

Idiopathic

Spine-hunched; sleep forces your eyes
open, wearing dense brushstrokes
across the landscape. In this city of gold,
you give limbs to shadows, only to
writhe around autumn and black flies,
braiding through wounds then long loves.
By the scent of your wrist, night's lattice
work leads to the vein with its flat side,
born into shivers some dimly silver curves
about your wet-wool weight. This idea
of first coming over the soil, of storing up
life dissolving in the seeds and mud,
you are a woman on her flexure, fingers
full of posies, set among some rocks
nearer the sea that rushes at you
with plaintiff coos across the barley fields.

Prose Author of the Month, August 2018

Kris Faatz



Kris Faatz (rhymes with skates) is a Baltimore-area writer and musician. Her first novel, *To Love A Stranger*, was a finalist for the 2016 Schaffner Press Music in Literature Award, and was published in May 2017 by Blue Moon Publishers (Toronto). Her short fiction has

appeared or is forthcoming in various journals, including *Kenyon Review Online*, *Potomac Review*, *Reed*, and *Digging Through the Fat*, and has been recognized in contests run by *Woven Tale Press*, *Glimmer Train*, and *NYC Midnight*. Many of her published stories appear online at krisfaatz.com.

Kris came to writing via a roundabout path that included an undergrad degree in engineering and graduate studies in piano performance. She's a professional music teacher and performer, but her working life is shifting more toward writing (with as much nudging as she can give it). Writing craft makes her happy and she would talk about it all day with anyone willing to listen.

As a writer, Kris loves to explore what makes interesting characters tick. "Fruits of Them that Sleep" began as a study about a character Kris wanted to know more about, a woman with experiences and perspectives very different from her own. She has always been a literary writer, but in her newest work (a second book), Kris is looking for the perfect intersection between the character-driven fiction she creates and the speculative fiction, especially fantasy, she loves to read. One of these days she imagines she will find it and settle into her long-term writing voice.

Kris thinks of storytelling as an ideal way to build bridges between people. That's the single thing she most wants to do as a writer, and along with the pure joy of word-hunting, it always brings her back to the page.

Fruits of Them that Sleep

On the morning when her daughter Abby was put under the ground, Reverend Robin Cahill stayed in her kitchen and chopped strawberries for pies. She didn't care much for that dessert herself. Fruit pies, especially uncooked ones, seemed too wet and sloppy. Or at least they used to, back when she cared to notice such things. She preferred pumpkin, sweet potato, and pecan. You could contain those pies and slice them into perfect segments. But the graham-cracker crusts, heaped up with fresh sliced berries and topped with clouds of Cool-Whip, had been Abby's favorite.

A handful of miles away from Robin's house, the congregation at the Church of Christ's Everlasting Kingdom listened to Reverend Harris, the Church's assistant pastor, speak long strings of words over a new hole in the ground. Robin knew the grave would have a carpet of green plastic grass over it. She had led funeral services herself often enough to know exactly how fake that plastic would look, and how raw the hole would be underneath.

She should have been there today with the others. Reverend Cahill should have said the words herself and laid her own daughter to rest, but no one would wonder that she didn't. Even her husband Mike hadn't wondered that morning, when he climbed into his black suit as if it had been armor that would hold him up. He hadn't said a word about her choosing to stay at home. He hadn't said a word to challenge her since she could remember. After all, for as long as he had known her, she had held the flame of God in her hands.

Not now. Now she held only berries, cold and wet. In the kitchen, with the house as empty around her as an unused shoebox shoved into the back of a closet, Robin stood over the wooden cutting board and drove the knife again and again into the red fruit. She planted the blade hard each time and thunked it solidly against the wood, as if the berries had been Reverend Harris's words, or her own. The words she had given her congregation, the ones she had believed in herself for so long. The words that had meant she let Abby die.

Think. Think. Robin gripped the berries between thumb and forefinger and drove the knife in, as if she could have chopped all those syllables into tiny pieces and scraped them into the trash. The righteous word of God that said that vaccines were unnatural. The Lord would heal His children.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Soon, Reverend Harris and the rest of Robin's flock would come back here from the cemetery. They would swarm into this kitchen to snatch paper plates and cups and plastic forks and spoons, and then like a plague of locusts they would stream out into the back yard and devour the luncheon down to the last crumb. Of course there would be hugs too, and tears, and sympathetic mouthings from the mouths that weren't stuffed too full. Robin would hear, again and again, how her baby had gone home to Jesus, how Abby was blessed now with eternal joy and freed from this sinful world forevermore.

