

New Fiction by Svetlana Sterlin: “Implosion”

written by Guest Contributor | January 31, 2018



[Image Credit: Detail from “Terror” by Amy Stewart Hale]

The man grips a black briefcase in his right hand. His left hand itches at his neck and face.

No one sees his scratching. Not the guards patrolling the glowing halls. Not the supervisors whose eyes have gone blank monitoring blinding, soundless surveillance. Not even the woman who sits beside him in the departure terminal, clutching a baby in stiff arms.

His eyes rove the room, occasionally snagging on a clock hanging on the adjacent wall, on a girl dressed in black whose gaze conspicuously follows the movements of passersby. Her eyes find his in the instant before he turns away; enough for him to know that she is not the one.

His hand creeps up to his jaw, fingers already curled.

*

Bleached blonde hair; bleached white skin. Heels on tile.

Rich shoppers and greedy salesmen. Hands clutching boarding passes and mobile phones like sustenance.

A girl clad in black, weaving lines of ink across the pages of the notebook resting on her knees. An ageless woman with frazzled hair limply holding a silent baby. A man carrying a briefcase – the embodiment of cold, impersonal business.

A sterile, pristine airport.

The girl in black considers the teary partings, the typing fingers and talking mouths. The ends morphing into beginnings. She can almost feel the circle of life shattering. She can almost hear the tension in words unspoken.

Her father sits beside her, oblivious to her contemplation. He is the only

person that she loves beyond doubt, the only person to whom she would reveal the thoughts aroused by her observations.

*

The briefcase sways back and forth as the man slips through the milling people. They hover by café stalls, so concerned about the price of coffee, the calories in a cinnamon bun, the taste of a day-old sandwich. In less than an hour, none of this will matter.

In his periphery, the man sees the girl in black lift her head as he passes – the one whose eyes he met earlier. Her curious gaze follows him to the end of the terminal.

The case weighs down his right shoulder. Sweat pools in his palm where it curls around the handle, but he does not adjust his grip. He continues patrolling, mimicking the guards, occasionally glancing at his watch, at the clocks on the walls, at the time ticking over on the electronic timetables hanging from the ceiling. Occasionally scratching at his neck, his face.

*

The baby's soft, curly hair grazes the woman's chin. Hair so young that it hasn't developed a distinguishable colour.

Her nails dig into the baby's delicate skin, but she doesn't adjust her grip, doesn't even notice the half-moon imprints.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

She looks up; her reflexes are more ingrained than her manners.

The woman speaking wears the uniform that marks her as a flight attendant.

"Here. Please." And she holds out the baby, with its wispy hair and claw marks etched into delicate plush skin, and she doesn't look at it.

She has never looked into its eyes. She will never allow herself to wonder what colour they are. But somehow, she knows. Even though she never looked, she knows that its eyes are the colour of the sea. Like the sea that stretched out beyond the room in which it was born; like the sea that lived inside its father; like the one that used to toss up storms in her own eyes. Like the sea that now lay still and flat inside her head.

The attendant stares at her. So the woman lets go of the baby and walks away, past a staring girl dressed in black, and bumps into a man carrying a briefcase. She rights herself but doesn't look back, not at the man or the girl or the baby or the attendant, whose voice rises above the morning cacophony, taut but steady.

She must have caught the baby.

*

The man is beginning to think that the plan has been called off.

He did not expect the airport worker to succeed in delivering the briefcase to him. He did not imagine that the plan would proceed to this point. That he would be responsible for such a paramount task. That any of this would really happen.

The skin above his collar is chafed and red raw. His forehead is damp, but he cannot risk wiping it. They are watching; they are always, always watching. This is the mantra that loops over and over inside his head. But the desire to forget, to abandon whatever foolishness spurred him into this, seeps through the crevices in his discipline.

*

The flight attendant holds the baby as far from her body as she can. She casts her eyes about one last time, but the woman is gone. Passengers gawp at the attendant from their seats, mouths propped open. She turns back to the baby.

"Okay," she says, her voice breathy and thin from running.

She readjusts her grip and holds the baby against her, rocking him as she walks back to her post, as gentle as ripples in a bathtub.

And that's when the smell slinks through the boarding corridor and into the departure gate.

