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MY HUSBAND, HIS STUNNING DERMAFLORESCENCE

I could call him daughter for all the ways he needs protection, but in fact he is my husband, hypersensitive in all ways tactile, olfactory, and gustatory, in other words, allergic. Visually, aurally, psychically allergic. Chimerical allergies - half medical, half poetic - I want to sketch, write sonnets to, harmonize.

He is allergic to ampersands (we cannot go to Best and Co. or Chip and Dent's), to magic, hydrogen and distaste. My husband, allergic to yeast, nothing in him will multiply. I collect him from his recitations of Goethe at the home of convalescence, and he spasms in foxtrots.

"It seems I am also allergic to reading German in front of old women who no longer open their photo albums," he sighs.

"Next time you can read him in translation," I tell him. "Don't push yourself too hard."

But he's no debilitante. If he's running through the streets studying architecture and it starts to rain (his most beautiful allergy, though it renders him utterly undrenchable, so that my torrents will never reach him, and he'll require tragic shelter for all his days), he doesn't cower inside the strip mall, but skips beneath awnings, invests in renegade dime store umbrellas that blow inside out, snapped ribs in the wind. To him, it's an adventure. He traverses the underground market, then plays umbrella tag up the street, hugging the backs of strangers, switching parasols when the owner turns a head. He perseveres the full length of the street, cajoles a taxi driver to secure a ride all the way up our narrow street and into the drive.

And if he fails, if some awning caves under the weight of inches and looses an arroyo down his neck and back, if he starts blooming in that dermatological fashion uniquely his? Then he opens more than sky that day, is enveloped by a mass of curious followers (I could be one, I think,

though who can say, if he weren't my husband, I might avert my eyes), shop owners lean out and offer him aloe and asphodels, strangers peel back his shirt, as if all he needs is more exposure, others relinquish their infants into his arms so he might whisper something holy in their ears. He glows. He's electric. Symphonies swell in his red skin.

He's blessed, he's touched. Doctors ruminate daily on how to salve and solve him. He has their private numbers and familial acquaintance. They send him baskets of organic fruit on holidays.

Second-string, to be sure, but still worthy of mention, are the banal culinary mishaps, when a sprig of lemongrass yields some equally dainty pain as ballast. Flapjacks are certain death for him, and so much as one sliver of Belgian chocolate, worse. Raspberries cause a camouflage to burn beneath his skin.

Restaurants have been the scene of many a rash and convulsion, and we often seek the security of bland food, hygiene via dearth. We request tables far from windows or plants which appear too outgoing. We carry utensils, condiments, and moist towelettes. Of course, there's only so much you can prepare for.

In an Italian eatery with roving violinists, we discovered (not as I originally feared, some latent aversion to catgut resulting in disruptive sternutation), but a misfortune to which he hazarded the approximate appellation "a foiled fermentation," wine earnestly resweetening itself in front of lovers too bitter to drink it. The spectacle caused his eyes to water, a forcible flood across the table. Other diners who couldn't help but notice eyed the couple with disdain (to which my husband was, thankfully, immune) for their insensitivity and sentimental dissonance, dining in such a place in a state of anger, an anger which had virtually fistfisted the cloth napkins stuffed into their collars. And they were having lobster! They

had become the very monstrosity they consumed, their words steamed red and thrashing, despite all wishers willing them to still. My husband, as generous as he is afflicted, kept slipping tens to the violinists to serenade the couple with song. Instead, they seemed pestered, could not muster even shame enough for a half-hearted tabletop clutch. Seeing my husband so teary, depleted, I said, "Let's not eat out again."

I suppose this would be the time when other couples would seek solace in each other, couch themselves in home, stir the *olla podrida* of all ingress, the harried swap of cultures, but for my husband I, too, am an allergen, the allergy *de resistance*, a cherried trigger for his breaking out.

"It's no cruel fate," I say with a jot of optimism to any who care to ask, "His personal was quite transparent."

*Man, S. Highly Allergic. Sex
(not an option). Vibrant Conversations
and Other Spiritual Couplings in Abundance.*

We find ways around it, surprise with sexy messages stuck underneath pillows, above the dishwasher, to boxes of fertilizer. He writes: Today spent thinking of you, my heart grew all adervish. I write: *My love, you make me want to let you insert it.*

And then we do it in isolation, he preferring the terrarium where he can watch our praying mantises mount and glide against each other. He falls against the glass and rubs his face as if weeping, says, "I wish I could release myself without involving insects."

Still, he removes the screen and lifts a branch of them, cradles his hand beneath their carapaces and carries them to where I lie in the walking closet (which he dubs my swaying cage) and sets them to me, their legs

feathery against. I am stunned at the duration of their contentment, the wisp of friction, before they spring away.

