

## Weird Words 2: “Queeny’s Last Run: Or, Placentophagy Agonistes”

Written by Shawn Macomber

Tuesday, 18 December 2012 14:36

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*The name Shawn Macomber may ring some dark bells: The journalist, writer, heavy-metal enthusiast and horror fan has seen his byline in a multitude of media. We're more than a little grateful to have his eerie, arch Gothic tale "Queeny's Last Run" as one of our ongoing Weird Words 2 finalists.*

*Have a read, and prepare for warping...*

Through the kitchen window, Dandelion Hamilton could hear the goddesses from Mama's ashram giggling and trading hosannas to Lady Gaia in the backyard as they decorated the altar. She glanced down at the white-veined burgundy slab oozing yellow goop onto Grandma's china serving platter, and shuddered.

*Almost time for the ceremony.*

Dandelion would rather eat liver for a month of Sundays, but Auntie said that when a mother makes a sacred offering of her own body's life force, the good daughter receives it with reverence. If you asked her, being a son seemed like a pretty sweet deal right about now. After all, Baby Joe got to go to the Barrington Hills Fishing Derby with Daddy, while Dandelion was stuck here waiting for the...blech.

Dandelion shuffled off to her room and flopped down in front of Queen Hoppy's aquarium.

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“You think *crickets* are grody, Queeny?” Dandelion groused to the bullfrog perched on an algae-festooned rock. “You should see what Auntie and the goddesses are making *me*

eat. It’s called a

*placenta*

, and it was stuck to Baby Joe’s bellybutton back when he was in Mama’s belly, swimming in his own pee-pee with his twin, who Auntie says got subsumed, whatever that means. Anyway...”

Queeny lowered a filmy eyebrow against a marauding cricket. Normally the frog would have snapped the insect right up, but she hadn’t eaten anything since Daddy said he was sick of the house reeking of a swamp and made Dandelion let all Queeny’s tadpoles go in Nippo Lake. Dandelion pressed her nose against the glass, peering into the murky wading pond. Sure enough, pale waterlogged earthworms floated near the bottom amidst the cricket husks.

“OMG,” Dandelion whispered. “You have the baby blues just like Mama.”

And if all living creatures were part of the same web of life like the goddesses were always saying, wouldn’t a cure for Mama work for Queeny, too?

Dandelion peeked out her door. Coast clear, she padded down the hallway and hoisted the serving platter up off the table. It was heavier and harder to balance than she had expected. Grossness sloshed over one side, then the other and then back again, leaving a trail of stinky blotches behind her.

Dandelion set the platter down on her bed before circling back to push her Barbie beach house in front of the door. She wasn’t allowed to have a lock. “Open doors and open hearts”—that was what Mama used to say back when she came out of her room.

Catching hold of Queeny usually required a complicated series of palm-flanking maneuvers. This time, the frog let Dandelion slide her hands under the chin-to-butthole belly that felt like a piece of silk stretched over jumping jacks. The frog made no effort to escape as Dandelion airlifted her to the platter.

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Dandelion plucked a piece of grey egg crate from a small plastic terrarium and shook a few crickets onto the placenta.

“Easy pickings, your majesty,” she cooed, swiping an insect through the mucous moat and placing it before the frog.

In an uncharacteristically slow motion, Queeny parted her lips and slumped forward, the shellacked insect no more able to avoid its fate than a Tokyo pedestrian in Godzilla’s path.

The effect was almost instantaneous—the upright frog cocked her head at the other crickets as if preparing to slip into huntress mode.

As Dandelion reached for another cricket, a vein unspooled from the center of the placenta and, with a quick casting snap, stung the tip of her finger.

“*Ouch!*”

Dandelion jabbed the throbbing digit into her mouth. The tip of the spindly opaque tendril quivered for a moment before honing in on a zig-zagging cricket. The vein whipped nooselike around the insect’s neck, dragging it into a tiny red crevice that opened to receive it. A gob of guts squirted out and then was slurped back under.

Queeny scrambled along the platter lip, attempting to gain some purchase. Too late. Above her, veins twisted into knots as if guided by tiny invisible sailors’ hands.

Truth be told, Queeny had never displayed much tangible affection toward Dandelion. (Like many amphibians, she could be difficult to read...) Yet the frog’s baleful, pleading ribbits nevertheless jostled her human guardian out of shock.

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“Hey, give my frog back, you...*icky lump!*”

Dandelion seized the blob and attempted to shake Queeny loose, but the placenta might as well have been a Vaseline-coated hot water bottle. Its nettles peppered her face with red-hot pinpricks. Her grip slipped. Icky Lump hit the floor with a wet thump.

Queeny’s body, visible as if immersed in red amber, distended and deteriorated beneath the membrane. The frog’s eyes went glassy and still. Her two webbed feet, stretched into an impossibly wide stance, reemerged from the bottom corners, white veins encircling them like pulleys.

