

# New Fiction Interview with Sam Cohen on “The Night Before Valentine’s Day”

written by Saehee Cho | January 8, 2015



Something I have always loved about your work is the way it sets up tone/mood. I think you use multiple strategies for this: the perfect precise detail (the liquid hot pepper on a cheap margarita), the stream of the narrator’s thoughts, and also the repetition. The repetition of “vampiric” and “scavengery” has an almost choral effect, which is so surprising and wonderful to see in your work. Also the repetition of time, “The night before Valentine’s Day...” is so musical and reminds of the way fables start. Can you explain a little about strategies of mood in this piece?

**SC :** As far as the precision of detail—thank you. For me images are not so much a strategy but a starting place—My impetus to write is often to record images and feelings and sensations that haunt or nag me. Often there’s something I’m feeling or sensing that I don’t have language for, and the closest I can get to capturing that feeling is capturing the images that I think are creating it, and using a specific kind of rhythm. There’s a way in which my writing is sort of an attempt to photograph feelings or sensations I can’t name which I realize is sort of a fool’s errand (my roommate Zack just used that phrase the other day and it made me laugh so much, I want to use it all the time now) and so what I end up with is liquid hot pepper on a cheap margarita.

It pleases me too that the repetition surprises you! Repetition—either linguistic, as here, or structural—does feel to me like one of the strategies I’m constantly employing—one of the few things, maybe, that I’m conscious of as a “strategy.” Maybe I’ve been stealth. But I think I use repetition so much because my narrators frequently aren’t sure what story they’re trying to tell, or they’re aware there are so many stories that could be told about the same events and they don’t want the responsibility of picking, or they have trouble excavating the story from the mess of stuff it’s among, all the images and the feelings, and so they sort of derail into tangent, description, backstory etc. and the repetition is a way to re-ground themselves or allow themselves to start over. I like what you say about a chorus or a fable. Yes! I think that, in this story, the narrator has all this stuff kind of swirling around her—her feelings for her ex-lover, the tragedy of environmental devastation, her maybe-dependent friendship with Justin, the strange attachment to the bird, and the lack of attachment to the world around her. There’s something about the repetition that’s grounding in familiarity or tradition, or connecting to other stories. The repetition’s also a kind of excuse-making on the part of the narrator – she keeps grabbing at a simplistic or familiar story or reason—the night before valentine’s day—to explain her messy feelings, but of course she can never maintain this ease or simplicity, & so she always spirals out from there.

For me, this story feels impossible without Justin. He's the necessary middle-man; in a way I feel like he moves the plot. How does Justin work in the story for you?

SC: I see what you mean, how this story might feel primarily like it's about the relationship between the narrator and Genevieve, but I do think it is a love story between all three characters. Each pair of characters has their own love, and their own way of enacting that love. The relationship each character has with Justin is more fixed, less at risk. Genevieve and the narrator, though, are committed to figuring out how to continue to love one another even though they're no longer going to be lovers, and so a lot of the tension in this story comes from the negotiation of figuring out how to do that. In order to figure out how to continue to love each other under these changed circumstances, these two need to find a new way to interact or be together and the way that they're going to do that is to interact together with Justin, whom they both still/already love, and with whom they have basically-set ways of interacting with.

I'm not sure the story has a plot in any traditional sense, but I agree that Genevieve and the narrator would not have even been able to get together on the night of the story without Justin. At the time I wrote this, I was thinking a lot about passivity. I'm not necessarily a person who wants to argue that passivity is agentive or powerful or whatever, but I'm interested in the experience and cognition of more passive characters, in how they manage to make things happen. Genevieve and the narrator are both passive characters. The narrator is somewhat passive-aggressive—she drops hints or makes jokes in order to manipulate the situation, to sort of top from the bottom, but Genevieve just kind of goes along with what she's invited to do, as long as she wants to do it—she's good at saying no, but isn't going to go out of her way to make anything happen. By allowing Justin to be the active one, the decision-maker, the narrator and Genevieve are able to just passively end up in this space together, seemingly without intent.

Justin is also the perfect person to have there with them—they're both so familiar with him, and he's someone who doesn't seem to care about the potential awkwardness or sensitivity of the situation—it's not going to change his behavior. He talks freely, which allows the other two to talk more freely (such as when the narrator mentions sex she and Genevieve have had), but he also takes up space such that no really in-depth conversations are going to happen between the other two. Justin creates a space for the narrator and Genevieve to interact and also makes that space safe by allowing for certain kinds of interactions and limiting others.

The push and pull of the dynamics between Genevieve and the narrator is so interesting to me because there's a lack of judgment placed on it.

For example:

"I smiled when she said that. I liked being called a cunt, or I liked Genevieve calling me one. I liked hearing her say the word *cunt* during this time when she wasn't saying the word *love*."

I don't know quite if the narrator likes their dynamic but she certainly experiences a certain kind of pleasure from it. The excerpt above makes me wonder about the alternatives for love when it's withheld or unavailable but still somehow necessary between people—what form that absence takes. Can you speak to place the two women are in their relationship in this story?

**SC :** As I said above, the narrator and Genevieve are in a place of figuring out how to be together now that they are not going to *be* together. You know, they don't just want to be civil, or like, "friends," but to figure out how to still love each other after excising the romantic/sexual component of their relationship. But this is sensitive, too, because neither is fully admitting this—both characters are afraid of the vulnerability that would come from directly stating what they want. I'm really committed to writing about characters in places like this—characters who aren't sure what they want from each other or characters who want strange kinds of relationships with each other.

Anyway I remember talking to you about an earlier draft of this story, and you suggested that the narrator was masochistic in "liking" being called a cunt, but I don't think she is masochistic—maybe she's posing as masochistic. There's something cooler about masochism than there is about just, you know, wanting intimacy. And I think the narrator likes cunt because cunt suggests intimacy. Love is hard to say, and cunt is also hard to say. "Cunt" can be a nice thing to invoke, between certain people. Calling the narrator a cunt is Genevieve's sort of brusque and masked way of communicating, you know, that she cares a lot about how the narrator treats her. And that even though she doesn't like it, she's going to keep putting herself in the narrator's presence. "Cunt" communicates that Genevieve's hoping for something. "Cunt" makes the narrator realize that she's powerful. She's been a cunt, maybe, because she hadn't felt powerful—because she'd been afraid of being vulnerable. So Genevieve's admitting that the narrator's been hurting her means that maybe the narrator can stop guarding herself so much, can afford to be a little more vulnerable.

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READ THE STORY HERE : [THE NIGHT BEFORE VALENTINE'S DAY](#)

**Sam Cohen's** writing is in *Delirious Hem*, *Sidebrow*, *Pank*, *Black Clock*, *Joyland*, *Gaga Stigmata*, *RECAPS*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Gossip* was published by *Birds of Lace Press* in 2013. She has an MFA from *CalArts* and lives in *Los Angeles*.

