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- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
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- [Submit](#)
- [Meet the Editors](#)
- [Issue 23- Spring 2022](#)
- [Previous Issues](#)
- [Join Our Team](#)

[back](#)

Non-fiction

[The Taste of Salt](#)
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[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)[back](#)

The Taste of Salt

by Jon Vreeland

Silence. Then...Crunching of gravel under my black beat-up Chuck Taylors. What are they looking at? What do they see white locked in a casket—mahogany, black, white, or whatever colors the mourners chose—buried under six feet of the earth's soil, a layer of green for the topping? I wonder if their eyes ever adjust to the dark, or are feasted on by all the critters which reside with the body...

The wind's gentle serenade breaks the silence. I stop at the first row of bodies resting in an almost analogous slumber, and, on my hands and knees, I struggled to read the inscription on the black marble gravestone with silver sparkles—a perfect match to the night sky. Carmen Nieves, Beloved Mother and Daughter, 1902-1983. I could almost hear her breathing. Her heart-beat rattling the diamonds placed on her chest. Her dress made of silk, Scarlet like her lips. Another perfect match. There is nothing like a stroll through the graveyard on a warm winter night.

It was so romantic this romance with death. I thought about the time my number one lover and I held hands, Heroin and yours truly, plodding along the shores of Huntington Beach. I hadn't seen my mistress lately—the ever so sensual Crystal Meth—paranoia was her best quality and no help to my long suffered insomnia. I did not miss her—although Crystal had saved my life a number of times when she re-started my heart; a shot of Crystal to the neck, a shot my mother would ever support. But sadly, I was perfectly content with the one who often lead me into the dark quarry of an overdose. Commonly, both of my lovers would borrow blood from wherever possible, infect it with their toxins so deleterious, and re-gift it to yours truly. My eyes closed. And on that day my number one and I made love, but my mistress was nowhere to be found, unable to start my heart due to her absence. Who cares? My skin stained red. White. Blue. How patriotic death can be...

I felt like nothing at first, but this overdose was the same as walking through the woods with a strange feeling I was being followed. Every time I looked back nobody was there. I could hear breathing. I could hear laughing. I tried to run but my legs felt like rubber—weights tied to my feet. There were footsteps...quickly getting louder. The laughter furious, like a witch gone mad, spitting on the wrath of God. The clouds infiltrated the night sky, smothering the moon and the stars, fog appeared out of nowhere, oozing from the dirt floor of the forest. I was blind. My legs growing weaker. It was gaining on me. Closer...faster...louder. I fell to the ground and started crawling as fast as I could. The fog felt like ice. The dirt was numbing my hands as if it were icy snow. The weights on my feet were pulling my now paralyzed legs underground. My nails scratching at the ice cold dirt, trying to stay above ground...tearing at the dirt until my entire finger nails were buried underground, leaving me with blood painted nails. I was screaming. The laughter got louder. Cacophony only the Devil would deem gorgeous and pure. Finally, the ground had disappeared from my hands. I was lying on my stomach at the edge of a cliff, looking over the edge, wondering if I could fly. I tried to pulling myself to my feet but was still paralyzed...Then, something bit my neck until I woke up...

I jolted straight up with the needle still dangling from my neck. The tears rolled down their faces while they stood over me like they were looking down a well checking for snakes before they lowered themselves in. I could taste the salt of tears in my mouth. My brain worked overtime trying to remember what happened. Nothing came to mind. More salt, more light, more voices. My eyes fluttered as someone squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek over and over. Now my lips...More salt, but not my own.

I heard her speak while I looked around to see where I was. More salt. Mine, hers, and the taste was not of the sea. My vision coming back until I saw her. Wiping my neck with a red Kleenex, cleaning up the demise that rolled down my dying skin; and with no sigh of relief, and no remorse from me or my artificial lovers, our night continued, and our so-called life staggered on. Holding hands in a dim and desolate place.

Day after day, night after night. I walked aimlessly with no purpose, no direction. A broken spirit, a withering soul. My addiction was living death, purgatory—no Heaven and no Hell. Just me and my artificial lovers. The number one, so viscerally dressed in black. And occasional visits from my mistress, Crystal, the one dressed in white. This deadly love triangle provided a surfeit of wickedness camouflaged as love. I awaited my death but I was already dead—the joke was on them, they were beating a dead horse.

I trampled over thousands upon thousands of dead bodies in the Carpentaria cemetery that night. It was a beautiful starlit night and it was oh so beautiful. Not the thought of the decaying cadavers. The skeletons arrayed for the masquerade or ball in imposing attire. Nor the shadows dancing by the light of the moon, hand in hand, ethereal shadows perpetually in love, but the letters and numbers gilded on their gravestones; a fleeting summary of their lives. Name, beloved mother, beloved daughter, son, father, birthday. The gravestones paint a picture, showing they had people who cared, and ultimately, people who mourned their absence—even if they were infected with the disease of addiction. That was the beauty I saw. People who led fervent lives, with perseverance, valor, and a lust for life that would make Iggy Pop smile.

Today, my lover, my mistress, the triangle, are gone. Vanished into thin air, but only from my eyes. Sometimes they visit my dreams uninvited. Longing for my kiss, my touch, my fixation. Serenading me so maliciously. Waiting for my return. Abolishing my resurrection, bringing an invitation to, once again, dance with the dead. But I would rather walk through the dark night holding God's hand with thousands of well-dressed corpses smiling at the silhouettes who continue to dance to the beautiful music. So hypnotic. So real. They are not dead. They never died. Their life has just begun. Spirits and souls in another world. The better world God intends for us. The world where guardian angels hover over our shoulders, camouflaged by thin air, and sometimes human flesh. Protecting us from demons and the devil himself. A world where death does not exist.