

The Lion Keeper

I know an art professor who can only make good drawings in bad faculty meetings. A new president came to the university, then all new staff. There are no more bad faculty meetings, so my professor friend can't make good drawings anymore.

A long time ago, the same professor wanted to marry me and have children. I knew even then I couldn't be a parent. I'd always be falling off like a button and angry at the pots. But, I still think about what life would have been like had I joined the professor.

These days, I keep a lion in the basement of my building. I hear her roar as I walk down the stairs in paint-smudged clothes. From my stoop, I can see the rooftops of Freedom Square and the sign for the pie shop. There's a flower mural next door to my apartment and an advertisement for a portrait studio next to that. In the ad for the portrait studio, half of a picture of a confident train conductor is torn off.

Neighbors tell me they're collecting bottles and gasoline for Molotov Cocktails. They talk about an ingredient to make the fire cling to armor and bodies, causing especially severe burns. Broken-down fruit crates are tied together and wait neatly at the edge of the sidewalks. They've been waiting for days for the belching truck that used to come late at night with big gloved hands and fruit crates from other neighborhoods.

Someone has tied a fleet of toy boats to shoelaces and flung them up along the power lines where they blow in the breeze. Before I get to the liquor store, a blue heart flops into the crosswalk in front of me. Where arteries used to connect the heart to a body, bright blue paint spurts out all over the street.

I run into my brother. He's wearing a yellow safety vest and helping direct traffic around a fire at the national university. He tells me to go down into the subway for shelter. I scowl and say I'm going to the liquor store. He tells me I smell. I tell him I smell like someone who could turn tanks around.

I spot a board in the street. For some reason, plumbing or electrical, it has two clean holes at the center that look the right size for arms. I pick up the board and push my arms through the holes, the wood against my chest. In this costume, I go home like a plane with a lousy propeller.

My apartment is cold. I turn on the news even though I know it's a bad news day. The lion is banging into the foundation downstairs. I lay my rifle on a chair, slide my canvases to cover the windows, plug in my phone, pour myself a glass of water, and push my bed to the far side of the bedroom. It must be all this noise that makes the lion roar.