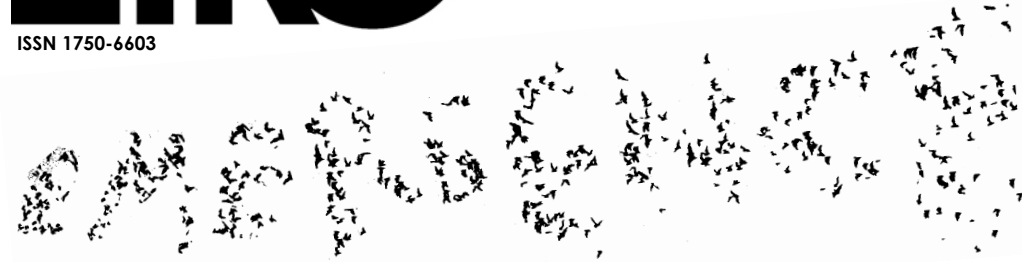


LITRO

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noise?” she exclaimed. Indeed. My sweat-happy catastrophes, who’d been simmering all day, had morphed into a single squealing tornado around the farmer’s market dumpster.

“Guys, stop!” I yelled. “Come on and eat your goat cheese sandwiches!”

I couldn’t snatch them over to me because I was frantic trying to dole out proper change. The spirit of competition that usually wins out among these customers had set in. Once one of them picks a carton of fruit, a rumpus sets in. “Six dollars for you,” I was mumbling. “Here’s sixteen back. Bug and Hopper come here!”

“Jeni, you should keep an eye on those children. They can’t just play in whatever is out there. They’ll fall ill.” Candice again. She was smiling, her fleshy cheeks blooming roses.

“Thanks Candice, though with the goat milk they drink, they hardly get sick.” I stopped bagging fruit and tried to halt the speedbots. They were on automatic. “Hey guys, over here!”

Of course they crashed. Bug hit the ground, a hysterical, battered pile of trouble. A banana peel, care of Hopper, plastered on her mussed white hair. I ran.

“I hope you don’t take them with you to collect the guano. They’ll get bitten and catch rabies. In fact, two children died just this last month—”

“THANKS AGAIN CANDICE!” My scream surprised us both. Heat compounded loneliness, and the top blew off the pressure-cooked day.

That afternoon I ignored the extreme weather advisory and thrashed the canoe into turbulent muddies. The time was earlier than 4:30, early enough to get caught. We ramped up headlights and went right under.

It was a mad splash through the dark tunnels, canvassing the maze as it narrowed and widened and turned and split. I found him at a low intersection point, at the base of some steps, knee deep in water. He was right, the water level was higher.

“I’m looking for bats.” I blurted.

He scratched his head. “Bats?”

“A colony of free-tails,” I blathered. I wanted to make him understand. I rambled about how I’d found bat carcasses, which the stormwater was dumping into the bayous. “It’s a matter of

finding the right habitat, a place large enough to hold a couple hundred at least. They’re pretty adaptable; after all they’re coming from Mexico. It’s a beautiful mystery really, where they live in here,” I stopped, breathless. He wore a peculiar expression.

“You’ve been spending all this time looking for bats?”

“Um.Yeah.” I answered, stupidly.

“Oh.” He foraged through his pockets.

It’s unanimous now Jeni, I thought. Get ready for the trespassing citation. He thinks you’re a freak. Standing there, grinding my feet like a donkey, I pushed up silt clouds until my eyes grew wet. Tears are the worst. I looked for my kids, They were busy fingering calcite deposits on a wall. Above us, a manhole suspended like a holey spaceship, beamed dust and light, and a meager spider was floating down to us on its gauze. *Hitch me up with you, I wanted to bawl.*

He unzipped the ominous paper on his knee. “Let’s start with this first,” he said.

It was a map, of the storm sewer system that was buried under the city. Even the connecting waterways clearly marked. “Thanks,” I said, marveling at the hundreds of access points dotting all 14 bayous, from Amanzanilla to Sourné.

