

## LITRO

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PRESENTING PART 2  
OF RINKU PATEL'S EMERGENCE

This is the second part of a special double issue, the first part of which was published last week. Jeni and her kids, with the help of an enigmatic Houston municipal worker, are searching for a colony of free-tail bats in drains beneath the city . . .  
Read part one in full at [www.litro.co.uk](http://www.litro.co.uk).



Side creek access point, broken canoe launch: the magic gone, it looked more like a pointy-headed predator with hairy ears. Then I spotted the municipal truck on the bluff. My fingertips tingling, I shouted, "he's inside!" Flip-flopping again, the access point transformed into a joyous clownface. "Quick! Let's find him."

The kids soldiered through the tunnels, primed to see him. But when we passed the waterfalls, a funny thing happened, or I should say, didn't. The bat meters stayed mum. "Strange," I said. There were no phantasms flickering on the wall, either. *You've missed the emergence*, I scolded myself. "Let's check the bathhouse and head out guys." *He's hanging out on the bluff, waiting, while you stupidly two-step through drains.* "Stay where you are," I cried to Bug and Hopper.

The ceiling was emptied. The floor was heaped with pyramids of carcasses. They were dead. There was the smell of rotted meat.

"It was Public Works." It was him, entering. "You?"

He held out his hands. "They poisoned them," he said. He kicked at pellets scattered like confetti.

Eyes going blurry, I refused to see him at first. "You told the city?" My shoulder blades shriveled towards each other. My back started to hunch. I felt old.

"They were a hazard. They said they would just move them. Listen to me..."

*You betrayed me.* I sat slumped, became someone else, heard unsaid words clanging in my head. A scream bounced off walls and ceilings and the piles of dead, but it wasn't mine.

"Mama!" Hopper skidding into me, hysterically sobbing. "Lily ate the candy and isn't waking up."

My patched-up crone's heart burst.

†††

The hospital confirmed that Bug ate poison. They took her unconscious body, pumped out her stomach contents and injected in new stuff. He was there too, another haggard face in the waiting room. *Exterminator.* "Get out," I growled.

By the morning Bug was ok, but the scare stuck. I didn't need chiding doctors to tell me anything, either. I was the one to put her in the

subterranean, in that poor bat cemetery, to pick off the floor. It wouldn't happen again. I'd work the bayous again, but without them. I would keep them safe with a neighbor.

It had only been a week when I began to find his strange notes in my canoe. *Some nerve.* Remembering pain would flash briefly across my chest. He always asked me to meet him at the subterranean, one more time. My eyes swimming, I'd paddle away fast. Another note dropped into the puddle at my feet, water swirling over his pen parks, pulling out ink threads, writing gone.

But they became more frequent and urgent. One evening, exasperated by his littering, I wrote back, "fine. today. 5pm." I sat it on the bank, flagged with a stone. I stepped into the canoe and didn't look back.

Bat cathedral. Maternity ward. Mass grave. This subterranean had been many things. My boots splashed in pools that reflected the past, my nose caught a whiff of rotting. Doubling over, I nearly left. Then I echolocated him. My headlight was turned off, but I knew exactly where he was. On the left side. Behind a column. In the rear. I gulped deep, and stepped inside. It was almost clean. I heard an interfering sound. Not his, but my feet veered towards it.

In a wooden carton, in the middle of the room, he'd clustered a couple dozen of the blindest pups. I touched their warm coats. Sitting down, I curled one into my palm. He lingered, waiting for a cue. I didn't call out. I stared at the pups, stroked the one in my hands until it bleated to be let go. He was silently moving towards the exit. Receding. "Wait!" I wanted to shout. "Stay." I said nothing. Then I noticed another note, stuck under the pups.

Jeni,

*I found them the next day. They need you.*

Elias

I looked up, my face wet, and pricked my ears for his echoes. He was already gone.

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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In the dog days of July, the mounting heat sponges all the moisture it can handle. This humid torture is what Houston is about. The water warms and the wind shear drops until a tropical depression from the Yucatan ambles over, and boom! A bolt of lightning cracks the hot, heavy day in two.

As you take cool gulps of air, rain comes pouring, into the storm drains, from the drains into the bayous, and from the bayous into the Gulf, where everything originates anyways. The rising water suspends silt and clay broth, which sworls the bottle caps and plastic six-pack rings in a gravity-defying dance. Damsel and dragonflies start to skim the surface. It's cooler and crisp for the next few. Then the mosquitoes hatch. They grow the size of roaches, and roaches grow the size of roseate spoonbills. The bats eat plenty at this point. But when the air grows still you know it's going start all over again.

We came out as wet before as after the storms, and we weren't getting anywhere, either. Wild hibiscus had begun to elbow out the swamp lilies and Louisiana iris, while the twin explorers and I splashed along in the canoe, crossing out possibilities, nixing one access point after another on the map. Sometimes he came along, and together we would paddle through rapids and rock outcrops. We portaged around logjams and manmade dams, past White Oak Bayou, down Buffalo Bayou, to the wharves east of Roughpass Swoop. We'd rest at tiny islands of giant ragweed harbored with tinier white sand beaches.

