

*Shannon O'Connor*

**Lithium**

She lived downstairs from her parents, and since the place was gutted and in shambles, they could not rent it to anyone. They let her live there, but they did not give her any heat. "The winter is mild this year," they claimed. "You can just stay in bed all day. That's what you do anyways, right?" She did not have a choice. She did not have a job, and could not move out. The country was in the midst of a recession, and the low-paying service jobs were difficult to get.

She talked to herself in her cold, cold house. "I'm so happy cause today I've found my friends, they're in my head." She knew in her heart that there was an answer to her prayers. It had been two years since the explosion in her world happened. She had managed to get a diploma from high school even though she dropped out. She took a college class in the fall, but did not finish. She felt the spark again, the spark of knowledge. She did not want to tell anyone the truth about what happened.

She knew that if she saw him again, she would be saved. All she needed was to see his weeping dark doe eyes again. He would tell her the truth that she really was the savior of the universe.

Last September, she thought she saw him dancing on a stage wearing a red shirt while he was playing the piano. But that couldn't be him. The obscure rock band that played at the shopping mall. "Burn down the mall! Burn down the mall!" The kids all sang together. Did they know that malls would take over the world at some point? And that the glitter-filled neon of the Cambridgeside Galleria would not change in ten years, while the rest of the world became connected and disconnected all at once?

In the desolation of her room she wondered where he was. She heard on the radio that the band she thought she saw him with was coming back to a club in Brookline in February. She was not old enough to get into most clubs, not that she would, but she would love to see him. She wanted to go with people that knew him from the castle where she lived

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like a princess.

She knew that he would come back and he would reveal the truth that she was really the savior of the universe. She needed him to tell her that because nobody else in her world knew. She liked the darkness of the winter. "Sunday morning is every day for all I care, and I'm not scared," she would sing to herself in her cold room. On Sunday, it was the beginning of a new week, and if the sun shone, that would bring her closer to her destiny.

She had a bottle of orange juice on her table in her living room that had been there for months. She hoped that it would ferment and turn into alcohol, like the water that Christ turned into wine. She thought it might turn into a giant screwdriver.

The house was messy; she was a poet, and needed to be enthralled in chaos to create, plus nobody ever came to visit her. If anyone had, she might have cleaned a little bit out of sheer embarrassment.

She burned incense and lit candles. Not because she smoked pot, but because she liked her house to smell nice. The gutted kitchen made everything smell like mold. After a while, she did not notice it. She would light her candles in a daze 'cause she found God. She knew that God was with her in everything she did. Everything everywhere was a sign. In the supermarket, all the boxes of cereal spoke to her and told her that she was the one. They told her that the time was near and she would soon fulfill her destiny. Cocoa Krispies told her that the world would not always be filled with people of different races. Frosted Flakes told her that a new Ice Age was dawning.

The cigarettes spoke to her, too. Winston told her that the war would be won soon. And True Blue told her that everything was true. Kool told her to be cool and not let anyone know what was going on.

The DJs spoke to her on the radio. They knew that she was listening. They gave her clues. This is the day your life will truly change. She believed it. She's painting huge spoons.

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She knew she had to see him in the daylight. During the night the spirits were not with her. She did not like to venture to the city at night, because darkness did not like her. In the light of day, he would take her away and they would learn together the ways of beauty. She was so excited; she couldn't wait to see him there.

March 19, the last day of winter, was the only day it snowed that year. The snow didn't stick to the ground. She was looking for him everywhere in the square, in the stores and the restaurants, but he was nowhere. She went to the castle in the trees.

"I never really knew you, but I wanted to," she screamed to the beasts guarding the castle. "You seemed like you wanted to know me, but I was too fucked up at the time to know anything. It's not too late, it's never too late, please don't take me away again, I don't want my dreams to seep out, I always want them with me."

The sentry in front of the gate bowed before her. He picked up his clipboard, his white coat reflecting the moonlight. "You have to do what we say. If you sign this paper, you won't have to fight us."

"I like you, and I'm not gonna crack," she said to the sentry. "Is he here? Will I finally be saved?"

"We'll help you here," the beast said to her. "We'll help you to get back to the way you were before."

"But I don't want to be that way!" she screeched. "I want to be the way I really am!"

"You shouldn't be the way you are because you are sick. You are not right. We will make you right."

"I don't want to be right. I like the music in my soul."

"They won't tell you in there that you're sick, but you are. You're not like everyone else. We want to make everyone the same. That is our purpose as a hospital. To homogenize the world. Make everyone

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vanilla. No chocolate, no butter crunch, no cookies and cream. Vanilla. Do you understand?"

"I want cookies and cream! I can't go in there! I want to be free!" she ran down the hill onto the street in the dingy neighborhood. There was a bus stop there, but she didn't know when the bus came, and didn't want to wait. So she ran down the street screaming, with her shoelaces and dreams intact. She didn't want to take the pills and be vanilla. She wanted to hold on just a little bit longer, and chase unicorns through the forest.™

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™ Shannon O'Connor received her B.A. in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She has been published in *Up Dare*, *Chord*, *The Bagel Bard Anthology 3*, and previously in *The Wilderness House Literary Review*. She was the recipient of the *Mary Doyle Curran Award* in 2005 and 2006. She is currently finishing her first novel.