“Some drains are hard to get at. I’ll take you sometimes if you want.”

“Really?” I brayed, my voice pitched high, my eyes shuttering down and then up, to his sprawling cheekbones, pulling at his mouth. His mouth, turning at the corners. Was that a little smile? Fat raindrops pelted our heads. The manhole was about to become a giant showerhead. My troublemongers reminded me, “Hey mom. You said no drains when it rains!”

I shook off water. “Sure thing guys. Better use our feet than get flushed out!”

We squirmed out of the dimming tunnel, just in time to get hit by a blast. How could one dark grin make me forget to be watchful?

A squall was brewing.

(Concludes next week...)

LITRO

Rinku Patel has published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Harper’s*, and the *Slow Food Guide to San Francisco*. She learned to properly shuck a crawfish while growing up in Houston, Texas. *Emergence* is extracted from her novel *Submerge*, a story of migration, the Gulf, and the pursuit of Mexican bats.

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Explaining’s always easiest to start and not finish. So don’t expect a perfect ending, but here’s the launch: I just was trying to keep my kids out of trouble. That’s how he first slipped under my sonar.

When it hit me that the kids were scrambling off again, I dumped my face shield into the canoe and began to clear my throat, “Bug and Hopper, stick to that shore while I pack or I promise I’ll leave you at home next—” Tumbling they went into the bayou froth. Working hard as I was to glimpse them, I didn’t exactly *see* him crop up from underground, readying to tap my back. I’d just sensed him. I swiveled. His fingers missed their mark and poked my collar. Then I nearly spilled my guano.

He’d shoulders to lug around the world. The July sun was glowering over his dark head, obscuring his features on the left, bleeding red down his right side. An omen that should’ve been noticed if I hadn’t jumped to his touch.

“What the hell are y’all doing!”

The roaring cars on the highway overpass above us muffled his yell, or maybe it was the tree leaves rustling with the clamor of the first cicadas. Maybe it was my thick head. Didn’t matter. He could’ve been a gator gurgling hollow threats underwater. It’d be aqueous static in my ears, pointless noise, like the ID badge clink-clink-clinkin’ a warning on his jumpsuit. Watch it Jeni, I should’ve been thinking, he’s a municipal employee with the city of Houston. I didn’t move. Even the kids were laughing, splashing in the murk. But I couldn’t move. I was oblivious, to the risk of his uniform, to the concrete slope we teetered on, to the kiddos

dunking their giggles, to the wind showers of pollen blowing our way, even to the storm sewer right behind us, gaping water down to the bayou—and’d spit him out too.

Thank heavens for rising thermals. A sweet reminder to startle me awake, swirled up Gulf humidity tickled my nose with the scent of fresh, warm tortillas: it was bat urine. Remembering, I tenderly clutched the find I’d cocooned in a Fiesta grocery bag: a warm, just dead free-tail bat.

“Are you ok?”

He thought I was crazy. A grown-up woman in a toxics suit, holding court under a highway overpass alongside Buffalo Bayou with a canoe, face mask, and gardening tools is hard to beat. I hugged my bat harder. If only he knew I’d been scooping carcasses for months, while I was darting through the underground drains. Or that I was hunting for a colony, alive under the city.

He reached down and rescued my shovel from the water lapping up the steep. “Here.”

“Thanks.” My voice snagged. I eyeballed the open storm sewer, practically begging me to dive in. Gathering up nerves and the half-truths, I began my pitch, “I’m just collecting some guano for the farmers’ market, Sir. From the Mexican free-tails sleeping in the eaves.”

“You collecting bat shit?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t think the city—”

“But I’m fully protected. See?” I chirped, patting my puffy suit. “All sealed in. Always, when I’m harvesting guano. No histoplasmosis to worry about at all!” As I yawped, I dropped my bat into the canoe.

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“You’re not doing anything illegal I guess. All right then, just be careful down here. And keep an eye on your kids.”

