



THE INDEFINITE STATE OF IMAGINARY MORALS

“Rae Bryant’s stories yank at you over and over... Is it necessary? Absolutely.”

— Frederick Barthelme

Stories by Rae Bryant

Praise for Rae Bryant

“Rae Bryant's stories yank at you over and over, desperate to give you the clue you never had and to point you, by what's left out, to a spot on this good earth where the heart might flourish. Getting there is your business, she seems to say, and she doesn't hold out much hope of your arrival, or of hers. Is it fun? Not so much. Is it necessary? Absolutely.”
—Frederick Barthelme

“Rae Bryant's fiction is smart and sexy and post-feminist and dangerous and akin to doing the tango with a succubus. Do you feel lucky? Part Hannah Tinti, part Kim Addonizio—with enough intense characters, flashy dreams, and edgy visions to entangle your heart and skull for eons. Bite into these thorny stories, before they sink their teeth into you.” —Richard Peabody, Editor, *Gargoyle Magazine*

“Reading Rae Bryant can be a harrowing experience; hers is a harsh world without wrong or right. But as you make your way through, pains and pleasures meet and build, until it's like drowning in a lake of silver light.” —Ben Loory, Author of *Stories for Nighttime and Some for the Day* and “The TV,” *The New Yorker*

Rae Bryant's fiction is rich with sensual detail, its surface clamoring for our attention like the glamourised skin of a new lover, everything fresh, everything undulled by long familiarity. And what waits beneath, begging to be revealed? Perhaps a writer striking poses, alternately a seductress, a tease, a joker, or perhaps a trickster: for while Bryant is always sure to show us a good time, there comes a sense that sometimes she's making us laugh just

so we don't notice what else she's doing, the way her fingernails dig deeply at our freshest wounds, aiming to free the many splinters stuck beneath our skin, and also that oh so good pain waiting just below.
—Matt Bell, author of *How They Were Found*

“Addictive; the rawness, messiness, unattractive infection of love that can cause a woman to gnaw off her arm to sneak away from her sleeping lover. It’s no surprise to find, among these stories, a new Wonder Woman, with a whip. Ah, you say: of course.” —Karen Heuler, author of *Journey to Bom Goody*, recipient of the O’Henry Award

“Will make you simultaneously laugh and cringe at the squeamish awkwardness of post-one night stand intimacies...witty...strangely fantastical and familiar.”
—*Flavorpill*

“If I had to describe Rae Bryant’s collection *The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals* in two words, the words would be these: damn impressive.” —*Outsider Writers Collective* and Press

“*The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals* commands attention. Bryant’s observations on the arcana of the mundane—life, sex, a sense of being—are matched only by her ability to render them strange. Alternatively lyrical and minimal, these stories exemplify the capabilities of the literary weird mode. A must read for any student of post-millennial fiction.” —Darin Bradley, Author of *Noise*
“Bryant creates a vivid portrayal of what it means to be human, in its gritty glory.” —*Weave Magazine*

“A distinctive collection that’s imaginative and compelling. These stories show the enormous talent of Rae Bryant beginning to take hold.” —Tim Wendel,

author of *Castro's Curveball* and *High Heat*

“Deadpan, visceral, sharply funny.” —Julie Innis

“A new genealogy of morals... a madcap ride through a land of errant desire and lost time.” —Gary Percesepe, editor, *BLIP Magazine* (formerly *Mississippi Review*)

“Sweetly erotic without going over the top.” —Jared Randall, *Apocryphal Road Code*

“Innovative, daring, original writing.” —Kathy Fish, author of *A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness*

Rae Bryant

The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals



The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals

Stories by Rae Bryant

Patasola Press
New York



Patasola Press
Brooklyn, New York

Copyright © 2011 by Rae Bryant
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
either are the product of the author's imagination or are used
fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to original journals of
publication
and to artist Gustav Klimt as is listed in this collection.

ISBN: 978-0615496962
First printing.

patasolapress.org
raebryant.com

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

“[Jeezus] Changed My Oil Today,” *Opium Magazine*, January 2011

Allegorie der Skulptur. Allegory of Sculpture. Gustav Klimt. 1889.

