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Untitled, 2021, photograph, size variable,
by Adalena Kavanagh

Shrinking Woman

LESLIE CONTRERAS-SCHWARTZ

Everyone had a lot to say about the incredible shrinking woman. She was known to have the ability to shrink down to a height and girth so small that she was indiscernible to the naked eye. There were feelings about this, her invisibility, and when she (her name was Loretta) went out in public she carried a tiny parasol—the kind that topped margaritas and frozen daquiris, made of toothpicks and tissue paper—so that others would remember to please not step on her. With her ever-diminishing body, her voice box also grew smaller, thus she spoke at such a high pitch that only dogs could hear.

Some said it was an affront to women, to humankind for a woman to be reduced to such a stature. What about us, said women either comfortably or uncomfortably under- or overweight and furious with Loretta's rejection of the body-positivity movement through her very invisibility? She makes us all invisible through the very act of her invisibility. Others tried to be creative in their responses, told her in public at the grocery store, while she pumped gas into her vehicle (a conundrum requiring much assistance), how larger than life she looked to them now, that to be so shrunken in body had allowed her spirit to seem much larger. It's as if now I can see the real you, they said to her adult beverage umbrella, the only thing viewable to the naked eye.

The fact of the matter was that Loretta had little control over her ability to grow or shrink. She was at the mercy of some larger thing that tugged at her voice, which she felt as a sort of rabid animal running the cage of her voice box, and through her fingers, her calloused writing hand. The voice and its desires and appetites, sensitivities, protectiveness, decided what her body would do. There were times when she could will herself into largeness, using her voice as an instrument to blow air through her limbs with a heated agitation. But this

was only possible indoors, in the privacy of her home, and during the hours between one and three P.M., as her voice was fickle, prone to fighting her physical self, and she was careful to never disrespect it.

Her voice (named Marissa) understood the perils of being in a physical female form. Marissa had developed a hiccup, a kind of stutter in response to Loretta's shrunken body, one that affected Loretta's ability to walk, to use her hands, or to see, and she announced her body from ten feet away to all she approached. Marissa grew angry, then tired, demanding that Loretta conserve her physical energy for the important task of maintaining Marissa's existence. Loretta complied with great dissatisfaction. Everything was harder at nine inches tall, she argued. I cannot say what I want to say in your grotesque body, Marissa said. But in truth, Marissa was protective of Loretta, knew that there was usually only one kind of violence Loretta could face in this new tiny form (being squashed because no one saw her at all), and that in her larger form, Loretta had risked dangers of all kinds, large and small, multiplied exponentially, the kind of things that shaved off a part of body and voice, in such a way that it never grew back. There were whole parts of them—from childhood through early adulthood—chiseled off by people of all kinds; Marissa decided the best plan of action would be to shrink Loretta way down, with a body and voice few would expect much of at all, but meanwhile stoking the small fiery animal, fluttering around in her chest beneath the ribs, beneath the muscles and connective tissue, this little flame. Marissa noticed everything, and she made Loretta write it down.

To complicate matters, Loretta was surprised that, after years of steady shrinking, a whole adulthood of shrinkage, she was pregnant with her life-sized husband's baby. Of course she was worried, since along with the rest of her body her uterus was also minuscule, a tiny Haman's hat or toy. Would the doctors be able to help their baby if he or she were born microscopic, with insect-sized windpipe, nasal passages, and lungs into which no medical instruments could fit? But the baby was born at a normal size, life sized as they call it, and at the bris everyone said Mazel Tov a little too loud, considering that the mother could not hold her newborn son, as he was too ginormous to even think of it, and she microscopic. Everyone was pleased that the baby was not affected by the mother's condition, and they celebrated, although it's unclear how exactly Loretta participated.

Flood Girl

There was a girl, around five years old, who woke up alone in a flooded house, floating on a mattress. Authorities helicoptered water, military-grade ready-to-eat meals, a pair of scissors, and sanitation wipes down the chimney.

The authorities sent little drones into the house to monitor the situation closely. The girl and her family had not received authorization to be touched, as it was currently believed that the city her family had fled from (with a name unimportant since no one could comfortably pronounce it), was plagued by a contagious disease caused by the waters that had drained from the country into which they fled. The authorities of the refuge country believed that the sickness was spread through touch, even the slightest physical contact and possibly through looking. The girl's house was broadcast live, the public watching her from the halls of churches and the dark living rooms of their homes. The sale of popcorn and soda rose exponentially on the third day when the girl's house drained and she stopped wailing, an aspect of the situation that had made most viewers watch with the volume muted. She found the bag of first aid. She pierced the bag of food and ate it dry. It was discovered that the girl was not five but in fact more like eleven, since she was in a frantic search for something to soak up the flow of menstrual blood, a private matter that horrified viewers enough for them to call the news and argue on social media, some demanding that this filth stop coming into their living rooms and their phones and their computers, others creating hashtags and pro-feminine-hygiene memes calling for the child to have immediate access to sanitary products and for her show to be aired without restrictions concerning her natural body processes. Others commended the authorities for blocking all exits from the house, for surely she suffered from Original Sin, to have woken up in this condition without parents, in an abandoned, now mildewing house, menstruating. They called for euthanasia, or state-sanctioned execution.

People argued on message boards and via cell phone, exponentially increasing the sale of a new menstruation product called The Plug, advertised online and fashioned from wine bottle corks, that

allowed women to better choose when and where to bleed. The show was forgotten temporarily, and on the fifth day the girl—her name was Laura—died from unknown causes.

A poet, whose family was heir to these feminine hygiene innovators, who had patented the use of adhesive in place of the garter belt and supported having large families according to the will of God, wrote a series of persona poems based on the girl and her experience of dying. The poet had been a loyal fan of her live broadcast and even cried when she died. His book, called *The Flood Girl*, described all the various states the girl's body had assumed on the screen, and was written with great empathy, likening the expressions in her eyes and face to Marilyn Monroe's, and with details carefully describing her hair, the skin on her knees and elbows toward the end, and the shape and state of her body as it began to fail. The book was lauded as "a humanizing force, a great witnessing of girls left behind" and won a Pulitzer. The family who had fled the flood, hiding because of their believed contagious status, thought their daughter had been swept away and drowned. They woke up to see her face on the front page of the newspaper of a nearby town where they were recovering. Her name was misspelled—Lera—and her face, and although unarguably their daughter's, made the family believe it was a case of mistaken identity, a strange and sad coincidence or mix-up, since they loved Laura, her ability to laugh at most things, how she read to her younger brother at night, was stubborn and argued with her sister, forgave quickly—and they mourned her a second time, holding onto the picture of the dead doppelgänger even though they believed it was not her.