The placenta wobbled upright. Layers of pink and red receded, revealing a single human eye coated in a whitish blue cataract above Queeny’s mouth.

Icky Lump regarded Dandelion warily as several veins scaled her HUNGER GAMES comforter, first pulling down a bag of multicolored bracelet threads—which left Icky Lump looking like the most decorated general in the placenta army—then snagging the terrarium. Two weeks’ worth of feeding crickets rained down. Veins lassoed a few in midair; others were plucked off the ground. Queeny’s mouth—itsself now overflowing with oscillating strands—was not picky.

Dandelion wiped her hands on her gown and lunged. Approximating a cross between Stretch Armstrong and a discus thrower, Icky Lump hurled the terrarium across the floor. An ill-timed step sent Dandelion’s foot sliding in an unnatural direction, negating all supposed benefits of years of gymnastics training and setting the back of her head on an unpleasant blind date with the wood floor.

When Dandelion regained consciousness, she lay prone on the floor, and Icky Lump was tearing furniture out of the beach house in a furious whirlwind of veins.

Part of Dandelion wanted to play comatose. Let Auntie experience how wonderful Mama’s

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“lifeforce” was for herself, stinging nettles and all! Alas, Dandelion knew she’d almost certainly be blamed for the mess anyway, and so she scanned the room for potential weapons, moving her throbbing head as little as possible.

On her second pass, the half-light of the closet revealed the contours of the Slime Time kit Lynn Reston’s son Zach had given her for her last birthday. Dandelion and her friends had mocked the gift to no end, but belly-crawling across the newly established no man’s land of her bedroom floor, crickets hitching rides on her like parasitic suckerfish on a beluga whale, Dandelion thanked her lucky stars for the obliviousness of male preteen nerds.

Dandelion retrieved the kit, slithered back to Queeny’s aquarium and dumped all the packets into the dirty water. The burbling slime forming across the surface looked like radioactive snot from a recently bloodied nose—but, as Auntie was so fond of telling her, beggars can’t be choosers.

Face veiled in goop, Dandelion crouched behind the tank and issued a guttural “Gwahhhhhbbahhhhhkkeeeeee.”

Icky Lump dropped the hot tub it was attempting to extract from the beach-house skylight and slowly twisted around. Its cataract eye widened. The placenta leapt off the roof and teetered precariously on Queeny’s feet for a moment before hop-lurching toward the closet—tentatively at first, then faster, little red crevices emitting smacking chirps.

Icky Lump stopped a few inches from the aquarium. In her two slime-covered hands, Dandelion lifted the suddenly docile placenta to her veil peephole. A vein wormed its way toward her face. Dandelion flinched, but there was no sting, only light caresses.

*Kwwwwisssshhhkaaaa*, Icky Lump yawned.

“Gwahhhhhbbahhhhhkkeeeeee,” Dandelion replied.

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If Dandelion could reach the pink plastic Girl Time kitchen set Auntie bought her as a “big sister” gift at Mama’s shower for Baby Joe, there was an built-in Easy Bake oven just big enough to broil a placenta.

Dandelion tilted her head back. Gravity was pulling the slime facade dangerously thin, opening perforations.

*A few more seconds, a few more inches...*

The bedroom door banged against the beach house. “Dandelion!” Auntie shouted, projecting annoyance through wood as easily as if it were a pane of glass.

Dandelion had no choice but to risk an answer. Attempting to master in a matter of seconds the ventriloquist’s meat and potatoes, Dandelion slurred from the corner of her mouth, “One sec, Auntie!”

Icky Lump gave the sagging peephole a suspicious tug.

*Sqqquuuuaaiiii!*

The veins resumed the stinging. Icky Lump mollusked onto Dandelion’s fist, its inner goop scalding her skin. The time for subterfuge well and fully past, Dandelion plunged her fist into the Easy Bake and cranked the temperature gauge. The heat lamp glowed angry orange. Icky Lump squeezed tighter. The smell of singeing arm hair and sizzling placenta juice commingling, Dandelion bit her lip against the pain and pressed the placenta up against the bulb. Icky Lump undulated violently. Queen Hoppy’s charred jaw fell. The constricting grip finally loosed. Dandelion ripped her scorched hand from the oven. Fused to the bulb in its center, the placenta hung like a towel on a rack. Its upside-down eye twitched with a mortal terror Dandelion intuitively understood would haunt her all her remaining days.

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“The circle is cast, young lady!” Auntie continued to harangue. “The candles are burning, and we need your mother’s placenta *right this minute!*”

Dandelion bit into the corner of an aluminum packet of peanut butter cookie mix.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, squirting batter.

As soon as the placenta took on a golden brown hue, Dandelion used a pair of Girl Time tongs to transfer it back to the platter. Moments later, Auntie battered her way into the bedroom with one last flurry of kicks.