“All You Bad Sinners,” *decomp*, October 2010

“Buttercrisp,” *Pear Noir!* Issue 4, Summer 2010

“Chinchillas in the Air,” *Annalemma*, 2010

Chor der Paradiesengel. Choir of Heavenly Angels. Detail from Beethoven Fries. Gustav Klimt. 1902.

“Collecting Calliope,” *Weave Magazine* Issue 4, Spring/Summer 2010

Danae. Gustav Klimt. c. 1907

Die Leiden der Schwachen Menschheit. The Suffering of Weak Humanity. Gustav Klimt. 1902.

“Emperatriz de la Orilla del Río,” *PANK*, December 2010

“Featherbedding,” *Kill Author*, Vladimir Nabokov Issue 8, 2010

“Fifty Years in Halves,” *Word Riot*, February 2010

Fischblut. Fish Blood. 1898.

“Fly Fishing In Neoprene Legs,” *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*,” March 2010

Gorgonen. Gorgon. Gustav Klimt. 1902.

Gustav Klimt. *Goldfische. Goldfish.* Gustav Klimt. c. 1901.

Hoffnung. Hope. Gustav Klimt. 1903.

“I Keep a Vine Woven Basket by the Front Door,” *A capella Zoo* Issue 4, Spring 2010

“Intolerable Impositions,” *Bartleby Snopes*, Issue 4, 2010

“Monk Man and Moonshine,” *Menda City Review*, Issue 16, May 2010

Nagender Kummer. Gnawing Pain. Detail from Beethoven Fries. Gustav Klimt. 1902.

“Paddlehead,” *Caper Literary Journal* Issue 4, May 2010

“Postfeminist Zombie Assassins Wear Wonder Woman Underoos,” *The Medulla Review* 4.1, 2010

“Solipsy Street,” *Metazen*, November 2010

“Stage Play in Five Acts of Her: Matinee,” *BLIP Magazine*, Summer 2010

Stehende alte Frau im Profil nach links. Staying Old Woman.

Gustav Klimt. Date Unknown.

Stehender Mädchenakt mit vorgebeugten Körper nach links. Staying Female Nude with Bended Body Heading Left. Gustav Klimt.

Date Unknown.

“Stiletto Dance,” *Foundling Review*, April 2010

“Street Red,” *Writer’s Bloc* (Rutgers-Camden), 2010

“Sublimity in Turquoise Blue,” *Farrago’s Wainscot*, November 2009

“The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals, Relatives and Gin,” *BLIP Magazine*, January 2011

Dedicated to my readers, editors, mentors and friends who have kept me honest. To Richard Peabody for his amazing sense of edge and faith and guidance. To David Everett, Mark Farrington and Tim Wendel for their creative support and to JHU for a place to call my creative home. Especially to my husband, Patrick, and my children, Tyler and Madelyn, and family et al. who have supported and loved the woman, wife, mother, daughter, granddaughter, sister and writer.

Contents

INTRODUCTION by Karen Heuler

STORIES

The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals,
Relatives and Gin 3
Intolerable Impositions 8
Emperatriz de la Orilla del Río 12
Fifty Years in Halves 16
Featherbedding 20
Stage Play in Five Acts of Her: Matinee 23
Cystic Burden 28
Monk Man and Moonshine 29
Sublimity in Turquoise Blue 49
Fly Fishing In Neoprene Legs 67
Chinchillas 72
Art as Appropriated as Woman as Klimt 76

KLIMT REDUX: A STUDY IN DESECRATION

This Space for Rent 78
An Old Woman's Morning after a One Night Stand 80
Goldfish Have Hot Sex 82
Deus ex Machina 83
This Is Not Pornography 84
Bent 85
Parasitic Futuring 86

The Interior Clichés of Women 87

Anorexia Cavum 88

MORE STORIES

Solipsy Street 89

Spyro Gyro 95

Buttercrisp 96

Collecting Calliope 99

Street Red 105

City in Spires 109

I Keep a Vine Woven Basket by the Front Door
125

Man-Beast 133

Postfeminist Zombie Assassins Wear Wonder
Woman Underoos 134

Paddlehead 141

[Jeezus] Changed My Oil Today 144

All You Bad Sinners 148

Stiletto Dance 152

Cow Tipping 154

Shadow Spots 169

Introduction

In this strange world of couplings, women find themselves warily trapped by sex into a reluctant attachment to men; or merely warned by sex of the treachery of connecting.

