

THE BLACK EMERALD

Novellas and Stories

Jeanne Thornton



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Energy Arcs and Fractal Skies	The Evergreen Review
Skeleton	Night Train Magazine
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Satan in Love	A Capella Zoo
Chairs	Santa Clara Review & Fiction Circus

*Dedication
is overrated*

I. THE BLACK EMERALD



THE BLACK EMERALD

I. The Black Emerald

Prologue

On Reagan's first date with Josephine, the two girls went to the theater on Lamar Street where you could order food that was bad for you while you watched movies that supposedly weren't. Reagan and Josephine ordered thick, fat shakes made with caramel and salt, and they split an order of fries with green chili queso, which they munched happily as the credits began. The movie had been made somewhere in the Middle East, somewhere depressing that you heard about on the radio, and although it was a cartoon it was in black and white. Its hero, Reagan guessed, was a little boy who was making a tree out of scrap concrete and wire in the cratered field outside the house he and another family shared in the refugee camp. A crew of animated animals began to cavort around the tree: a boar, a hyena, a goofy pelican, a wise old scorpion that resented the poison in its tail. The animators from wherever this was were talented, and the black lines defining the outer extension of the animals squashed and stretched in perfect sync with the action. The animals kept urging the boy to build his scrap tree higher, higher. Meanwhile, in the house, the boy's father, who spent most of his days fishing in the oil-and-war-polluted sea, clashed with the boy's brother, who'd recently been recruited into a group of fanatics of some stripe. There was a nice scene where the boy's brother gave him advice that was not age appropriate in a Wes Anderson kind of way, then spoiled the ironic effect by telling him that dreams were the only thing that made life worthwhile. The dreams thing really ruined it.

Reagan assumed the end of the movie would be depressing, but Josephine had taken her hand (Reagan guessed out of some kind of

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ecstasy) during a particularly long vignette where the boy trailed laborers on their daily commute across a border, the whole time asking the laborers for scraps and packaging for his tree, and the two girls made out through the final forty minutes and a hunk of the credits. Reagan unbuttoned the two buttons of Josephine's blouse just below the top, slid three fingers inside her shirt, let her skin slide along her breastbone, felt her head swim as the soundtrack filled with Foley gunshots and jarring music. This was what it felt like to be in love, she knew; stories told her so.

The last shot of the movie was the scrap tree in the field outside the charred ruins of the house, requisite silent cuts of each dead member of the family still smoking like meat. The animated scorpion was slowly burying his dead animated pals around its roots, his sad, stoic eyes on long, frail stalks. In the white light of the final credits Josephine smiled and smoothed her hair and buttoned the blouse and Reagan sat with her hands on her lap.

And although she had no wish to believe it, this was the first moment Reagan started to believe that there was a way out of her ordinary life. The way lay straight through love and through Josephine. Josephine rose like a great wave before her, a wave so navy dark it looked black, and if Reagan could wait in one place, feet on some strange surfboard with the perfect balance of tension in her muscles and perfect attention to every shifting current in the water that surrounded her, Josephine would swoop beneath her, lift her, carry her someplace far away, someplace where she could feel the sun on her forehead.

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Reagan always had to look when she dialed Josephine's phone number on the virtual keypad of her cell phone. She sat on her knees on

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her bed, her head propping her blue woven blanket up like a tent, and the backlight of the phone made a tiny campfire inside; her own breath made it hot.

Josephine didn't pick up. Reagan bit her lip and dialed again. She dialed a third time. Josephine would pick up if Reagan just kept dialing.

What, Josephine said, picking up. Her voice was always higher than you expected. The great joy of loving a girl completely was that you always kind of knew how her voice sounded on the phone, but still you got to experience it every time; all the perfect details that the brain filtered out like they were caught in the mesh of a sieve but that passed easily through tiny fabric speakers.

I just needed to call you, said Reagan.

You can't just call me, said Josephine. You know that. We broke up.

He's downstairs, said Reagan. He said it was her own fault if she felt like a prisoner in her marriage, and then he just broke a glass or something. I don't think he threw it. It was a kind of quiet shatter. I guess he dropped it. I guess that's better.

I don't want you to do this again, said Josephine. This isn't my problem to solve for you.

He's calling her worthless, said Reagan. He says she's the reason he was never able to succeed at anything. His self-pity is really luxurious right now. It's really piquant tonight.

You're making this my problem, said Josephine. This isn't a fair thing to do.