Robin had said the same kinds of words herself. When she did, they had always had the fire of belief in them. Now she set herself to finish chopping the berries. The juice stained her hands redder with each slice of the knife. When they were finished, she sugared them and let them sit in their own juice while she carried the rest of the lunch outside.

Trays of cold cuts, rolls, macaroni, salad fixings: Robin had put them together herself, last night, with no help from anyone. She couldn't stand even to let Mike into the kitchen beside her as she busied her hands over the arrays of food. Now she carried the trays outside one at a time. Each trip through the yard, to the picnic table under the old willow tree, took her past Abby's swingset. The bright white-painted metal bars still looked brand

new. Robin and Mike had only bought the swingset three months earlier, in March, for Abby's fifth birthday.

Robin made herself look straight at it as she lugged two plastic gallon jugs of lemonade over to the table. She remembered Abby gripping the swing's chains and aiming her toes for the sky, her long hair falling down her back and her laughter spiraling up into the trees. *Look, Mama! I can fly!*

Robin adjusted the placement of the floral centerpiece, an arrangement of white lilies, on the picnic table. The table had a white plastic cover. White on white, like the cheesecloth sheets and blanket Abby tried to sleep under in the hospital, while the rash crawled over her skin and the fever burned away at her insides.

Back in the kitchen, Robin piled the cut strawberries into graham cracker crusts and mounded Cool-Whip on top. She eased the heavy glass pie pans into the refrigerator. By the time Mike came home, she had changed into her long black skirt and long-sleeved black blouse and run a damp dishtowel over the kitchen counter one last time, to pick up any stray splashes of juice.

Mike didn't say anything to her when he came in, but she followed him down the hall to their bedroom. At the very end of the hall, the door to Abby's bedroom was closed, the way it had been since the last night she had slept in it. Robin couldn't believe that had only been a week ago.

In the master bedroom, Mike took off his tie in front of the long mirror. He saw Robin coming in the glass and nodded. The back of his head, with its small round bald patch, bobbed briefly. Robin didn't look at his eyes in the mirror.

She went to her dressing table. She had already brushed her hair out so that it hung straight and smooth down her back – *don't cut my hair, Mama*, Abby had said when she was three, *I want it to look just like yours* – but she passed the brush through it again now and asked, "How was the service?" In her own ears, her voice sounded light and distant.

"Good," Mike said. "You would have liked Reverend Harris's homily." He said that without accusation, without any inflection at all. Robin heard the two light clinks as he dropped his cufflinks onto the top of his dresser. "Everybody'll be here soon," he added.

"Lunch is all ready," she said. She heard him move to his closet, hanging up his suit jacket. She didn't look at her own face in her dressing table mirror, any more than she looked at his. She only saw the long dark ribbon of hair that lifted up, extended, and softly fell again

as the brush bristles passed through it. “The pies are in the fridge for now,” she said. “I thought the cream might go bad in this heat.”

“Okay. We’ll get them out later.”

“Yes.”

Mike went to the bedroom door. He would step out into the hall, Robin thought. The two of them would each be alone again, wrapped in separate packages of silence, just like they had been ever since that last night in the hospital, a handful of days or a hundred years ago. Instead she heard him say, “Robbie.”

Her nickname, the one that said *I love you* but also *I need*. Robin made herself look at him. Standing there in the doorway, with his shirt sleeves rolled up as if he was going to weed the vegetable patch or help Abby fill her plastic wading pool, he looked so young. Like the boy Robin had known seven years ago, who pulled a tiny velvet box out of his pocket, opened it up to reveal the hidden star inside, and held it out to her, with the words he was too scared to ask aloud written on his face.

He said now, “It’s going to be all right. She’s with God.”

Except that his voice went up on the last words and made them a question. Robin knew he needed her to say yes. She, who always knew what was right, who had a direct line to the Divine’s will and love –she had always thought so too, God knew she had – only she could make sense out of this pain.

Measles are natural. A simple childhood virus. God will see her through.

Robin couldn’t answer. She didn’t nod or shake her head or say a word. Instead she turned back to the mirror and ran the brush through her hair again, the soft dark sheaf just like Abby’s. After a while, she heard Mike walk away.

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Everyone came for the lunch. Robin stood in front of the swingset, under the too-bright sun, and watched her congregation empty the food trays. She was at the center of a constantly shifting circle of faces, of sympathetic eyes and chewing mouths, of perfume and hairspray smells and somber suits and dresses. Words circled around her like the

steady drone of bees. *Your baby is at peace. Jesus will take care of her. You'll see her again on the other side.*

They sounded so certain. Of course they did. Robin had taught her flock to believe those things.