The tone and style of these stories is oddly addictive; we're listening to the kinds of thoughts no one mentions, thoughts that don't necessarily reflect badly on these women, but do expose a guardedness that seems to be imperative. That guardedness is what we all crawl into at times; here it is the mode of existence.

You know you should be put off by these voices; you know these are women who will never let you in, whether it's friendship or love. On the other hand, you ARE these women sometimes, or you want to be, knowing all too well that dealing with other people's expectations can deplete you; that the ordinary connections are not equal, ever; that there is always more expected from you than you were meant to give, and the best thing to do is to taste what love is like and get out, fast.

Many of her stories start in bed or land in bed, as lovers confront or avoid the demands of love. Does she want to stay? Does she have any need for him? He certainly needs her, and it is this relentlessly intimate need that drives so many of these women away, the rawness, messiness,

unattractive infection of love that can cause a woman to gnaw off her arm to sneak away from her sleeping lover.

It's no surprise to find, among these stories, a new Wonder Woman, with a whip. Ah, you say: of course.

—Karen Heuler

Author of *Journey to Bom Goody*
Recipient of the O'Henry Award

The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals

The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals, Relatives and Gin

She drinks his Tanqueray and tonic and envisions telling him that he really isn't take-home material or the sort of guy who dresses up 'real well' with all the necessary un-tucking and scarf draping — he's lost too much hair now — though he is satisfactory for a stand-by hook-up — this cannot be denied — or an occasional at-home necking, possibly a low-lighted evening event with coworkers.

Enter gin and tonic #2.

The pillows have pushed out between them. Knees touching. He speaks deep and slow about high school football and stock options. She imagines him tight and angled, ignores the rounded belly. Pictures the thickness of his portfolio instead. She downs the rest of her gin and sucks on the wedge of lime, lets it linger on her lip.

Gin and tonic #3.

Skin to skin. The belly has turned out quite helpful, a fulcrum of sorts, and wouldn't you know it? The belly hides the private parts of their sex so when she glances down to observe the gritty details — really, who can resist? — the mound of flesh will not let her.

Two minutes in, the belly surprises her. It proves to be more flexible than she would have imagined, taking on geometric swing patterns akin to Spyro Gyro, a game she'd so loved as a child, and there in the chaos of belly and breasts, the organs become art, flesh sculptures in motion. She names the penis Waldo and labors to locate its position in the gyrating flesh between them, like finding the missing character on the back of a cereal box that your little brother waves in the air even though you've told him to Put it down! I'm trying to locate the penis!

It takes the better part of three minutes to find it. The penis works behind a camouflage of gray pubic hair and a love trail. She studies it like Dian Fossey studying apes or a mathematician studying circles and rectangles. She takes measurements by relationships. The arc of the penis equals the slope of the fluted glass. The girth equals the diameter of one in a half sushi rolls. She records the quantitative features, the dedication of it all, for truly, the penis has heart and

stick-to-it-ness. A solid ten points for length. Four for width. Bonus points for its dogmatic work ethic. In the end, she awards the penis a handicap for discrepancies between actual breast size and push-up promotional dimensions.

Post-coital water.

Hydration is the single most important step toward anchoring into the reality of sloppy behavior. It is a wetting of the moral palate, a rejuvenation of the spirit, a pause and opportunity to decide if the behavior should register in the grand scheme of lifelong decision makings, or if the behavior is simply a burp, an unanticipated flinch of gastric sluttiness. She finishes the water, wishes it was gin then pulls a pillow into her bare lap. Slutty wins. Yes, it has been a slutty sort of evening.