Reagan bit her lip and closed her eyes: the nasal voice of her father rising as he got angrier, falling then rising again as he moved from room to room, the level mumble of her mother apologizing to him. If Reagan could become carrier waves and travel with the signal to the satellite then back down to the world, she would find Josephine sitting in the dark of her room, maybe on the floor by her bed, her neck supported by the soft corner of the mattress and comforter. She would have a book half open in her lap, or a magazine, or the remote on the little DVD player she had in her room to watch

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important serial TV shows; she had been doing something before Reagan had called, interrupted.

I want to come over to your house, Reagan said.

You can't come over, said Josephine. I broke up with you. It's going to be a while before we can be normal.

I want to lie in your bed again, Reagan said. I want to kiss your neck. I want to put my hand on your stomach. These aren't unreasonable things.

I can't give you these things, Josephine said. You need to respect the boundary I'm establishing.

Fine, Reagan said, and she hit the virtual button that hung up on Josephine.

She sat there under the blanket holding the phone away from herself, watching the glow of the screen until the power saver made it fade and turn dark and all she could see was the faintest reflected edge of her knees, the chopped curls of her hair. When she got it cut her father said she looked like a Depression moppet, an Orphan Annie. He liked reading books about the Depression. She wished she was an orphan. No, she didn't. That was a fucked up thing to think. She didn't want to think fucked up things about the world. The world was a really great place, really, if you just understood why everything happened the way it did, like God could probably.

Her father's voice was swelling again. I think we can work it out this time. I think we can try really hard and maybe you can be more supportive of me and maybe I can be more willing to accept support from you. I think this can work. She could imagine her mother's eyes, wet. It would be quiet for the rest of the night.

She took the blanket off her head. Her room was still there, motionless: her thin shelf of anime volumes, her action figures with dust on their feet long set in heroic poses, her Scotch-taped posters of green-haired girls wielding crystal swords facing unfathomable dark forces that looked like smoke, her boots lined up perfectly even against the door as if an orderly ghost might be preparing to march through the wall. She went to the drafting table and turned on the swivel lamp. Her Rapidograph in hand, she drew long, curving lines

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that found their way toward one another and formed a cartoon picture of Josephine. The long rectangle of a lapsed-Mormon jaw, blond bangs cropped close, ridiculous headscarf pattern of black and white hypnotic spirals, melting eyes. She had drawn Josephine many times; Josephine always said Reagan made her look ugly, made her jaw and shoulders look enormous. She tried very hard to fix these problems as she worked.

When she was close to done with the drawing, she tried calling Josephine once again. This time there was no answer. Reagan listened to the song Josephine used as her voicemail—a quiet, classic 1980s neo-psychedelic thing, movie soundtrack material. She closed her eyes and nodded her head to the backbeat.

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Her parents were asleep; she sat on the floor by her boots, all her music stopped and trying to keep her breath quiet until she was one hundred percent certain that they were really asleep. Then she crept out the door and went straight to the curb, stood there looking into the blue blackness under the street light. She had to look when she dialed Josephine's cell phone, but her feet knew the way to Josephine's street by heart, and they led her there like the entranced victim of a vampire.

Josephine's lights were out. Reagan watched them for a while, and then she lay down in the street besides Josephine's sweet sixteen car. She made sure to lie on her side so that someone could see her arm from the house. After twenty minutes she got up, made a show of brushing off her jacket, and went into the middle of the street to lay down instead, stretched out across the concrete. But it was a school night, and there were no cars this late and this far from the city, and after another ten minutes she got up and walked home.

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She finished the drawing of Josephine's shoulders, bare, angel's wings from the blades, light radiating in blasts from her skull. *I will keep you*, she wrote on the page in letters wrapped in snaky vines of ink. She sat in the tall drafting chair looking down at her pen point as it leaked black ink at the outer edge of the heart, one of whose lobes was taller than the other, imperfect, imprecise.

§

She woke up to the sound of her father knocking on her door. She could imagine him there: short, balding, eyes big and brown and vulnerable. In one of her cartoons he would be the screaming victim of a titanic monster, the kind of uniquely ugly face that it's too complicated to draw episode after episode, so it's best to have the character killed early. It's more convenient for everyone.

The garbage, he said. The garbage, Friday morning.

I'm sleeping, she mumbled. I'll do it later.

No, you'll do it Friday morning, he snapped. Not later.

He was saying something more to Reagan, something about how she had to respond, to confirm that she'd take out the fucking garbage Friday morning before school, no later, that this would constitute an oral contract between them so he would know he could trust her. She scrunched her eyes tight and made a ball of blankets in her arms, held it to her, imagined it was Josephine's head, Josephine who could save her.

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