Auntie gaped at the destruction and the myriad hanging globules of slime.

“I just wanted to cook for Mama, Auntie.”

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In the backyard, each goddess rested a palm against the belly of the next as they chanted invocations of, variously, Isis, Tiamat and Inanna. Auntie hustled Dandelion into place. Maggie Shatfield’s smile faded slightly as her hand lighted upon the gooey front of Dandelion’s gown, but, having long considered herself a warrior princess, she refused to break the circle.

Auntie stood before the altar, hoisted a silver chalice above her head. “Mothers of the ancients, this day we honor you, for your blood runs through our veins!”

*Your blood runs through our veins!* the others echoed.

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Auntie drank deeply, then plucked a moonstone from the altar and dropped it in the chalice.

“O Bodiless Seamstress of our Destiny—we summon thee. Nurture all spirits wild and free within these, our corporeal husks. So mote it be!”

*So mote it be!*

Auntie passed the chalice to Dandelion. The potion tasted of bathtub water and ash, but she pretended to take a long drink to avoid further antagonizing Auntie, who was watching her even as she carved up the placenta with Daddy’s Thanksgiving turkey knife and offered chunks of impaled peanut butter placenta cake to a semicircle of goddesses, their mouths open like fledglings in a nest. Grimaces warred openly against unconvincing, passionately determined smiles.

With what nonchalance she could muster, Dandelion muscled in for the breaded eye-slice. Auntie obliged, and Dandelion held it between her teeth, straining against her gag reflex until she could sneak-dance off behind the altar, where she dug a tiny trench with her heel and buried it.

“*Namaste*,” Auntie said, squeezing out a candle flame with a licked thumb and forefinger. The rest of the goddesses templed their hands and briefly bowed heads. “So...shall we go see the men?”

“If we must,” Lynn Reston said. The goddesses all chuckled, except for Maggie Shatfield, who snorted like a hungry sow, and Mama, who knelt at the altar in gape-mouthed wonder.

Dozens of translucent blue frogs scurried up the altar. The goddesses all agreed it was a sign of approval from Lady Gaia. To Dandelion, it seemed as if every cataract-covered eye communicated both knowledge of her crime and the threat of imminent vengeance.

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The coven reached the shores of Nippo Lake just as the derby boats were launching onto the water. Out in his little yellow dinghy, Daddy held up Baby Joe and shook his little arm. Dandelion returned the wave with feigned reluctance, not wanting anyone from school to see her giving a shit, but also eager for Daddy to return as a bulwark against the surreal nightmares of the afternoon.

The ritual had clearly energized the goddesses—they skipped along the wooded pathway to the lake as if they were young girls on a Slushee sugar high, voices resembling a 45 record spinning at 78 RPMs—but Dandelion was too busy watching the bramble for a frog ambush to be fully aware of the mania.

This is why, while the rest of the crowd was applauding Dale Hennessey for catching the first trout of the day, Dandelion happened to glimpse Renne Malden crouched under the industrial-strength bug zapper near the picnic tables, shoveling handfuls of electrocuted flies into her mouth. Nearby, amongst the water lilies, Maggie Shatfield and Lynn Reston sat breast-deep in the lake, smearing gobs of mud and pond muck on one another.

“I think I might burrow here this winter!” Maggie shouted.

Dandelion tugged at the sleeve of Mama’s ritual gown, but when her mother turned, she saw jagged circles of green and grey had replaced the whites of her eyes. The pupils had at least tripled in size. Her lips were drawn tight, and pockets of loose neck skin flared just below her jaw.

Dandelion stumbled backward into Auntie, who had undergone the same transformation. She cried to Daddy for help, but the cheers for Ed Demurs’ record-setting large-mouth bass drowned her out. Auntie took her hand and placed it on Mama’s gurgling belly.

“Can you feel your brothers and sisters swimming around in there, little flower?”

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Dandelion could not fathom what was about to happen. Yet as Auntie took her in a bear hug, she began to cry anyway.

Mama waded out waist-deep into the lake, a look of pure ecstatic bliss on her face, large opaque egg clusters floating up behind her like buoys. The quickening took but minutes, and soon Nippo Lake was aflutter. In a tragic example of fundamental miscommunication, the derby men mistook the pandemonium on shore for lively encouragement. It wasn’t until lures were jerked hard enough to drag men overboard, and boats began capsizing amidst schools of six- or seven-pound tadpoles sporting screaming baby heads, insatiable for bait and unfamiliar with phrases such as “catch and release,” that they realized the world had turned upside down.

Many years later, when, at the orientation for the über-secretive, high-cost Barrington Hills Monster Derby, Dandelion would occasionally tell the story to incredulous contestants, she would always conclude with the same line:

*And that is why it is not wise to never, ever make cakes from our sibling essences...*