They are both too worn and wasted and downtime to grab a towel, blanket, napkin, so they sit watching the pieces of spicy salmon with cucumber leftovers on the coffee table, the near-dissipated pools of soy. They talk about the distressed barn wood aesthetic of the room and try to ignore the nakedness of it all and the fact that the room has grown rather cold now and their sweated skins are uncomfortably slippery. Filthy slips. The kind of film one might scrub away with Clorox. When he leans back and offers his shoul-

der, she nearly cringes like a too old child expected to sit in her grandfather's lap. In minutes, thankfully, he sleeps — it has been so long she's lain still with shallow breath. She hums, in her head, the theme song to *Mission Impossible*, slides from his arm and chest, away from the couch, collects wrinkled clothes from the floor then carries them to the front door where she trips and slips over the skinny black skirt, the red bra that is really too small and the blouse buttons. Shit. She tiptoes back to couch, grabs purse, stops, drops, rolls when he snuffles in his sleep. Crawls back to door.

Coffee.

At the 7-Eleven, around the corner, she stands in a line, waiting to pay for coffee and the Styrofoam cup in her hand. She adjusts the hem of her skinny black skirt and tries to straighten the twist in the red lace bra strap that irritates the mole on her shoulder because the mole sticks out too far. She has made mental notes to have it removed many times. The lace and elastic are cutting into her skin now and she thinks she smells the aroma of ejaculation and sperm swimming through her canal. She glances around the convenience store and wonders if 7-Elevens carry pregnancy tests. The bra strap really is too tight. She sips the lukewarm coffee and laments for the

environment and for Styrofoam and the people who made Styrofoam because they didn't know it would be so bad when they invented it. They thought they were saving trees.

What would coffee taste like with Tanqueray? Would it be bitter?

She tells herself, Surely, he will call. How long will it take for him to call? The woman in the security mirror is staring at her now. Her eyes are smudged with mascara and age, framed by a familiar arc in the brows. She used to be so much sexier after sex. The mirror makes her nose convexly large.

Surely, he'll call.

She considers death. It is best served as a pre-emptive measure. She vacillates between great aunt and second cousin and readies the tears because they are more convincing, a quicker get-away. Men run away from women who cry too much. When her cell phone vibrates, she tries to remember which relative she had used last time, not wanting to kill the poor thing twice.

Intolerable Impositions

She gnawed her arm off in the morning, before he woke. There was no way around it. Her forearm lay trapped beneath his thick neck stubbled except for one irritated spot of skin below the hairline where an infected pore rounded, tipped with pus. She had seen it the night before, the infection. She saw it in the dim bar light, pulsating, but the blemish did not matter after two glasses of cabernet. And besides, he presented so well from the front — pressed, suited, hip-but-not-too-metro tie, square jaw, and straight white teeth. His hair was thinning. Inconsequential.

After a tolerable sexing — top, bottom, behind, sideways, over the edge of the bed — he turned his back and asked if she would find the ingrown hair on his neck because it hurt him and he had no one to do it now that his mother had passed away three months ago. In the dark silence of their after-sex, he explained how his mother cleaned the area with hydrogen peroxide then extracted the infection, fishing inside with

tweezers and a needle to find the offending hair. He spoke with soft words: “She could always find it so quickly. Now I have no one. Would you mind? The tweezers and the peroxide are in the bathroom cabinet.” It was a test, though he did not admit it.

She had known other men like him — men who searched for a dedicated intimate, a partner un-squeamish. It was their way of telling the keepers from the one-nighters. She begged off the immediate task. “I’ll do it in the morning,” she said, smiling, as if the task did not disgust her.

She woke before him. The bulbous infection lay millimeters from her nose, an inch from her forearm. It would touch her if he rolled backwards, toward her. As long as he lay motionless, she was safe.

Pulling her arm in small increments, she worked it from beneath his neck, but each time her forearm moved, he moved, so that he inched himself backwards, forming into her an intolerable spooning. She had not consented to affections. There was no contract between them for this cuddling, nor was there provision for lovemaking, only sex implied, and she cringed at the familiarity of his back and buttocks and legs where they contacted her skin. It may have been different if he faced her. He was much prettier

from the front.

