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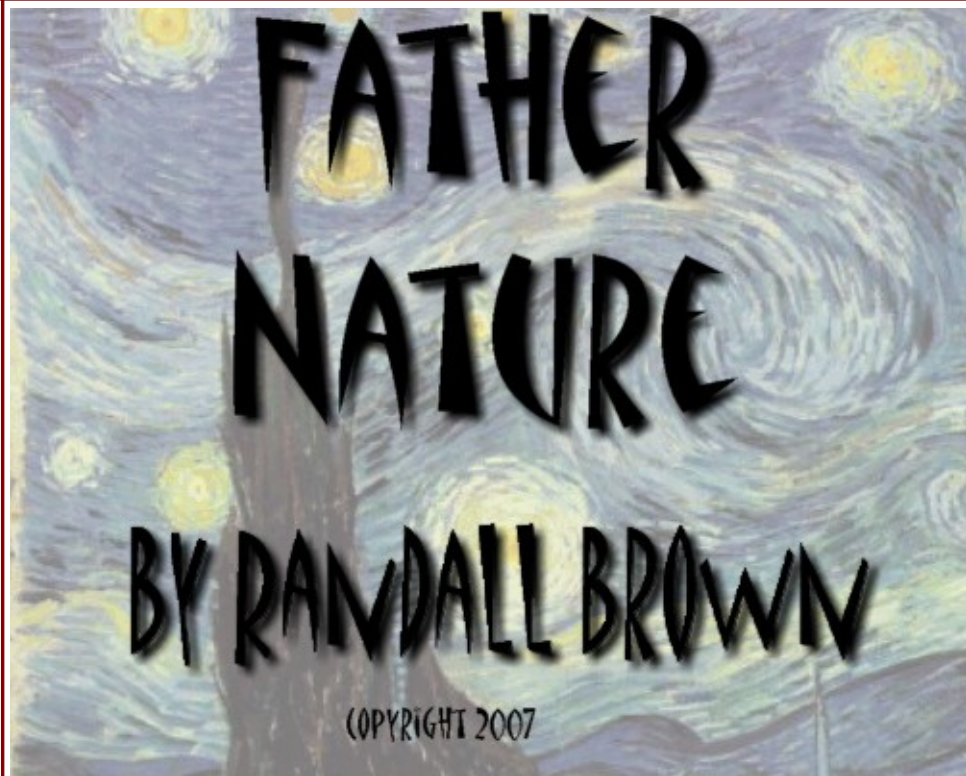
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Father Nature sits on the couch, sips hard lemonade through a straw. On the TV screen, a male praying mantis approaches the female. Father Nature watches them grapple--the female reach for the male, devour his eyes first, the rest of his head--and then, as if a great force has been unleashed upon the world, his abdomen thrusts, an engine propelling him forward, back, until death do them part.

Father Nature sucks down the rest of his drink.

The window opens and Mother Nature blows in, fills the room. In the fall, she smells like rust and ashes. Wrinkles begin circling her face. Her fingers turn brittle, her hair thin, her teeth yellow.

"I taste a liquor never brewed," she says. She sucks in all the air from the room, releases it as a stale breeze. "Emily Dickson's line--not mine. You'd think she'd have left the house now and then, wouldn't you? But sometimes we want what we can't have."

She flicks off the TV. Her robe blows open, and the flesh hangs loose, folded. Ah no. Desire rises, burns his chest, his throat. "Ah ha," she says. "Autumn."

How long has it been since she's had him--eight, nine months? He's become too monstrous to go out. And now it's Fall and he feels her heat, the warmth of decay.

"Two brains for the praying mantis," he says. "One in the stomach saying yes, one in the head saying no. Such a dilemma you gave him."

"Not really." She accuses him of never seeing the big picture--despite the 72-inch television screen. Her robe falls away. Flesh, acres of it, falls, sweeps across the floor, rustles toward him. Fingers slice up his legs. A tongue lashes around his neck. He pushes her away with his fingerless hands, then his toeless feet, finally his earless head.

Then she's beside him, reaching toward his face, ready to exact her price for his hunger. He wraps the yearning around his insides, drowns it with drink, blanks it into nothingness with the television. Perhaps keeping his nose stuffed with cherry tobacco leaves could save the last pieces of his self from her appetite, but the miasma of Fall, of flesh clasped to the last

remnants of summer, permeates her aura.

"Give me your nose," she says, "and then you can have me."

He shakes his head. His clenched muscles ache for release. He smells apples on the edge of cider.

Again, she reaches, brushes his mouth. Sap and saccharine drip into the corners of his tight lips, burn their aftertastes onto his tongue.

"A single lip. Only that," she says.

Again, he resists. She reacts with another reach, a caress of eyelids. He sees glowing pumpkins, bent inwards with the first rot, buzzing with the last of midge-sized bugs.

"An eyelid," she wants.

"No," he says. He must last. As long as possible. What else is there?

She rises, looks at the giant television. She stares at its blackness. Only thing to see is her reflection. "Ah yes. Well, there's always television."

The screen flickers. A nymph struggles out of his case, wriggles free, and then rushes toward the stream surface. She points her finger, and from nowhere flashes a trout and snatches the nymph.

"Delicious," she says. Syrup trickles down her legs. Perhaps one day she'll restore him--or he'll be like the thousands before him, parts buried inside her. He sees leaves holding onto branches as if the fall were not inevitable, as if this year there might not bring the crumbling return to the earth. It's fear, he smells, tastes, sees, even hears, in their desperate grasps. Fear of that fall, that tumble toward her bosom, released of the apprehension, an unstrained descent through the crisp air and the crackling ground.

"A nipple," he says.

"Both."

He nods and down she drops, moist, warm earth, like the dead must feel, except they cannot feel the sharpness of her desire, how it permeates the world, falls upon it, a rush of wind tearing at the leaves until the entire world is laid bare.

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Randall Brown teaches writing at Saint Joseph's University. He is a Pushcart nominee and holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College and a BA from Tufts University. His stories, poems, and essays have been published widely, with recent work appearing or forthcoming in *Hunger Mountain*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Cairn*, *King's English*, and others. He's recently finished a collection of (very) short fiction, *Mad To Live*.