On nights like these, I dream our life is a zombie movie. His body is shot full of holes and light pours from his eyes. His contagion, liquid with wanderlust, seeps into the places we touch, capturing us, like something we could years later be found whole in. It hardens around us and I do not attempt to flee. To pus, I prefer suppuration or purulence, the sound of baptism, like amber turning slowly in light. I have never been afraid of zombies. I don't need pitchforks, priests, or mirrors to understand the awkward way they move. Sometimes it's drumslade and trumpeting comfort to be called the undead.

If you love a man with allergies, you acquire a sense for where he'll stash the dandered and discarded parts of him, the sloughed exfoliations: in the medicine cabinet behind vitamins and menthol balm, nestled in kitchen cabinets between orange extract and herbal tea. I assemble them alphabetically, then chronologically. I record them in my book devised for such reverence, noting location and date of discovery.

Sometimes I watch him emerge in a heaven of steam after he's been showering, even if it's not the right season for watching steam. Even if it's summer and too hot for it, I wait for him to share what must be his private recrudescence. I lift the novel he's been reading, and flakes of skin descend like stealth precipitation he's been holding back for a more prudent time to fall.

"I need to get in," I call to him, and he is quiet, thinking of some excuse to keep me from turning the knob. He emerges with a towel around his waist, another around his shoulders like a cape. He looks stunned and mummified, like who am I to be sitting on the bed looking at him just so?

He retreats into the walking closet (his secret walking in him, a strolling storm cellar). I want to knock on that door, too, cut out a window, slide his meals in the crack underneath.

I want his disease to be what collects us — a shiver of us, a sneeze of us, a doom of us.

“Is there something wrong?” he asks, and I respond, “Whatever do you mean?” because there is no time for all the answers to this question now that I am measuring water for tea; too hot unnerves the tannins, too cool and it’s tasteless swill. At 96.3 degrees, he leaves the room and I hang his teacup on a peg. I drink little. I am trying to be caffeine naïve.

From the other room, I hear a sneeze. Maybe the mail’s come, bringing with it some foreign dust to liberate whatever’s been trapped inside him. It’s beautiful then, a sneeze in that light, and I want to tell him, that’s the most beautiful sneeze I’ve ever heard, and he might say, easy for you to say, and he might say, there was a time I couldn’t even imagine you.

I hear the sneeze and the trees moving behind it and a truck exhausting background noise, the syncopation of birds. I move to tell him everything, but he has disappeared, maybe gone townward. And there he could find any number of things - bees, greetings, great unravelings. I wonder if he’s suitably prepared. We have been a long time living in this house. I could say, I know this town like the slats of my walls, but I don’t really know this town.

There are days he says, “Will you please, please just put that book down? Will you stop writing it all down?” And I think to put it in a drawer, in front of him, as if to say, I’m not. I’m not. I look at him until he lifts the

book from the bed and walks to the bathroom. He says, “Do you really want to know what I do in here?” Everything I’ve written, the things that make him fragment and flake apart, he makes shreds of it. I watch years float in the toilet bowl. He discards the cover and tries to flush the rest of it, though I don’t believe it’s really possible, thrusting both hands in. There’s too much of it. Water runs over and pages float at my feet. May — October — the dates bleed and fish, but the entries might be salvaged still. He’s out the door, but I collect the pages and spread them flat on the shelves of the walking closet, but I am not hiding them in the closet. I am looking in the closet for some other hiding thing.

There is a memory I have, when I was young and went to demonstrate against a fascist group in Ohio, and suddenly they were right in front of me, not plain-clothed racists, but in full regalia, and I was startled by how little there was to feel. That I could have answered a true or false question, I would have known which box to check, but as I was chanting, go home, I was thinking about a boy named Ely, how I hadn’t eaten since noon.

Or other times when someone told me that someone or other had died, when I was just about to ask for an eraser or a quarter, and I gave them my Terribly Pained Face, and then they extended a hand to me and asked, “Are *you* all right?” and I said, “I don’t want to talk about it, no I don’t want to talk,” as if what I have is not any ordinary dead mother, but a stuffed, chain gang, biker mother in a lazy-boy in the parlor or on the basement floor.

If I were to tell the truth of this story, it is not a blessing really, is it? He must feel shame when someone clutches his hand and sends him flushing in a depth-defying way. I am lucky to be free in the world of such reactions. It has been years since a word, or a touch, or a sideways glance

has caused anything in me to rupture.

But I still imagine there will come a day when we will touch and he will not sneeze into my hair and there will be no looking away. Nothing will happen and we will be overjoyed. He will say, I must have built up a tolerance to you, and I'll howl and hold out my arms. Then we'll clear the cabinets of all the analgesics, the shots and inoculations, throw it all out there in the middle of the floor and dance around all the antidotes we'd kept on hand for when we slipped up and connected.