



I HAD A GREAT TRIP DESPITE A BRUTAL FEELING OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: A FICTIONAL RESPONSE

Then you moved in. You moved everything to the East wall. It was pleasant. It moved you. Yet you grew bored. The air left your room. Hours moved slow as ooze. So you moved everything to the West wall, near your cot. It was better. You moved around, danced even. You nearly moved yourself to tears.

In these first days, you sleep too much. What else is there? You find your crackers provided to be too salty, but otherwise enjoyable. Still, you'd thought your room would be bigger.

You soon consider drawing on your walls. You wonder if this is expected of you. You decide against it. You never paid your damage deposit. If there was only a phone, you could call your friends, organize a house-wrecker, call your broker, your parents, get the okay.

You discover paint in your cupboards. Cans of it. Are you an artist? A housepainter? Or a clown? You wonder who in the world could answer that question. But this isn't really what you had in mind. For days you wonder when it will start. Then you realize with a cold shock that it won't. Not ever. That this is all there is.

Now you've painted your room entirely red, using your hand as a brush.

When you realize that you might be a walking talking art show your heart sinks like an anchor. What could you do that is worthy of consideration? Whatever it is, it had better be something. Perhaps you will make something useful out of your trash? Maybe they'll discover some greasy impressionism in your spent pizza boxes? Or a sappy fresco of urine on the drywall?

You launder your socks in the sink provided, not because they smell, but for the warmth in your hands. You drink glass after glass of tap water, and let each slide down your throat like a chlorine eel.

You remember only the worst parts of your life. When you were a boy, you thought all the other boys were as lost as you were. When you were a girl, you wandered the halls of girlhood with your fists clenched and your heart frozen like a Cornish game hen. Later, as a man, you fought in no wars, but you were a general, of sorts, with medals like full shelves of candy pinned to your lapels. As a woman, you were pregnant at eighteen, and will probably be again, the next time for real.

But now that you've painted your room green there is something slipping from you.

You're encased in drywall, entombed in it. You recall that some people call it sheetrock, which sounds more like a genre of music than a building material. You write sheetrock songs in your canned soup with your spoon.

You've become a worm here. You eat earth and spit yourself out. The next morning you wake up with the wrong brain in your head. You plan elaborate vacations to the bathroom. You return feeling better, rested, depleted. You turn on your hotplate, hold your hand to it until you screech and leap away, laughing. Then you sit in your wooden chair until your thighs ache.

Next your room turns magenta. You might have done it.

After more blackout sleeps you realize that you were wrong, you are not a worm, you're here because you are a walking treasure. You are in a drywall treasure chest made by God. But you are also garbage. You stink and you should be ignored, like an eclipse. And this too is a wonderful thing.

It occurs to you that you've never been in this room. Not even now, now that you are here. You realize that you're not trapped, you've only got unreasonable freedom-related expectations.

Michael Christie on Samuel Roy-Bois

You know your lightbulb is trying to kill you. You build a crystal castle out of your sugar cubes they provide for your tea. You pour a kettleful of boiling water over the top. Nobody sees it dissolve. Except you.

Some other things I've learned by watching you:

- 1) You enunciate words like a speech therapist when you are angry.
- 2) You have an incredible vertical leap.
- 3) You met your first lover via wrong number.
- 4) You don't believe in toothpaste. You've already flossed everything in the room, including the chair.
- 5) Ever since you found yourself, you've found yourself boring.

But look, now you've finally done it. You've painted your room silver, like that guy, what's-his-face.

It is night, you think, and you can hear them outside now, discount wine sloshing in their plastic cups. Herbed havarti in their teeth. They wear soft shoes and speak in low tones. They also want to drink your blood.

Even though you aren't worth knowing, you are worth imagining. Why would someone want to know you, anyway? What good would it do. You're as wrecked as anyone else. As they are. Just because you're you and you're here doesn't make you holy. You know that if they actually knew you, they wouldn't be here, wouldn't want to conjure you, and perhaps they know this too.

You barricade your door.

Your month is not enough. You crave more like medicine. If this room is a drug, you want to know where to buy it, how to set it on fire with a lighter.

Samuel Roy-Bois, *I Had A Great Trip Despite A Brutal Feeling Of Cognitive Dissonance*, 2011. Photo: Blaine Campbell

You enjoyed everything about your experience here.

Didn't you.

Didn't you.

Really, there never was any way you could stay. You knew this going in. No, it won't be easier after this. It will be the same mostly. Maybe worse. Now that you know too much about how little you knew.

You moved in. You moved around. You moved it on over. You moved on up. You moved mountains. You moved your hands. And you made a movie of it all, behind your eyes.

But now, you, and I, must move on.

Michael Christie is the author of *The Beggar's Garden*, a collection of linked stories that won the 2011 Vancouver Book Award, and was a finalist for the Rogers Writer's Trust Fiction Prize. He holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia, and his fiction has been twice nominated for the Journey Prize, Canada's top short story honour. Currently, he lives in Thunder Bay, where he teaches Creative Writing at Lakehead University, and is at work on a novel about a woman living with agoraphobia.