

Nathan Leslie

The Worm

When Davey's little brother is born, Davey is asleep. Davey wakes up naked. Davey has slept naked, ever since he was five. Now Davey is six, and in first grade. He knows how to read, how to walk, how to talk, how to dribble a basketball, and how to pick beans and squash, how to paint a room green. How to peel an apple.

Last fall Davey helped his mother paint his bedroom. He wanted to paint it the same color as the grass. When his mother said his room may be too dark Davey said he liked it that way. His mother shrugged, and they drove thirty miles to the hardware store to buy paint.

Davey hops down the stairs, as usual, and pushes the kitchen door open. It is Saturday morning, only nine o'clock. Usually his mother is making eggs and toast. Usually his father is outside trimming weeds or mending the fence. This morning he only hears voices from the living room. Davey opens the refrigerator and pours himself a glass of grape juice. He looks at the purple juice and thinks it is odd that he is about to drink something purple. Then he does.

Davey walks through the dining room, to the living room. He can hear the cries then and the soft voices. Davey thinks it is too soon, that it can't be. But when he walks into the room, his mother is on her back on the foldout bed, covered in a white sheet, with tiny yellow flowers. She looks tired, but her eyes glint. Davey's father sits in a chair next to her, looking at the baby. Davey thinks the baby looks sunburned and stupid, eyes closed and hands gyrating up and down. Davey thinks the baby looks like an ugly stupid worm.

Davey's mother nods at Davey and tells Davey that he should meet his little brother. Davey says he doesn't want to. Davey doesn't want a brother, and doesn't want to make a fuss. What's the big deal? Davey wonders. It's just a stupid baby. It can't even talk. It can't do anything. Davey's father says that they have named the baby Peter, and he asks Davey how he likes the name.

"It sounds boring," Davey says. "I told you I don't like 'Peter.'"

"Maybe it will grow on you," his father says.

"Maybe not," Davey says.

Davey's mother asks Davey if he is surprised it all happened when he was asleep. Davey says yes. He doesn't know how that happened.

"We were just very quiet," Davey's father says. Davey isn't interested in quiet.

When Davey watches his mother nurse his brother, he feels sick. Davey wants to know why the worm should get all the attention. Davey's cousins and uncles and grandparents stream in and give presents to his mother and coo at the baby, and hold the baby. His relatives wink at Davey, pat his head and move on. Some ask Davey, "Are you excited to have a little brother?" Davey nods and curls and uncurls his toes inside his shoes. Worm, Davey thinks. When he goes outside nobody notices.

Davey wanders into the woods, walks around the trout pond and sits on a log. He kicks at the dirt and shredded bark and watches the millipedes and beetles and ants scuttle for cover. Davey follows the ants toward a tall tree, and finds a small mound of dirt where ants scurry in and out. Davey kicks the mound and watches the ants race. He stomps on some, and picks rocks from the path and drops bombs on others. Davey fills a watering can with pond water and pours the water into the gaping hole. He watches the ants wiggle and wriggle helplessly in the water.

When Davey walks through the front door nobody seems to notice. He walks upstairs to his room and closes his door. Davey wants his father to show him how to mow the lawn, how to catch the trout with his bare hands, how to plant spinach. He wants his mother to curl him in her arms and press herself to him. He wants her to take him out into the garden and pick cucumbers and peppers and garlic into the red bucket. Davey buries his head in his pillow. He wishes the worm died inside his mother. He wishes the worm came out in a black and oily clump.

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In his dreams Davey snips his brother's fingers off with scissors. His mother is asleep next to the baby, but Davey cuts the toes off next. He throws the fingers and toes into the watering can. The baby looks at him and smiles and clover and dandelion sprout from the hole where each finger and toe was. Davey saws off the baby's arms and legs. The baby giggles and squash sprouts from his arm holes, and cucumbers grow from his leg holes. The worm doesn't bleed.

Davey's mother sleeps. When he lifts the sheet, Davey can see his father is curled on his mother's stomach, his head resting on her naked body. The baby waves its clover fingers at Davey and Davey lifts his brother and holds him. He carries his brother from his parents and into the kitchen. The kitchen is dark and shady and Davey has to step over the roots and fallen branches.

When Davey lays his brother on the table he watches Petey's face change. It becomes large and adult-like, and his face has hair and his mouth has teeth. Davey turns away and pulls the longest knife from the knife drawer. He takes it with both hands and swings it down, onto his brother's neck. For a moment nothing happens. But then a giant laugh emanates from the baby, and Davey stumbles backward. The baby's head rolls and tumbles to the kitchen floor. Davey watches it disintegrate. Centipedes slide into the ears.

As Davey watches his brother's neck, he understands. As the old head decays, a fish sprouts from the base of the baby's neck. The scales glitter in the darkness of the kitchen, and the fish stares directly at Davey through both eyes and flops against the cabinet door.

Davey feels a hand on his shoulder caressing him, and his shirt damp with sweat. His mother's face appears before him, like the moon rising over the trees.

"Honey, are you not feeling well?" she asks. "Are you okay?"

Davey nods and sits up. He says he must have been asleep.

"Poor guy," his mother says, stroking his head. "Too many people

coming in and out. You must be exhausted.”

Davey shakes his head and asks where his brother is.

“Downstairs,” she says. “It’s so adorable. Your father is asleep with Petey on his stomach.”

“Is Petey asleep too?” Davey slides out of bed.

“No. Do you want to hold him?”

Davey nods and walks down the hall. He can feel his mother follow him. Davey walks downstairs and into the living room. A baseball game is on the television, but the sound is off and Petey’s legs kick. Davey can hear a soft gurgle. From his brother.

“Go on,” Davey’s mother says. “You can hold him.”

Davey looks across the room. He wonders if Petey’s yellow room will be too bright for him. Davey wonders what Petey will be like when he is his age. The sun angles through the slats in the living room blinds, and Davey walks through the stripes of shadow and sun. He leans over his father and reaches his hands under his brother. He clamps his hands together and lifts Petey as high as he can over his head. He can feel the air all around them.

Nathan Leslie’s six books of fiction include *Madre*, *Reverse Negative*, and *Drivers*. Nathan’s short stories, essays, and poems have appeared in over 100 literary magazines including *Boulevard*, *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, and *Cimarron Review*. He is fiction editor for *The Pedestal Magazine* and he is series editor for *The Best of the Web 2008* anthology, which will be published by Dzanc Books. His website is www.nathanleslie.com.