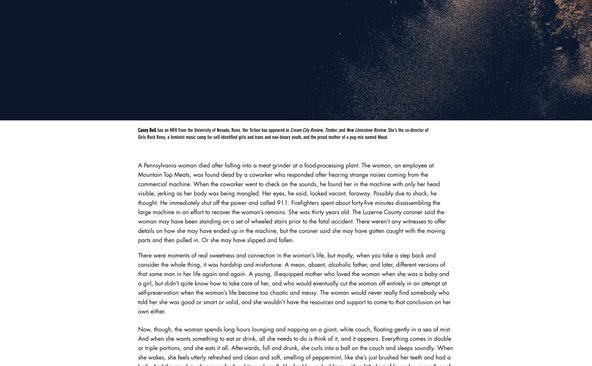
LUMINOUS THROUGH THE MIST

Casey Bell



Casey Bell has an MFA from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her fiction has appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Timber*, and *New Limestone Review*. She's the co-director of Girls Rock Reno, a feminist music camp for self-identified girls and trans and non-binary youth, and the proud mother of a pug-mix named Maud.

A Pennsylvania woman died after falling into a meat grinder at a food-processing plant. The woman, an employee at Mountain Top Meats, was found dead by a coworker who responded after hearing strange noises coming from the commercial machine. When the coworker went to check on the sounds, he found her in the machine with only her head visible, jerking as her body was being mangled. Her eyes, he said, looked vacant, faraway. Probably due to shock, he thought. He immediately shut off the power and called 911. Firefighters spent about forty-five minutes disassembling the large machine in an effort to recover the woman's remains. She was thirty years old. The Luzerne County coroner said the woman may have been standing on a set of wheeled stairs prior to the fatal accident. There weren't any witnesses to offer details on how she may have ended up in the machine, but the coroner said the woman was doing her work wearing the moving parts and then pulled in. Or she may have slipped and fallen.

There were moments of real sweetness and connection in the woman's life, but mostly, when you take a step back and consider the whole thing, it was hardship and misfortune. A mean, absent, alcoholic father, and later, different versions of that same man in her life again and again. A young, ill-equipped mother who loved the woman when she was a baby and a girl, but didn't quite know how to take care of her, and who would eventually cut the woman off entirely in an attempt at self-preservation when the woman's life became too chaotic and messy. The woman would never really find somebody who told her she was good or smart or valid, and she wouldn't have the resources and support to come to that conclusion on her own either.

Now, though, the woman spends long hours lounging and napping on a giant, white couch, floating gently in a sea of mist. And when she wants something to eat or drink, all she needs to do is think of it, and it appears. Everything comes in double or triple portions, and she eats it all. Afterwards, full and drunk, she curls into a ball on the couch and slumber peacefully. When she wakes, she feels utterly refreshed and clean and soft, smelling of peppermint, like she's just brushed her teeth and had a bath. And the couch is always perfectly white and smells like freshly washed linen with a little hint of lavender, regardless of whatever she spilled before falling asleep. All of this was thrilling at first. The woman ate nothing but bacon cheeseburgers and ice-cream sundaes for many, many days. Tacos wrapped in slices of pizza. Whole sleeves of Oreos and raw cookie dough. Punch bowls of frozen margaritas. Tiborne steaks and hot dogs. Frosted bottles of beer. It didn't seem like it ever would get old, but it eventually did. Recently, she's been reading French cookbooks to conjure up something novel and more obscure, something to surprise her. Bouillabaisse, gratin dauphinois, oeufs en meurette, cassoulet. Paired with a bottle of Côtes du Rhône or Bordeaux. There are other countries that she'll explore too. Their cuisines, their literature and films. She pictures anything, and it appears. The woman will travel the world in this way, right from the floating white couch.

When she wants to move on, she'll just think it.