The drains started out promising. Entering the curved lip of the storm sewer always felt like progress. As we walked, concrete morphed to steel which morphed to brick. Sometimes he named the flowstone cascades hanging off the walls. "Look," he'd show my curiosities. "See

that? Those are soda straws. These are cave pearls." The list goes on.

In these arching chambers and twisted lightwells, we rescued a black lab, spotted minnows floating downstream, sidestepped pipes leaking sewerage, sniffed out a wet marijuana bag. That summer the cops found three Mexican boys too, all dead.

Where were the free-tails? No answer. The shape-shifting culverts vanished into dead ends, or worse, shrunk into mouseholes, special haunts for leprechauns. My own little people were excited by the shrinkers. To keep them out, I'd plead, "Listen guys. If you go through that, you might not be able to return. You swell up pretty big on the other side. You become an adult."

We floundered for weeks. Did I mind? Not too much. Maybe it had to do with him. It felt like something. Still, the search was dizzying, and with my side jobs, there wasn't time to roost. We needed luck to change.

One day it did. I was slipping past downtown, that pointy crowd of buildings that needles at the sky and litters the banks of Buffalo Bayou. The kids bounced like upset frogs, and the cantilevered freeways above us had blown down all the grime I could handle.

"*Sloooowww down!*" Glinting eyes, soot in his hair, the source of the shouting barrage was propped on an ant-hollowed bank. "Pull out your map," he called as I paddled up.

I handed it over, and quickly grabbed the waistbands of my two amphibious shorts, poised to ribbit into the water.

"The carcasses you've found have been here," he said, sweeping one wide hand over the eastern part of the map. "X's mean you've hit all the points, right?"

Had licked knees to prove it.

"Look." He unrolled another paper.

"That's my map," I said. "But—" It wasn't.

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“Found this in the City Archives,” he said. “Engineer’s drawing. From 1893.”

I compared my map with this one, and noticed a phantom area, with a large barrel-like space, that was missing in mine.

“This is where your dead ends lead,” he murmured, circling the engineer’s drawing with one pinky. From the barrel, drains tentacled out to new access points. “Wanna go?”

Mesmerized by his hands, I gulped. A thunderclap jolted us to action.

†††

It was a race against graying sky. We streaked past coastal mudflats, around Retrinue’s Basin. Eventually the boat chopped water. “There’s been rain upstream,” he said as we surfed rising rapids.

“And the Gulf’s near,” I replied.

Landfall. A side creek, nothing but weeds and a decayed canoe launch. A smidge of old-growth cypress, and an access point to hack through. It was a little face, that entrance, its pointy head crowned in chinaberry, and its mouth, grinning with cowlilies. *Who will be the food stuck between your teeth?* I brushed down pin-pricks of hair at the nape of my neck. We went in.

Velvet moss, old stamped brick. This culvert was different. It was a place where anything was possible. We crawled at first, then walked, four spots of warmth in its cool, expanding belly.

The first centerpoint, leaking skinny shafts of light. “Right or left?” he asked me.

I looked at the map. “Left.” Better air flow that way, and it was the side facing the bayou water, rather than the sea. It was water to drink.

My hungry spelunkers were already off, gawking at flowstone. “Popcorn! Spaghetti!” they crooned. Red goo dripping down a manhole cracked to open sky. “Tomato sauce!” They dive-bombed the wall, but I grabbed them. Cloud juice splattered my face. *You’re trying to raise the devil down here, while the big blow’s coming on.*

“Mom. No drains when it rains?”

We kept walking.

A whopping metal screech, sudden gushing water. Waves crashing against gumboots. I jumped, scooping up Bug.

Relief, it was just dog-eared pipes spewing storm waterfalls.

Eerie lights jerking willy-nilly across the tunnel wall like an organism, like ghost-blue comets. Ghosts. *A place where anything...*

A breeze rustled through my shirt. “Run!” I screamed. Carrying Bug, pulling Hopper behind me, I leapt and plunged through water.

“Hey, wait.”

No need to stop. “*No way—*”

“Look.” Elias stood next to the waterfalls.

“See? It’s light from up here,” he motioned to a hole in the ceiling, “being refracted by water.”

I took a halting break and eyed the darting comets. Felt a chilly wind. Eyed the open sky he was pointing to, and took a full stop. Here was uncluttered airflow. Bats can’t echolocate if there’s clutter. Outside, the bayou would be widening, closing in on the Gulf; fat bayou, a clean, unobstructed source of water, to drink on the wing.

Only thing missing down was a space big enough for a colony. I looked up again, to the crack in the darkening sky, and spotted flitting wraithies. “Check that out,” I squeaked. Free-tails.

Just past the falls, Bug and Hopper’s bat meters rang like castanets. My giddy nose wasn’t deceived by the hanging scent of it either: bat pee. “Give me those toys,” I sang. Turn off your lights!” I may never know where my husband had gone, but I knew bats.

We reached a towering womb, a cavern really, the inside so dim you’d mistake the last scraps of day for moonbeams. Took tiny steps inside. There. The ceiling was honeycombed with holes to the outside, canvassed with a continent of floating fur and streamer tails, snoozing in the eves, torpid upside-down splendor. There were my bats. I beamed.