The sun was plunging into the water when I finally got to see him clearly. Boy, he had some kind of deep, inkwell eyes. A bait for trouble. But I was already clamoring down the concrete, freaking out about the little ones, listening hard for their kinetic echoes. I was waist high in Juniper grass and tromping towards the apron beach when I turned around. He was already gone.

†††

If I was going to be a bat I’d be a Mexican free-tail. When it comes to life, free-tails’ve got good heads: the hot days they siesta away, torpid and huddled together, and nighttimes they’re keeping their ears to the grindstone. Because once they start to stir, they’re listening for the echoes of loved ones and breakfast.

Folks might say, “You? A free-tail? Jeni, honey. You’re not nearly that social.”

I can be.

I just need the right crowd. Some things are better left to instinct than explaining. Take my market customers—they claw each other over my bat poop yet wear their BMWs like jewelry. Not my crowd. Then there are my kids, Lily and Lucas; who wrangle with my vegetables like a stink bug and leaf hopper on a sortie. Not even seven years old, yet they’re my crowd. The best example, of course, is summed up with one word: Burt. He didn’t want to be mine, but I always found an excuse. I stayed married to him, was still married to him, long after he was gone.

After the first run-in at Buffalo Bayou, I knew *he* was different from Burt. I couldn’t tell you why, but I could still conjure his scent (bayou stew) or his skin (green on brown, sweat and pollen), his rumble and thunder voice. My sonar hadn’t failed me. Rather than finding an underground bat colony, I had happened upon him instead. I wondered, was he a little bit, well, bat-like?

Couldn’t have been more wrong. But I’d nothing to go on but my senses, and it’d been four long years since Burt had left us. A person can get terribly lonely.

It’s not that I never tried getting on with folks; I held a demo at the market once, which I called “An Educational Session to Bridge the Bat Gap.” So many let their kids believe that bats are solitary creatures with nothing better to do than

dive-bomb their grannas’ hairnets at night. We decorated our booth with signs for the two types of bats: “Megachiroptera—the world of flying foxes!” And another, “Microchiroptera: let’s hibernate!” Bug and Hopper hung up matching models (fake), of a micro free-tail and a fruit and nectar-eating tropical bat with marble eyes. I gave a little talk. That went pretty well.

They turned on us within minutes. More precisely, when Hopper reached into a cage to reveal an adorable snoozing vampire bat, which I’d borrowed from an exotic pets store in the Galleria. My son knew that vampire bats drink the blood of tropical birds in the rainforest, not little Anglo children on the Gulf. Try telling the customers. Their screams curdled my milk.

That was my last demo, my last attempt to bridge the gap. Don’t get me wrong, I stayed busy: I mowed lawns, even though it’d been Burt’s business; I bartered guano for goat milk, to turn into cheese and soap; I even farmed at Party Boy supply store’s empty lot alongside the I-43 highway; and occasionally I sold my friend Jaime’s papayas for him.

I’d always been into guano. Business had grown ever since they day I dumped some onto one woman’s yard without asking and within a season, her plumeria sprouted serving platters for leaves, and her hibiscus soared. Neighbors took notice. Then a natural living magazine in Santa Fe called to ask about the guano. The story, pure applesauce, came out a few months later. An opportunity was hatched. I taped the article on my booth. Demand skyrocketed. Weekly canoe trips were in order. Honestly, I couldn’t have done better if I’d labeled it organic heirloom poop or whatever else is in these days.

But it’s the bats that really drew me in, and the customers knew it. “Still looking for your lost tribe of bats Jeni?” one or another of them would ask, before poking holes into my figs. I’d duck into my baseball hat and reply, “As a matter of fact, yes.” Bats are wild animals I could relate to.

Free-tails are reliable too; they’re here year round, unlike Burt, who reverse-migrated out of town to Corpus, to Laredo from Corpus, and finally crossed the line in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. My spineless Burt, long past the Rio Grande, whose last postcard said, “Hey Jeni, I kinda like Puerta Vallarta. Keep the mowers...” What made him go? Was it two hungry babies with four of his cypress eyes? Was it my

polebean frame and washed-out looks? “Some girls wear golden ringlets, but my Jeni’s got greasy yellow stringlets!” Burt would joke. I was never much good at commanding Burt’s senses. Must’ve been that’s what drove me below sea level, into the city’s wet human wormholes, to *him*.