When the woman was eight, her mother took her to the dentist because she wouldn't stop going on about how bad her teeth hurt. This was the second time she'd ever been to the dentist. As a girl, the woman drank so much soda and ate so much candy, and only once in a while would she brush her teeth. The dentist lectured her mother about basic dental hygiene while poking around at her aching, tender teeth, probing the exposed nerves. She had five rotten teeth, three of them permanent. Pulling them was cheaper than fillings. She lost more teeth after that, and was actually relieved to see the last one go, since it brought an end to the near constant pain, and to the smell. She wore different kinds of dentures over the years, but none of them ever really fit right or were very comfortable. That was usually one of the first things she'd do when she got home from the plant: take her teeth out and heave a sigh of relief. The woman was too young to not have any teeth and she was always self-conscious about it. That might explain part of why she didn't have a higher sense of self-worth and would oftentimes stay with men who said and did awful things to her, and who cheated and drank too much. These men, and there were so many of them, seemed to gravitate to her. This was her experience again and again until she was convinced that that's what it was to be with somebody. It was either that or be alone. She'd never been alone.

When the woman was fifteen, she got a job at a Christmas-tree farm around the holidays. She helped tie freshly cut trees to the roofs of people's cars with twine. She always smelled like pine, and dabs of sap got tangled in her hair, even when she wore it back, and the only way to get it out was with scissors. An older boy worked there too, eighteen or nineteen, tall and lanky with dark hair that hung in his eyes. He would ask her to take a walk with him deep into the woods beyond the farm. Sometimes he took off his coat and put it down on the ground for her, and other times she'd be freezing in the snow with him on top, pushing into her and breathing heavily in her face. Later, when she missed her period, the woman used a knitting needle, which she'd first held over a lit match and then let cool, to thrust around blindly inside herself. She sweated through the night, feverish with chills, cramping, shivering relentlessly. The next day, delirious, half-lucid and bleeding, she collapsed while trying to walk to the Christmas-tree farm and ended up in the hospital for two weeks. A nurse told her repeatedly how extremely lucky she was to be alive. Her mother would never be able to pay the bills from this incident, leading to her complete financial demise. The woman promised herself she'd never have sex again, but eventually she did. Even during the times when it felt good, it was always through a layer of stabbing pain, which she would never tell a single soul about.

On the floating white couch, though, there is no pain or anything even close to pain. In addition to eating and sleeping, the woman loves to read. She lounges gracefully as she reads, letting a hand or a foot hang over the edge of the couch to skim the cool, fresh-smelling mist below. She sips steaming cups of herbal tea or chilled glasses of rosé, depending on her mood. She is entirely undisturbed and consumes fat tomes of poetry and literature and drama. She has read all seven volumes of Remembrance of Things Past. Everything she reads is beautiful and profound and complicates and expands her understanding of the human condition. The woman is skeptical of Faulkner and Hemingway, and a lot of the Western canon. She is still wondering if she will ever find a novel more capacious and heart-wrenching and transformative than Toni Morrison's Beloved. She's also learning to play guitar and paint watercolors. The woman is becoming a skilled, wise, patient artist, who is attentive to the ways that her mind and body are extensions of one another. She meditates and stretches often. At times, she bounces at a furious speed on the couch cushions to get her heart rate up, though she does not sweat or even get hot. Sometimes she listens to very loud music as she does this. She prefers something with a lot of bass, like Missy Elliot or Lil' Kim. With enough force, she can propel herself high into the air and do flips, two or three in a row, backwards and forwards. She finds this exhilarating, a refreshing, full-body release. And in the air like that, high above the couch, she can glimpse far out into the endless, ample mist, which sometimes changes colors, cycling gradually through soft pastels. If she's tired, she rests. If she's restless, she bounces and does flips and stretches and then eats, which always puts her to sleep. Lately, the woman has craved Moroccan tagine with preserved lemons or some sashimi with pickled daikon.

