

Spin Me

a story
by Michael Descy

Yeats was wrong. The center holds. It also grabs, gorges, swallows. Things do fall apart, but on the grand scale, they fall together. The Milky Way swirls like bathwater down a drain. There's a black hole in the center. We can't see it, of course; we can only infer from its appetite. Someday appetite will be all that's left: we'll all be a pinprick—again. Blame gravity; the weakest force always wins.

I never loved a dancer. Something about pirouettes and toe shoes makes me drowsy—kind of like root beer. I realized, though, watching her the first time, that to her, turns and leaps weren't art, they were laughter, defiance. She spun and twisted until she blurred.

Imagine space as a sheet of rubber. Stick in a pin, and twist. A little elastic whirlpool appears. Release the pin, and it snaps back. Space bends and it recoils, even the space within us—especially the space within us. Every atom spins in infinite pirouette but only I get dizzy. My lover's eyes soak in light and never gave it back. Before them, I melt and tumble down their bathtub drain. Like a spider, I always crawl my way back up the spout.

She asked me yesterday what holds two bodies together.

"Gravity," I said.

"What else?" she asked.

"Love," I said.

"What else?" she begged.

"Velcro."

My next-door neighbor swears she can see the sun getting bigger. "Swelling like a carbuncle today," the grimilkin croaks. "Throbbing like a toad on a frying pan ready to explode." I normally don't trust anyone with more cats than teeth, but sometimes I want to believe. I don't mean to sound cynical, but someday it's going to happen. The sun is going to have a mid-life crisis, flare red, and engulf this odd, little world, the odd little woman and all her cats, and me. And my dancer, too. Something tells me my dancer might survive.

She doesn't think we'll be around then, when the sun squirts like an overripe orange. That's billions of years away. But what are we, anyway? Cells? DNA? Atoms? Every seven years we exchange every atom in our bodies for another. So who are we? Patterns, arrangements, recycled matter. We drink the same water as the dinosaurs. Let's not kid ourselves, we *are* the dinosaurs, merely recycled, rearranged. We'll be here when the sun explodes. We'll all be here. We just might not be *us* anymore.

She doesn't like the thought of lizard-skin atoms somewhere in her birdlike bones. She doesn't even eat meat. I met her after she performed a Prokofiev masterpiece. She came over to my place for coffee. She doesn't drink coffee. Neither do I. In stocking feet she twirled on my hardwood floor, her clothes flying off in all directions. A spinning body alters the surrounding geometry of the universe. Einstein predicted that. He was right. A mystic whirlwind, she swallowed night and time, and even the thin walls of my apartment, and left us alone together with nothing but our naked skin and the rush of the universe between us.

Imagine space as skin. Smooth it with your hand and the body beneath loosens and writhes. The epidermis is dead but beautiful, while everything else is just the opposite. Funny how that is. The cosmos is a surface, perhaps even a relatively lifeless one. It can be pinched and folded, twisted and pulled. It usually snaps back. For all I know, the earth is some sort of staff infection on the backside of the Universal Being.

It still is beautiful. Slight, yes. Ephemeral, no. Something tells me my dancer will survive. Like a blade of grass, the wind bends her in every direction, but cannot knock her down. The weakest force always wins. Even when the sun turns to iron and whole world's on fire, the weakest force wins. How do I know this? *Love*, you assume. But love is like Velcro—it makes bodies stick together, but only while the eyes and fingers remain unsullied. Then, *Trust*, you assume. But the truth bends and twists like a flag in a hurricane, like the fabric of the universe on any given day. *Faith*, you conclude. Still wrong. There is nothing as strong as *disbelief* to solidify your convictions. I trust her, love her, have faith in her, but I have none in the universe that bore her. She will win. Somehow. The cosmos is too strong and clumsy to capture her.

Sometimes, late at night, I remind myself that I am, too.

Spin me.

That first night, Elis' eyes were like a child's. I knew he wanted me, but his eyes were round, much rounder than the rest. Open. Almost too wide open not to let him in. In the darkened hall, no one thinks the performers see beyond the bright lights, beyond the countless eyes scrutinizing our bodies. I don't need to see them; I know they're there. Like greedy tongues, they scour tight torsos and compact breasts, scouring them for defect, retracting only after none are found. Most never realize the defects lie inside. As Elis says, we are all fallen creatures. Some more than others. Others more than some.

I am a dancer, but not that kind of dancer. A ballerina. (God damn it!) Elis cherishes that. I don't know if he understands that most of those posh, patrician husbands stand the show merely for tits and ass alone, even when tits and ass don't amount to much. But he's different. He makes me breezy, a snow-globe fairy, my world a soap bubble, a hiccup around me. Each night I grant him the power to pick it up, shake it in his hands, and send the sparkles a-whir, the boundaries a-shimmer. He makes me want again. Sometimes that's enough.

Clumsy. I can't even touch her, really; at least not the part I love. We merely feel our electrons repel each other. Sensuality reduced to electrostatic repulsion—sick, isn't it? Sometimes I think I know too much. But I remind myself because I know that someday I'll have to train myself to forget. Holding her is like holding fire.

In my ear, she murmurs that she loves me. I am silent. She tugs on me.

"I was sleeping," I lie.

"You were dreaming."

"I was thinking."

"You live in your head."

"Don't worry, I'm only renting." I turn to her brown eyes and see my own reflection. Her irises twist, dilating, and I start circling down, like a spider down a spout. I made love to her like an 18 year old. Unfortunately, I am an 18 year old, so it was merely appropriate. She curled

her toes inside her pointed slippers and twisted the bedsheets with her fingers. I held her till she slept, counted sixty breaths, then slipped out into the early morning air.