Robin didn't feel the heat seeping into her black skirt and blouse. No sweat pricked at her cheeks or trickled down her back, and she didn't seem to feel the arms wrapping around her either, one pair of them after the other. But she did feel it when, after how much time she didn't know, Mike put his hand on her shoulder.

"Robbie. Do you want me to get the dessert out?"

When Robin turned to answer him, her hand brushed the side bar of the swingset. Abby staring out the window on her birthday morning, amazed at the magic of the swings suddenly appearing in the yard. (Mike had worked that magic the night before, wrangling the clanking pieces of the set as quietly as he could, with Robin standing by holding a flashlight.) Standing here now, Robin remembered her little girl sprinting outside to run her hands over the gleaming new metal, her eyes huge with delight.

Now Robin looked up at her husband. He had always been taller than her, but now he towered over her, his face far away. For the first time, she didn't have the holy fire inside her to lift her up. She knew he saw how small she was.

She said, "It's all right. I'll get the pies."

The circle parted to let her through. Alone in the house, with the back door shut against the hum of the crowd outside, she opened the fridge.

Abby's favorite. Robin carefully maneuvered the cold Pyrex plates out of the fridge, one at a time. When Abby ate strawberry pie, she used to scoop the Cool Whip off her slice one spoonful at a time, savoring each taste of it before she started in on the sweet juicy berries. Robin and Mike teased her about eating her dessert one part at a time, leaving the crust for last. *You're supposed to eat them all together, ladybug. That's how they work.* Abby had only grinned back. *I can taste it better this way.*

Robin would have to take the plates outside one at a time. They were too heavy to carry both at once. First she went and propped the back door open so she would have both hands free.

She hadn't made strawberry pie as often as she might have. Abby had always wanted it, but you could only get good strawberries for a few weeks every year, and anyway the pies were messy and Robin had never liked them much. She could have done things differently.

Measles are natural. A simple childhood virus.

Robin had never gotten measles herself. She'd gotten a shot instead, like all the kids she grew up with.

She lifted the first plate carefully, balancing the base on one hand and holding the edge with the other. Her fingertips dipped into the cool whipped cream.

God will see her through. That last night in the hospital, after Abby stopped asking when she would be able to leave. After her grip on Robin's hand relaxed and her eyes stayed closed. *God will see her through.* The fire in the little girl's body had been much too real, but the one in Robin's soul had gone out.

Robin carried the plate from the kitchen through the den. When she stepped out into the yard, the sunlight pushed back against her like a solid wall.

Jesus will take care of her. You'll see her on the other side.

There was the old willow tree, and there was the picnic table and the crowd of people around it. There was the swingset with its gleaming bars. All of them somehow far away, on the other side of the wall of light that Robin couldn't pass through.

You'll see her.

Holding the cold heavy plate in her hands, Robin felt the summer heat seeping into her dark clothes. She felt sweat beading under the curtain of her hair.

*You'll see her...*but Robin saw her now. The child on the swing, holding the chains tight in her small hands. Her toes pointed to the sky. Her hair flying behind her and her face lit up with laughter.

Look, Mama! I can fly!

On the other side of the wall of sunlight, Robin saw Mike too. He was looking straight at her, and he looked worried, Robin saw, but she didn't know why, because she was only

standing here. But now the heat was filling her up, rising out of the ground or raining down from the sky, or both at once. And the plate in her hands felt much too heavy, and the wall, the one that stood between her and the husband she loved and the daughter she had lost, was too high and hard.

Look, Mama!

Robin gripped the plate in both hands, her fingers tight around the edges, digging into the cream and juice.

If I can do this one thing. It wasn't a prayer. She didn't say the words out loud or even think them clearly, but they were there, cool and solid in her mind. *God, if you can hear me, let me do this one thing.*

She should have made the pies more often. She should have done things differently. Now her body turned on its own, her hands moving through the air, her shoulders pulling back against the weight of the plate. And then the plate left her hands and skimmed high and far, over the wall she couldn't get through, and red juice and white cream trailed behind it like a banner, and her hands were empty, and her body was as light as a breeze.

I can fly!

Robin felt herself collapse forward, felt her knees hit the hard warm earth. From somewhere else, she heard voices shouting. People were running toward her, Mike in front, his arms reaching out to her.

Robin's eyes burned. Tears mixed with the sweat that stung her cheeks, but maybe, maybe it was going to be all right. Maybe she had made her offering fly high enough.

All the way to heaven, on the other side.

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