When she was twenty-years old, the woman was living with another version of the Christmas-tree-farm boy, who was another version of her father. He was thirty-five and fixed cars and sold drugs for a living. The woman had drunk alcohol and smoked pot before, but she'd never done anything serious until this man came along. He let her stay with him for free with the understanding that she was to provide sex whenever he told her to. People came by the house all the time to make purchases from him, and sometimes he would ask her, but he would actually just be telling her, to have sex with this person or that person. The woman wouldn't have done it if he hadn't supplied her with a steady stream of Demerol and fentanyl and oxycodone. He would withhold the pills whenever she didn't comply. These pills were so calming and uplifting at first, and she had never felt happier. But then they just became dulling and numbing. And then it actively hurt when she didn't have them: deep in her muscles and even in her heart, she felt heavy and irritable and shiftless. He controlled her like this for a long time, on and off. She would leave and come back. She would be with other men who seemed better at first but would turn out to be the same. Many of them would tell her at one point or another how lucky she was to be with them, how much worse off she'd be on her own. Her ribs started jutting from her belly and her color was all wrong. Once, the man she was living with threw a beer bottle at her head and missed, showering her in needle shards of brown glass that got caught in her hair and cut her scalp and fingertips when she tried to remove them. That night, she waited until he fell asleep and took his car keys and a Ziploc of heroin from the back pocket of his jeans, piled on the floor at the foot of the bed. She drove east on I-80 towards New Jersey. She had nowhere to go and wanted to see the sunrise over the ocean. She needed to think in peace. On the Garden State Parkway, going almost eighty miles an hour, she finally dozed off, drifting into the next lane and colliding with a pickup truck, spinning out, careening hard into the cement median and then ricocheting off, flipping the car on its side, hitting her head against the window with enough force to crack the glass. Traffic on the parkway slowed to a trickle as drivers scanned the wreck for carnage. One man pulled over and dialed the police from his cell phone. He would ask her, as she lay in her sickened, panicked half sleep, pinned there in the car, a fly cocooned in spider's silk, waiting, he would ask her then, after he approached the car slowly, saying that help was on the way, he would ask if her if she had any idea how extremely lucky she was to be alive.

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As the floating white couch drifts through the mist, the light changes, and there can even be a sunrise or a sunset if the woman wants one, far in the distance and blurred out, or up close and giant, fiery. Always strikingly beautiful. The air can smell like the ocean, or like the woods, or like the yarn store the woman remembers her mother taking her to when she was just three or four. She remembers touching all of the balls of yarn, all the way down the endless aisle, squishing the softest and most colorful of them to her face and breathing in the smell. She sometimes dreams up a big, soft, pastel ball of yarn along with that smell and just strokes her face gently with it. It is so soothing. There can be a breeze if she wants one, or even a little chill. A small campfire hovering just next to the couch. Sometimes the woman likes for it to rain. She lets her hair and her skin and her clothes, when she decides to wear any, and the couch too, just soak in the cool downpour. When she wants it to stop, everything dries at once. The woman has started writing a literary biography of Astrud Gilberto, and the rain sometimes brings on new ideas or helps solve problems. There is always further reading and research for her to do. She listens continuously to Astrud's vinyl records and has taken a particular liking to Beach Samba. The woman faces the blank page and finds ways to describe how delicate and painful the situation was. João Gilberto and Stan Getz, close friends and musical partners, both madly in love with her. The affair, the end of the men's friendship and partnership. The woman floats and thinks and writes and researches and listens. She dreams of Astrud, and in her dreams, they have long, intimate talks. The woman learns Portuguese so she can read Astrud's letters in her native tongue. She is merging the facts of Astrud's life with the conventions of narrative, and it has absorbed her entirely. She is completely fascinated and compelled to learn and write more and more. There is no one, as she floats along the mist on the white couch, from whom she is stealing this time, nothing she ought to be doing instead. Time is purely her own to stretch and contract as she pleases. The woman wants to take on new projects when she finishes this one. A novel or perhaps a screenplay.

The floating white couch is almost always perfect, but on rare occasions, there are strange hiccups. Sometimes, out of nowhere, and never brought on by the same conditions twice, the couch will sort of sputter and stall out in the middle of the mist. Still floating, but no longer moving in any direction. When this happens, the mist turns a dark yellow color and smells badly of sulfur. The woman will try to think this away, but for whatever reason, she cannot.
She must wait it out. The woman cannot figure out why this is the case, but when the couch is stalled in the stinking yellow mist like this, her breasts, which are usually buoyant and perky, will deflate and her nipples will point dolefully downward. Perhaps, she wonders, this is a way for her to really appreciate and gain perspective on her situation. So strong is the smell and
so unsettling is the lack of forward motion that she cannot eat or sleep or work. She is so relieved and grateful when the couch starts up again and she can continue the difficult but gratifying work of self-actualization. It takes what feels like an hour or two, once the couch gets moving again and the pungent fart smell dissipates, for her breasts to resume their alert, tear-drop shape.