So she rolled to her back, letting only her side and arm touch him now. She considered pulling the arm outright, facing his wakening before leaving a fake phone number. She considered pushing on his right shoulder so to roll him onto his belly, which may have released the arm, but still, it was risky, and would likely wake him that way, too. After endless scenarios imagined — pulling and pushing and facing the man she now loathed for no other reason than the cyst upon his neck — she considered loving him. She could simply stay and wake by his side, share eggs and coffee and *The Washington Post* before returning to bed, but the venture brought the inevitable task of extracting the hair and the pus, and she found herself glaring at the thick, heavy neck with hatred. Only one thing to do.

It took her the better part of an hour to gnaw through the bone. The flesh was easy — soft, pliable, seasoned with skin creams and the experience of her near thirty years. The blood, however, threatened to give her away. It pooled on the mattress beneath them, and he nearly woke from the wet.

As she snuck out of the bedroom, she turned to watch the sleeping man who now clutched her forearm. He pulled it to his chest and hugged it like a child's teddy bear. She remembered mornings when, she too, clutched forearms to her

chest. It wasn't so bad. At least they had left her something before leaving.

She tied off the left sleeve of her coat, moved out of the apartment and into the hallway, missing the forearm already but resolved to leaving it. Waking him and his cyst would certainly turn into the day, the week, a year and before long she might consider him more than a fancy. He would fill her life with a series of cystic burdens. He would seize her entirely.

A single forearm was well-worth the escape.

Purchase and Read the Entire Book

The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals

by Rae Bryant

at

Amazon
Barnes and Noble
Powell's
& More



Rae Bryant lives in the Washington D.C. area. Her work appears in *Puerto del Sol*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *BLIP Magazine* (formerly *Mississippi Review*), *Opium Magazine*, *Caper Literary Journal* and *Foundling Review*, among other journals. She is a VCCA Fellow and a graduate of the M.A. in Writing program at Johns Hopkins University, where she was named Outstanding Graduate in Fiction. In 2011, she was awarded a fellowship to write and teach in Florence, Italy at the JHU Conference on Craft. Rae is currently finishing a novel. *The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals* is her first book of fiction.



In this visceral collection of stories by Rae Bryant, we explore the wits, moralities, edges and sometimes broken realities of lovers and friends, life and death, and the mundane tragedies in a normal day. From detachable women to cow tipping, kingfishers to drive-thru sex, Bryant pushes the boundaries and creates for her readers the amusing, the heart-breaking and the magically bizarre conditions of woman and man.

"Rae Bryant's stories yank at you over and over, desperate to give you the clue you never had and to point you, by what's left out, to a spot on this good earth where the heart might flourish. Getting there is your business, she seems to say, and she doesn't hold out much hope of your arrival, or of hers. Is it fun? Not so much. Is it necessary? Absolutely."

—FREDERICK BARTHELME

"Rae Bryant's fiction is smart and sexy and post-feminist and dangerous and akin to doing the tango with a succubus. Do you feel lucky? Part Hannah Tinti, part Kim Addonizio—with enough intense characters, flashy dreams, and edgy visions to entangle your heart and skull for eons. Bite into these thorny stories, before they sink their teeth into you."

—RICHARD PEABODY, *Editor*, GARGOYLE MAGAZINE

"Reading Rae Bryant can be a harrowing experience; hers is a harsh world without wrong or right. But as you make your way through, pains and pleasures meet and build, until it's like drowning in a lake of silver light."

—BEN LOORY, *Author of STORIES FOR NIGHTTIME AND SOME FOR THE DAY*

"Addictive; the rawness, messiness, unattractive infection of love that can cause a woman to gnaw off her arm to sneak away from her sleeping lover. It's no surprise to find, among these stories, a new Wonder Woman, with a whip. Ah, you say: of course."

—KAREN HEULER, *Author of JOURNEY TO BOM GOODY, Recipient of the O'HENRY AWARD*

Fiction/Literature/Short Stories

\$14

