

Michaella A. Thornton

finalist

MAN LACE

After the miscarriage, we don't know what to say to one another. Two years of trying, and we had finally gotten pregnant, even though our long-awaited victory lasted only five short weeks. "Over a month!" I wrote in my journal in a smooth purple hand as Peter played the Talking Heads loudly from the kitchen, where he routinely cooked bacon in his underwear.

"There's nothing wrong with what I'm wearing," he tells me as I raise an eyebrow.

"Babe," I say, hoping the endearment will pad the blow, "your underwear are in tatters."

"I have worked hard for my man lace," he tells me, modeling the front and back of his almost transparent package. "These ventilate the equipment properly."

Little swirls of brown-black hair peak through the moth-eaten fabric.

Peter is attached to these underwear like I am attached to a sixth-grade sleep shirt, the one I wear when he's away on business and proclaims, "Real women drive trucks." The material on my shirt and Peter's underwear is sublimely soft, pocked with pencil-tip to dime-sized holes and runs. These are intimate garments of overuse—textile throwbacks to sentiment and solitude.

Despite bacon and bravado, Peter is sad; in fact, we are often sad in separate rooms. He hugs me, brings lemon-ricotta cookies from the Italian bakery down the block, massages the small of my back, and tells his parents why I'm not at Sunday dinner. He does all of this alone.

A combination of cells we had hoped would turn into the furry, chubby Ewok of our nerd-loving hearts. A baby with his 20/20 eyes and my ample mouth: constantly talking, kissing, savoring something sweet, pillowy lips, and a gummy, horsey grin. Our imaginary baby would belt the blues and sing arias.

Married for five years, we still didn't feel like adults. We couldn't find the brass water-sprayer in the garage or remember which day was recycling, trash, or yard waste. Peter got high in the basement after work. I wandered the house late at night: Fudgsicle in one hand, novel in the other. It was one big slumber party, except instead of childhood junk food, we cooked dry-rubbed ribs over Applewood chips and savored Irish

whisky, downing the amber liquid on the front porch swing like a nightly sacrament.

We had lived elsewhere: the Sonoran desert, the nation's capital, a small town where tobacco and textiles were deposited royalty, the hometown of Harry S. Truman and methamphetamines, and the Chagall and Sullivan streets of our native Chicago. Yet, we missed our families, and we missed the state we had rushed to leave when we were eighteen.

Peter brings me bacon, scrambled eggs, and black coffee: breakfast in bed. I prop myself up on my elbows and pull myself toward the pillows. He is, of course, wearing man lace. The tenuous scraps are held together by luck and love, routine and reluctance. We hold onto all of this long after the beauty and utility have worn off.