†††

The bat meters clicked to a halt. A drippy, no luck day in the storm sewers, until he cornered us again. Just like I didn’t need divorce papers to know Burt wasn’t coming back, I didn’t need an instrument to know that *he*, someone I’d only seen once, was around the bend. But it was too late to turn back. Our headlights jimmied off the walls, and onto his face.

“How did y’all get into this drain?” he growled, holding hands to his eyes.

I grabbed my kids’ headbands and turn their lights down. “Through the opening under Gaup Bridge, on Buffalo Bayou.” I stammered. “Pretty easy canoeing up.”

“What. Never mind. I’m not gonna ask what you’re doing here because you’re not gonna be honest with me.” Isn’t that the truth, I thought. He wouldn’t be hearing about the bats from me.

“My mom is lookin—” Bug was jumping up and down, sloshing dark water. “For the exit,” I added firmly, hugging her bobbing head to my side.

“OK, let me show you then.”

My sewer scavengers in tow, I followed his disappearing silhouette towards a confetti speck of sun until it widened into a glaring orb of daylight. Streaming out with the storm water, I braced for a full-on muggy afternoon.

His arms were crossed, and he frowned.

The little ones and I slithered down the slope to the bayou and pushed off the canoe. I glanced back at the cool dark; at him, looming in the cement hollows of the storm sewer; at the web of freeways groaning with noise and grime high above him.

“Don’t let me find you in the drains again,” he shouted, before turning back in.

We paddled downstream. Just around the first bend, the concrete channelizing both banks of the bayou gave way to crabgrass. A perfect viewing area. “We’re gonna stop here!” I cried. I pulled up behind a crowd of oleander on the bank opposite the drain.

He came out around 4:30 pm, like clockwork, every day. I watched him from basecamp over

the next two weeks. The child insects would climb the steep and play in the Chinese yarrow and crowning grasses. After he left, I’d call the kids and we would enter the drain.

One day he stepped outside, and veered to the right side of the bank instead of left. He shouted, “You there. Hold on a minute.” Then he disappeared up the embankment.

He came scooting down my side of the slope. Bug and Hopper tugged along right besides him. My heart walloped my chest.

“Use it.” He said, tossing me a small package, before pivoting back around. As he vanished up the edge, he called over his shoulders, “There’ll be tropical storm warnings all summer, starting now. The water levels are gonna get high, out here and in.”

My wee predators snatched the present from my frozen hands and gnawed it open. Inside the box there was a natural gas gauge, and a post-it said, “Be careful. Some sewers have deadly leaks.”

†††

Real danger is never obvious like that. But after one long day at work, I was besides myself trying to get to him. A flaring hot week had burned my crop at Party Pete’s, so I spent the morning wandering through undeveloped lots around town to round out my pickings. Pulling up at the market late as I was, I muttered a warning to myself. *Jeni, you’ve got a ration of trouble*. They were lined with their totes, mad as newly tipped cows, before my truck had even parked. I felt tired.

One of them, Candice, was fingering the bruises on my fruit. “Are these kumquats organic, Jeni?” she asked, her eyes on my dirt-cloaked fingernails.

“I certainly didn’t use any spray, Candice. At all.” I said. The hairs gunked on the side of my face pricked my face, and my wet t-shirt was glued to my back. I added, “You know I only use guano, Listerine and red chili peppers!” I was telling the truth, but I wouldn’t tell that they weren’t my harvest. The trees belonged to some anonymous loft developer who was letting them drown, branches thrown up in surrender, in a weedy lot. He would cut them down before constructing his gargoyles and zen fountains and imitation Roman columns. I doubt he’d even tasted the fruit.

But Candice wasn’t finished. She never was when it spelled trouble for me. “What is that