*

The man drifts by a young uniformed woman toting a baby in delicate arms. The baby lolls along with her movements, flaccid and oblivious to whatever forced affection she projects.

For the first time, the man asks himself if he is really going to do this.

The ticking of all of the clocks in the gate fills his head until all other sound is devoured by the *tick, tick, tick*. Even his heart *ticks*.

*

A snake weaves through the rows of chairs, the scales made up of human beings.

The wait has begun. Apprehension hangs over the clump of bodies, insidious and choking.

A breathless woman in a navy blue pencil skirt hurries by, weighed down by a baby. The man with the briefcase is weighed down, too. The girl considers pointing him out to her father, but she says nothing and continues regarding the man as he stands before a clock mounted on the wall.

An insistent smell pervades the room, slithering through legs, winding itself

into hair, seeping down corridors and along tiled floors. It rises and rises and she can almost hear it.

*

The man is surrounded by gawking faces – clock faces. Less than a minute remains.

His hand reaches up, but his nails do not meet skin. He stares at the clocks, his mind traveling to a time when his father spoke to him in a voice smudged with bitter disappointment, eyes seething with disgust, as if he cared.

The people in the airport no longer exist. But if they don't exist, then there is no point. No point in any of this.

He raises both of his hands to his face, no longer caring about the suspicion or the attention, and he wipes his forehead and scratches his cheeks and rakes his nails over his nose and down his sideburns. His fingers reach down into his collar and scratch the skin on his neck all the way down to the top of his chest. Perspiration floods the gaps under his nails but he doesn't care, doesn't care, doesn't care – because now no time is left, and nothing has happened, and he is about to exhale with relief when the inside of his mind implodes and the shrapnel that remains of it bursts into shards that embed themselves in his brain. He does not have time to notice that his briefcase has been missing for some time, or to feel relief or horror or guilt or ecstasy because

he

is

gone.

*

The woman hears the implosion of the building. The crash of the ceiling collapsing. The rush of air being vacuumed from the space. The catch of the fuselage. The silence before the screams. She hears but doesn't process, and so she keeps walking. Not hurriedly. Nor leisurely. Just walking. Just going. Just leaving.

*

The man's face looks no different in death than it did in life. His eyes are devoid of emotion; of anything at all. His fingers are curled in mid-itch.

In his last moment of vision, he saw the girl in black reaching for a bloodied man with a gaping wound in his neck. His arm was stretched out towards her, too, but their hands never connected because his forearm had been replaced by a ragged lump of exposed flesh and bone.

The girl's inquisitive gaze was replaced by a shredded mask of anguish. The man saw – or perhaps imagined – her eyes flick to his for an infinitesimal

length of time before his vision was doused in darkness.

No one will close the eyelids. But they will know who he is, what he has been a part of.

*

The flight attendant was thrown against the ground, bones tearing through muscle, her starched uniform minced by flying debris, skin ripped by the impact of the implosion, brain matter mashed against skull, hair pulled from scalp even as the tender caress of flames singed it away.

Thoughts of the baby left her mind as the noise rose and the world was cracked to smithereens.

When the fire began to bloom, she saw the twinkling eyes of her younger sister driving a car for the first time. She heard the chink of laughter like a wind chime in the breeze; the laugh that belonged to the woman she was to marry in three weeks. She smelled the freesias that her father had gifted her the night before her first flight as an attendant almost a year ago. She felt his crinkled skin under her fingers as he lay in the hospital bed a few weeks later, dying, telling her that she would make it further than he did.

Now she lies among the debris, a broken porcelain doll, and the baby is nowhere in sight.



Svetlana Sterlin lives in Brisbane, Australia, and studies a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Creative and Professional Writing) at the Queensland University of Technology. An only child born in New Zealand to a Russian family, Svetlana has grown up as an outsider and an immigrant, dragged across the globe by her ever-migrating parents.

Her poetry and short fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Germ Magazine* and *Projector Magazine*. In addition to poetry and short stories, Svetlana writes creative non-fiction, and novels in multiple genres. Her fledgling blogs (Tumblr: <https://svetspoetry.tumblr.com/>; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/svetspoetry/>; Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/svetspoetry/>) feature excerpts of her writing.