

two stories by ron nyren

1. CURTAINS

The light of the full moon woke her three or four times during the night. She felt it as a kind of pressure against her eyelids, and when she opened her eyes, she winced to see the bright disc cut so sharply from the dark sky. The room's one large window had no curtains to shield her, no trees outside it to provide a screen. She turned and spoke into her lover's ear, but he did not stir.

In the morning she woke to find his head burrowed like a small animal beneath her chin. She stroked his hair and his eyes opened. After a moment, she said, "You don't have any curtains on your window. The light from outside comes in so strong. Haven't you ever thought of curtains?"

"Oh no," he said, "I can't sleep in a dark room." He rose and handed her his bathrobe.

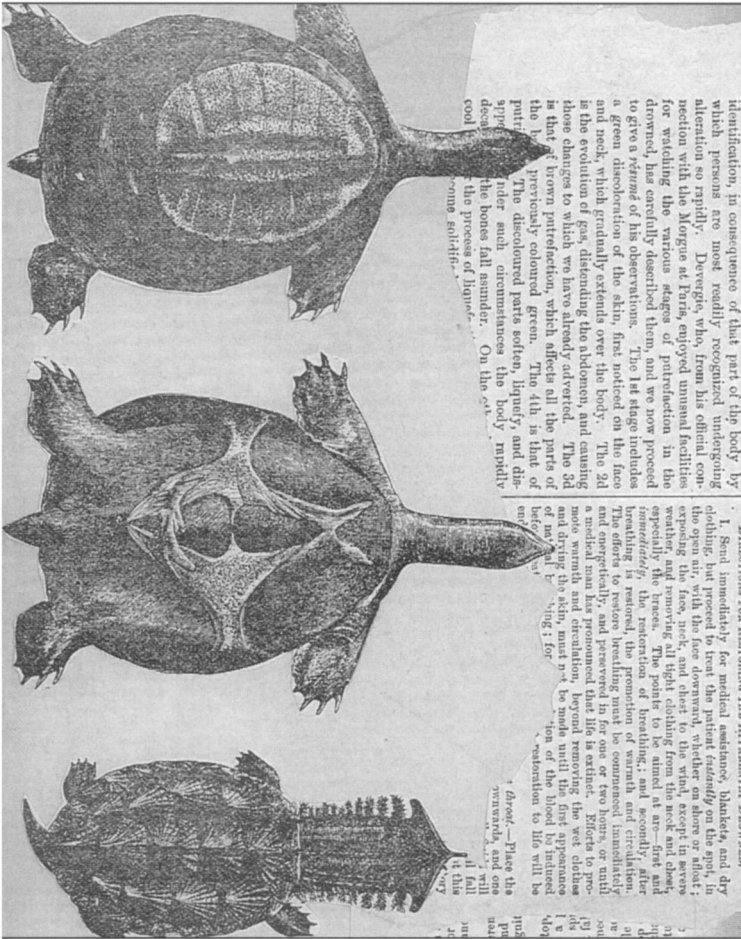
"Are you afraid of the dark?"

"No," he said. "But if I wake up in the middle of the night, and everything's black, then I don't always know where I am." They went to the window and looked out.

At this hour, the sun cast strict shadows, outlining each brick of the buildings down the hill, picking out the broken glass on the sidewalk, tracing the crossbars of the orange kite in the power lines. "Sometimes, if I'm only half-awake, I get the idea I'm still at work," he said. "I see guys from the stockroom yanking their hand trucks around, pulling crates apart. I start looking for my clipboard. I have to get out of bed and walk around until I trip over my shoes, or bump into the dresser, and then I remember where I am. By then I'm so awake it takes an hour to fall back asleep."

When she left his apartment for work, she reminded herself of the uncertainty of early love. Perhaps he would move to a different apartment soon, with a window blocked by a brick wall. Perhaps the nights would grow cloudier. Perhaps her three roommates might tire of watching television all the time, and go out more, so she would feel more comfortable having him over at her own place. Or perhaps the two of them would each discover some secret about the other that would put an end to their affection.

Yet none of these things happened. When the moon was thin, or gone from the sky, she rarely woke, but when it returned to its fullness, the room became too crowded with surfaces, shapes, and lines for her to



pins that had been removed from the ceiling, letting it spring open, and night was rushing down around me. It was frightening. I put my hand out to try to grab something, and I touched your spine. Those little knobs.” He reached behind her and stroked them, one by one. “Then I knew where I was, and I could go back to sleep.” As he spoke, his eyelids slipped shut, and his breathing slowed again. His forehead came to rest against her shoulder.

The room continued to thicken with a light that blurred the lines of the furniture, the corners of the walls. The room looked as if it were underwater and on fire at the same time. She felt that with this softer kind of light, she should be able to fall asleep, but she couldn’t. Now it was she who had become too distinct. She sensed each knob of her spine, and even when she closed her eyes she could feel the edges of her bones.

2. DIVIDING BY ZERO

A boy becomes convinced it is possible to divide by zero. His algebra teacher says no, it is not possible. Nothing is divisible by zero. The boy says, I will prove it. Late at night he pencils calculations at the kitchen table, in a circle of light cast by a single bulb. His mother undresses for the night. Don’t look, she says. He is busy erasing. I won’t, he says. They have named each corner of the room: one corner is the living room, one is the bedroom, one is the kitchen, one is the parlor. The boy wishes she would change in the bathroom, which is the only room that is a real room to itself. Now she has on her nightshirt, and the fraying green bathrobe she ties with a piece of string because there is no sash. She says, It’s all right to look now. Outside in the hallway a man is screaming Johnson, Johnson, and pounding against a wall. The boy scrubs the page with his eraser and the paper rips. He likes algebra, numbers wearing masks: $x + y = -(x - y)$, $a(x + y) = ax + ay$. Always x and y partnered, sometimes a and b . Never b and x , e and q . Who decides? In his proof b and x are partners. The man in the hall stops screaming, and now they can hear a TV anchor’s voice resonating in the ceiling. The boy’s mother brushes out her long hair. Usually at this hour the room is dark, and the boy is in his bed watching sparks jump from the hairbrush as it moves. Now she comes over and puts her arms on his shoulders, looks at the page full of calculations. Baby, it is only for a little while longer, she says. When I have a job again we will live in a house. We will leave these crazy people behind. He says, someday I will be rich. She says, no, not rich, we don’t need to be rich. He has already written $b \div 0 = x$ at the bottom of the page. He says, do you know what? Hawksbill turtles can’t pull their heads into their shells. □

sleep. “I can feel the edges of the furniture even with my eyes closed,” she told him.

One day she brought in heavy blue curtains with a gold fringe. Slightly too large for the window, they threw a calm dusk over the room when they were drawn. “Try it like this,” she told him. “Maybe you only dreamed you were waking up before.”

He shrugged, in that boyish way he had, first one shoulder, then the other. “They smell a little weird,” he said.

“They used to belong to my aunt,” she said. “They smell like her house, like all the things in her house.”

He fingered them dubiously, and then thrust his nose into them. “What are you doing?” she asked, laughing, and he blinked and smiled. “Cloves,” he said. “Old newspapers. Cedar wood. And cat pee.”

“You don’t like them,” she said.

“It’s nice to have something of yours in the room.”

That night she slept soundly, and didn’t wake until the curtains began to glow with the morning’s muffled blaze. It was Saturday, and she began thinking of all the things they could do. But when he opened his eyes, the first thing she said was, “Did you sleep?”

“I woke up once,” he said. “I didn’t know which direction I was facing. I had this idea that there were