The double stomach cried out, “Grapes!” I hushed them. “Grapes, grapes, grapes!” My fruitflies’d spotted babies, clumped together in knobby bunches and knots for warmth.

I’d forgotten that it was July. “We should leave.” I retreated.

“What? Already?” He couldn’t have looked more perplexed if I’d flown up there on a broomstick to join them. “We just got here.”

“This,” I explained, pulling my kiddos back, “is a maternity ward. They’ve just had their pups.” Free-tails give birth once a year, during summer. We were disrupting them. “Let’s go.”

“There’s no guys up there?” he asked.

“Well. No, but—”

The carpet was rolling in luxurious tidal waves. They were shivering themselves awake. “It’s the emergence.” I gasped. “Quick, run!”

We stumbled outside, climbed up the first manhole with a rusty ladder, reached a bluff

tarpaunched with rubble and orange city tape, poking with flapping banana trees. The afternoon sweat box fractured by another Yucatan draughter, wind shear was blowing them out.

I sucked my breath. Black streaks breached the ground, shooting up towards thunderous clouds. They were flinging themselves into the wind, a bunch of hurly-burly kites. The mass gained momentum, growing into a whirligig twister. The kids stumbled after them at first, then danced and caromed too. My spirits skittered light. The bats were fueling an airy blast of their own.

“After they emerge they always fly to the East,” I said. His head at tilt, he grinned up.

He narrowed his eyes. “I have an idea.”

We were off again. The kiddos cartwheeled down the hill to the bayou. I happily tumbled behind them. We passed the open mouth of the access point. *You didn’t eat us after all.*

It was probably an accident the first time. He was just handing the kids off to me, into the canoe. We just grazed each other’s fingers, mine turned red as chinaberry. Felt the gentle pressure again. The rest of me might’ve been a bent old coat hanger, but warmth coursed through my hands. My thermic palms pushed off.

We charged towards the Gulf, chased bats into the torchlight horizon. “Stay centered!” I yelled at my laughing hooligans. We’d never catch up, but with high water rolling, there were waves to ride.

“The whole colony was a bunch of Nancies?” he asked again. “No guys?”

“Is.” I cocked my head. “Free-tails have rules.” I plowed my paddle deeper. “A female has one pup, and only around July. The whole colony gives birth during the same week. Last rule: during baby-rearing time, the males live nearby, but separate.”

His black caterpillar brows were wriggling, arched. “I’m sure they miss them. Wouldn’t you?”

I locked eyes on the approaching underpass. I’d always thought that free-tail females were darn smart to keep their subterraneans separate. Now I wasn’t so sure.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

For the first time in my life, I hoped that Burt would get lost in Mexico and never come back.

“It’s coming down.” I said, smiling. The sky crackled with a thunderous downbeat, signaling the pour. We got soaked, but nobody minded. My minor league pagans thumped the sides of

the boat. We waved to the last of the free-tails gliding out of sight to their mosquito breakfast. “Buenas noches amigos!” my kids’ waterlogged throats hollered. “Time to eat now Mom!”

“All right, all right,” I murmured. “Put on your parkas.” My head thrown back, my lips swelled with rain and laughter, gumboing with the kids’ drum beats, into his low chuckles.

†††

The next morning at the market, I hummed. I spirited cantaloupes into place and draped the shade over my booth with helium lightness.

Even Candice’s sour lemon face, front of the line as always, had no effect. Her eyes x-rayed through my watermelons. Her turquoise-studded fists were revved to tap the hell out of rind.

Still humming. While packing guano, I didn’t hide my broken nails, didn’t cover my head with a baseball hat. “Try one of my loupes, Candice,” I smiled distractedly. *Who cares today?* Too long I’d thought that if I’d painted over my wrinkles, or gotten permed, Burt wouldn’t have left.

“Cantaloupe in July?” Candice squawked. Isn’t that precocious, Jeni. Mexican fruit from the Rio Grande Valley is available now too.”

“They’re not from Mexico, Candice. They’re mine, first of the season.” I passed out slices. “If you can’t decide, I’ll help the next person.”

Thing about Candice, she was just another 10 carat fighting cock cribbed in brocade. Her plumage was puffed, but even my children were quietly nested at my feet, sweet yellow canaries. She swung for a parting scratch anyways, “Another child caught rabies from a bat and died Jeni...”

She missed. We left her words dangling, and let the surge drop us at Buffalo Bayou. Leaving the kids to play on the apron beach, I suited up and headed to the overpass upstream. I scanned the drain through the eye slats of my face shield once in a while. I raked guano. Every so often, I thought. *This is where we first met.* At those far skyscrapers he gave me the good map. On this snaking bayou we chased the emergence. The metal prongs of the rake ground cement. Awful noise. I finished bagging, but he never came out of the storm sewer.

Unable to conjure him, we left. The day was past dulling, sluiced off like my enthusiasm. I paddled hard, but even the water looked basic again. Places are brick and mortared by perceptions, so the bayou was becoming to me what it is to regular folks: plain old oil and fecal coliform-loaded murk.