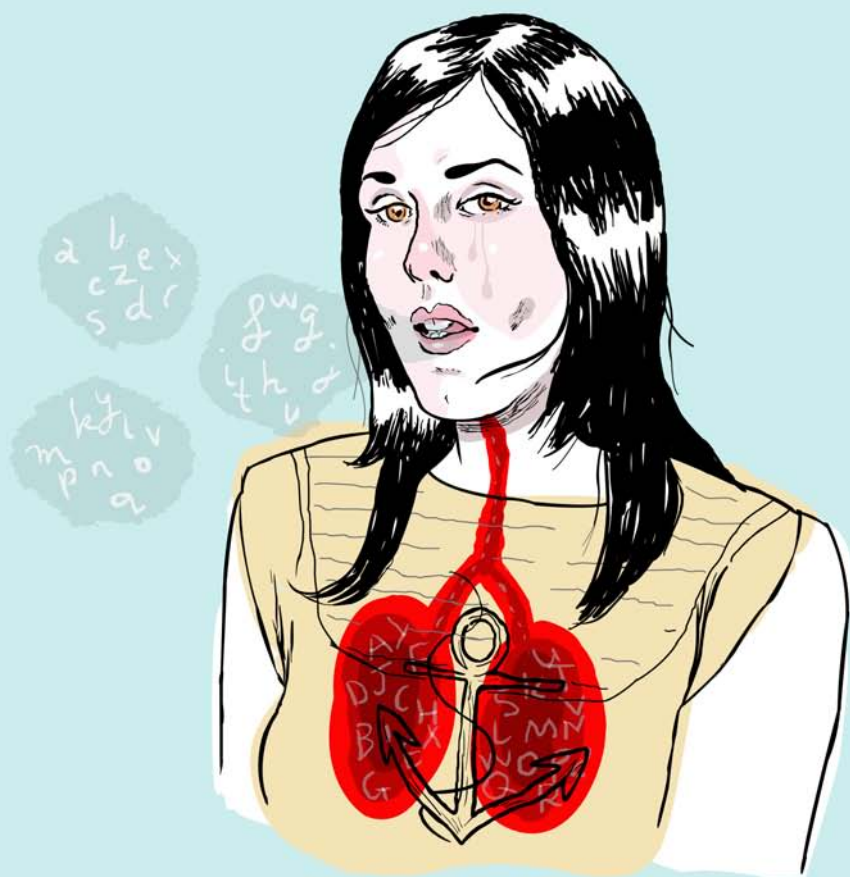


{ ALL *the* DAY'S

SAD STORIES }



{ A NOVELLA *by*

TINA MAY HALL }

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Winner, 2008 Caketrain Chapbook Competition

Brian Evenson, Final Judge

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Cover image "Portrait of Holly Throsby,"

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Printed on acid-free paper in Kearney, Nebraska, by Morris Publishing.

{SOME KIND *of* OMEN }

This is the year of beautiful trees. Cold nights, bright days, roadsides aflame. The wind blows, and maple leaves splatter the sidewalk. Six months before the stalker, before the mysterious white Xs start appearing on the side of their house, Mercy and Jake stand in the front yard raking. She has never had a false alarm; the blood comes as regularly as ever. Hopes are kept banked. The waiting extends only two weeks. It makes Mercy feel as if she is in some kind of dream in which they aren't really trying at all. Or as if the world in which she is living and breathing and menstruating is divorced completely from the landscape of her mind which is cluttered with tired images of seeds and buds and petals unfolding, fruit ripening. The next morning, Mercy sees the first ginkgo leaf break from the tree and hurries outside. Dying old perseverant locusts rasp on the trunk; the leaves come down like wings slicing against her face.

In less than twenty minutes it is over; the branches are clean,
and a circle of gold spreads around her.

{ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS}

One day, surprised by her reflection in a store window, Mercy realizes she is aging. The meat of her face is beginning to sag and pool. Her neck has a crepe-paper cast. She is thirty-seven, and it is ridiculous to be noticing such things. Bone loss, birth defects, mammogram. These are the words that float up to her from the car radio. She loves museums. She'll stop for anything claiming to be one, even those in people's houses by the side of the road. In Yuma, she paid two dollars to see an old man's collection of forks. They were arranged in cardboard soda flats lined with felt. One fork had a picture of Truman on the handle. In Kansas, a sign for a museum of *Horrors and Oddities*. It was in the detached garage of a blue ranch house. Metal shop shelves were stacked with boxes. A man sitting in a nylon and aluminum lawn chair inside the garage asked what kinds of oddities she was looking for. "Teeth, skulls, fetuses?" he said. She said she wasn't

really into body parts. "Sweetheart, it's all body parts," he said. He asked what she did for a living. Then he took a box from the shelf next to him. It was close at hand, probably the first thing he showed everyone. It was a lampshade with no lamp, translucent and browning. "Human skin," he said. "Circa Nazi." That museum was free.

{YOGA / POKER}

Mercy is flipping the deck of yoga cards, looking for her next pose. Jake is in the bedroom playing Internet poker. This is what he does when he is not at his flyspecked office in the history department or at yet another training camp on passive resistance. Ticking signals the dealing of hands. It sounds like a roulette wheel or a leaf caught in the spokes of a bike. *Vrikshasana*, tree pose; Mercy wobbles. She stares at her *driste*, her focal point, which is the thermostat on the wall. It is one of those old ones, brassy and pregnant with numbers. When the heat clicks on, a blue spark shoots out. Jake's Internet poker name is <lowluck99>; he says it is best to pretend you are a bad player to trick all the other players who are also pretending. When someone enters the table with a name like <acesonly> or <TeddyKGB>, you know he's a chump. *Ardha Chandrasana*, half moon, "I surrender into the flow of life." Outside, children

are shrieking. Mercy remembers a game she played as a child called “statues” where the goal was to stay frozen mid-motion as long as possible. This now strikes her as a game made up by adults. Jake types in the bedroom. The players talk to each other via a little column that runs alongside the graphic of the poker table. They use abbreviations to comment on hands: *TY* for thank you, *FY* for fuck you, *TYFY* for thank you and fuck you, *NH* for nice hand. Eight months they have been trying now; they have different opinions on what magic might work. Mercy breathes out and sings *Om*, “I am a part of Life’s joyful sound,” four parts: ah / oh / mmm / silence.