When she was twenty-eight years old, she'd been in and out of treatment programs, been to prison, and had lived periodically on the street. For a while, she'd stayed at a makeshift encampment in the woods, a mile behind a strip mall. There were tents and blankets and a warm fire, and she could almost always find someone who would trade her drugs for sex or for other drugs, and there was usually someone kind to talk to. That's where she learned how to shoot up, instead of just swallowing pills. A very nice woman had shown her how to use a cooker and prepare a shot, how to properly use a tourniquet. She'd told her to be careful about sharing syringes and how to avoid cotton fever. There were men there, though, who would come into her tent at night. It was fine to visit the encampment during the day, but it wasn't safe for sleeping, she would learn.

The woman was living in a sober halfway house when she got the job at Mountain Top Meats. She took a bus back and forth for the swing shift and saw a counselor once a week. She was drug tested daily. She wrote to her mother, who had stopped answering her letters years ago. The woman's mother had remarried, this time to an Evangelical man, who had advised her that her daughter was like a tornado that just sucked up and destroyed everything in its path, and so the only choice she had was to take herself out of that path. The woman wore thick coveralls and gloves and work boots at the plant, but even after she got back to the halfway house and showered and changed her clothes, she still smelled like blood and fat and bones. She would watch television in the common room before bed, but one of the other residents, a woman prone to outbursts, would insist on monopolizing the remote. It wasn't worth it to ask her to change the channel, so the woman would watch hours of home-renovation shows, sipping a Coke, letting the cold bubbles soothe her bare gums, trying to wipe what she'd done at the plant clean from her mind before going to sleep.

The woman always loved animals, and she thought often about the cow that lived on the small farm next to her elementary school. Other children would play kickball and tag or take turns on the swings during recess, but the woman would walk to the edge of the playground and visit with the cow, walking right up to the fence and staring deep into her wise, soft brown eyes. The cow chewed casually and looked right back at her. The cow was easy to be with. The woman would squeeze her arm through the fence, pet the cow's speckled hide, and pick out clumps of grass to feed her. She would save half her jelly sandwiches at lunchtime to share with the cow. The woman could confide in her. She told her about feeling unsafe at home. About her plans of running away and starting a new life where she alone could decide what was right and wrong. The cow could come along if she wanted. They'd go anywhere they felt like. Paris, France, or Hollywood, California. She would lose time this way, and it would seem like only minutes had passed when the bell rang to go back inside. Always, she would have preferred to stay with the cow rather than go back to school with the other children, who teased her about her teeth or her dirty hair or her bad clothes. In the halfway house, the woman wondered how many televisions she would have to watch all at once, all with their volume cranked up, to not think about the processing of cow to beef. Or to not think about how much better everything would be if she had just one goddamned Demerol.

It was winter at the time of the incident at Mountain Top Meats and the sky was constantly
low and swollen and gray. The woman felt the way the sky looked. If you're somewhere remote in the mountains, the winters in northeastern Pennsylvania are idyllic, a snowy wonderland.
This isn't true in the rust belt industrial parts, where the woman was. There was just cold and
darkness and highway times and strip malls and bad, icy roads. Everything hurt. When she mentioned this to her counselor, the counselor asked the woman if she had any clue how lucky she was to be alive after all that had happened to her.

On the floating white couch in the mist, the woman continues on her journey. Moving at her own pace. She will read, and in turn, write whole libraries worth of books, sharing them and discussing them with people she meets on other couches. She will always have anything she wants, and she will never want those pills or those injections, since, for the most part, she likes being able to feel her feelings now. She talks to her feelings. She asks them, patiently and without judgment, where it is they're coming from. From a part of her body, or maybe from a thought she has about herself. And she carefully considers whether allowing a particular feeling to take the reins in her mind will serve her well. The woman knows that it's okay to let some feelings sail on through the clear blue sky of her consciousness without ever being touched. There, in the mist, the woman has come to trust and love herself. To treat herself with tenderness and to seek out and name and appreciate every good thing about herself. All the good things she does and says and makes and thinks. She is extraordinary. The woman will always be going like that, luminous, vast and slow, exonerated from space and time, infinitely floating on through the endless mist, and there will never be a single there at which she would want to arrive.