{ EXPERTS RECOMMEND *the* MISSIONARY POSITION }

When they make love, Jake lights incense from Tibet. Mercy wears her kimono with the embroidered rabbit. To know it is the proper time, she uses a digital thermometer made in Germany. She places a dense Swedish foam pillow under her hips. The sheets are antique linen bought in Paris; they are worn thin from years of loving and washing on the part of a French farmer and his wife. Waiting on the bedside table is a pot of tea, the leaves harvested in Africa, packaged in cheap pastel paper boxes labeled with the names of ailments, and located in the grocery store's natural foods section. The rug is from Iran, the bookshelf from West Virginia. The condoms Jake used were made in Canada and have maroon wrappers; now, they linger in his sock drawer like love letters. The white noise machine has many components, some from Mexico, some from Taiwan. Next to the teapot is a small fat rock that they found on a beach in Texas.

Afterwards, Mercy lies still and listens to the Williams-Sonoma egg timer tick off the minutes with metallic pings; this is the sound of hope. Under the bed: months of dust. It is bad luck to sweep there when trying to call a child home. It is bad luck to throw anything out.

{WHY MERCY MAKES HATS}

The mystery of them—the old-time tilt and shadow. Black netting casting constellations over nose and cheeks. Only the lips exposed, always painted crushed-hibiscus red. The fedora's come-hither modesty, the pillbox's nod to convention. Her grandfather owned a millinery shop in Des Moines sixty years ago. He had a blond ringletted girl front for him and ordered hats and gloves from New York and San Francisco. They came in paperboard boxes cushioned in pink-tinted newsprint, smelling chemical, festooned with small hard fruits that popped white foam if pressed too hard. During the war, the hats were all straw and skimpy felt, devoid of ornament, and he ran a black market in silk stockings, kept under the counter in industrial-sized rat poison tins. His customers would kiss him thanks, waxy crimson prints that earned him eye-rolls and gelid roast beef at home. The store folded in the late sixties, and he folded soon

after, when Mercy was just a child, hardly old enough to remember his stories, the boater he constructed of blue typing paper, the lethal dust that sifted from a stretch of silk.

{THEY SAY LOVE *the* SKIN}

The sidewalk outside the coffee shop is littered with handbills promoting garage bands and diet supplements. Sometimes Jake is so quiet, especially in the car, that Mercy wants to run into something just to get a reaction. Her friend Morris says he spent his Saturday night hunting down cough syrup for his son. He went to three drugstores with the child strapped in his car seat, wheezing angrily. “The doctor said only brands without dextromethorphan.” Mercy brushes a beetle off her napkin. Its wings open, glossy and iridescent, as it drifts to the table leg. “And then he won’t touch anything grape or cherry-flavored. Three years old and he already knows his own mind.” Morris tells how he left the child in the car, shuddering with phlegm and weariness, while he went into each store. He says people were giving him dirty looks, but what do they know about a sick child. At the last drugstore, the one where he finally found

the right medicine, bubble-gum flavored, a man in an Army jacket stopped him on his way in. He asked Morris to buy him Evan Williams and knew exactly how much it cost. He had it in coins. “He said they didn’t want him coming in there anymore.” Mercy sees the way her life is going to go: coffee with friends, silent car rides, plucking stray hairs from her face, shopping trips to large cities. Morris hits the table with the flat of his hand. “I bought for him, of course. I bought for him.”

Tina May Hall teaches English and Creative Writing at Hamilton College in upstate New York. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *3rd bed*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Quarterly West*, *descant*, *Iris*, and *the mimesota review*. She is currently completing a novel rife with murders, tattered documents, and long-lost Arctic explorers.

"In precise, beautifully-rendered language, Tina May Hall subtly sketches the ups and downs of a woman trying to get pregnant and the way her life is impacted by the flutter of the world and the rhythm of life: internet poker, minor infidelity, fights over mail-order seedlings, hurricanes, and a series of mysterious Xs appearing on her house. Honest, unflinching, and very human, *All the Day's Sad Stories* is an impressive and worthy debut."

Brian Evenson, author of *The Open Curtain* and *Last Days*

"The turning of the seasons, the failure of a pregnancy, a marriage rattled by frail income and shabby infidelity—*All the Day's Sad Stories* strings minute episodes into a bead necklace of a novella. I sat down to read a few pages, and before I knew it, I had finished the whole thing, never having moved out of my chair. The delicate, fragmentary narrative nevertheless heaves the weight of an entire troubled year."

Angela Woodward, author of *The Human Mind*

"*All the Day's Sad Stories* is a masterwork in miniature, a beautifully chiseled book of vignettes that blurs the line between the prose poem and the short story while managing to produce an arc of feeling that most novels lack. Tina May Hall is, at heart, a lyric poet of mood and image who realizes that each sentence is an acoustical event. Take this book into a quiet place, because even the spaces between words make the most exquisite of sounds."

Peter Markus, author of *Bob, or Man on Boat*

All the Day's Sad Stories was the winning manuscript in the 2008 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Brian Evenson.

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