With her, time disappears like water down a washtub. I am mostly made of time, I tell myself. Seriously, what more am I than a naked ball of potential? And what is time but a playground, the ultimate ping-pong table to bounce upon? But my dancer—*the* dancer—she is mine like the sun is mine, like my youth is mine, like my talent is mine. She takes time like the government takes money.

I saw my neighbor outside; she pretended to feed her cats; I pretended the sun wasn't a bit larger than yesterday. I brought her an orange and watched her peel it with her shaky fingers. Her fingers were long, nicotine stained, and covered with brown spots. It was like watching a clump of bananas struggling to liberate a Tylenol from a child-safe bottle. Eventually I handed her my pocket knife. She cut the orange in half and gave me a gummy smile. I half expected one of her last three teeth to fall out. An underfed calico scurried from her skirts.

"I used to dance," she said. "Like that randy little vixen you just had your way with."

Her way, I wanted to say, but my cheeks flared like a landing space shuttle. "You *heard* us?"

"Nah. I see it in your eyes. Pupils dilated, kid."

"I see," I said, stumped. The sun suddenly looked like it was parked at the end of the block. I pointed in awe.

She looked up and squinted, pinching her fingers in the front of her eyes, like calipers. She contemplated the sun in her fingers as one would a Canadian quarter. "Do you love her?"

"Like the sun and moon and stars—"

"Or just your idea of her?"

"—Combined." The old woman crept back into her house. A dozen cats scurried after her.

I walked home, wishing I could fold the road before me.

I dream in black and white. They say dogs do that, but who's to say? It doesn't make me a mongrel, even if my feet twitch when I dream. And it doesn't make me colorblind, either. I dream in black and white but my life is orange—the orange of staring at the sun with eyes shut tight.

My father was a musician. A viola fell into his hands when he was ten. The first night he played till his fingers bled. No, he wasn't trying to be the Elvis Presley or Bleeding Gums Montgomery of the classical world, he just loved his art more than his body. I can relate. I dance.

My feet are small and hard, carved like white, birch canoes. They are my livelihood, and my liability. I hate them almost as much as I love them. Once, they were beautiful, pink and pliant. I was six. But I've tortured them ever since. They are still pliant—more so than I—but are leather-tough and calloused. I think they are fireproof at this stage. Hot coals don't faze me; nor do hot hearts or heads.

I danced into Elis's life and I don't want to walk out of it.

She looked odd lying down beneath the sheets. Her body was slight and flawless, of course, but completely still. Legs like hers were meant to move. She was a firefly caught in my jar, and the holes I'd punched were still too small to sustain her. I smiled when her legs kicked and her eyelids flapped like dewy silver wings. As her eyes unlocked their secrets, I gave her a name: Moriah. That's a mountain in Israel. That's where Abraham brought Isaac. That's where the father of his race made a choice to continue or kill it. In the end, the choice wasn't his. Moriah. Damn fitting.

I bet she's had many names. Fitting a name to a creature that beautiful is like saddling a bumblebee. It reminds me of Venus, which rides the night under three titles: the Evening Star, Venus, the Morning Star. So what if one is a newspaper, one a goddess, and the last a deadly weapon? A trinity's a trinity. We are all misunderstood somehow.

At any rate, names don't mean much anymore. Mine's Elis. As far as I can tell, I'm named after the island my great-grandfather first set foot on from the old country. He was a magician in Europe and died a preacher man in New York City—that's all I remember. His is

the oldest portrait in my house. I know less about him than about my painted dove. But I'm his spitting image.

"Moriah." The three syllables rippled the air like a pebble thrown in water. Moriah, a breeze across the cheek, a splash of color. She stirred.

Every dancer wants to fly. It's a cliché, really, but I'm the seed of truth stuck between its teeth. I've always wanted to fly. To flee, Nathan corrected. He was my first love. First love... Can nothing else see into me, tear out my heart, clean it off like an oil-slicked bird, and give it back to me, fluttering and alive? After all, what is a dancer in a small, New England town? And how can she get off the ground when every toe-torturing spin threatens to drill her into it?

Nathan was an astronomer, almost like Elis. He tried to teach me the heavens, but at some point my mind would melt, the moon blink out, and he'd find something else to teach me. The night I met Elis, he pointed out the brightest candle in the near-dusk sky and told me it was Venus, not really a star at all. But as the others peeked out, I couldn't tell the difference. A star's a star. What's the difference between reflected light and the real thing, anyway, when the former is twice as bright?

Nathan. I dance for him now. No—I fuck for him. (I dance for me.) I love Elis. But I kiss him searchingly, my tongue pushing past his tongue as if another lie behind it. When I make love to him, he fills me up, but the emptiness inside me feels greater. At first that scared me, the initial rush followed by the little-death of insecurity, of being filled up with nothing instead of something. I love him, I do. It just helps to remind myself once in awhile.

Nathan didn't leave me, he sent me away. He wanted me to chase my dream. All I wanted to do was chase him. He had to push me onto the bus to New York. When it pulled out of the station, he ran after it for nearly two blocks. I was pressed to the rear window so hard I nearly burst through it. He never caught up with me since. I've been running too fast. My dream seems to be running faster.

I asked my mother if there's such a thing as love after love. She asked me if there was life after life. People all over the globe swear up and down it exists, but even the most clever can't prove it. She rested her case.

“What, Elis?” she asked me. “Who’s that?”

I stood there silent, guilty merely of thinking aloud. “Only you.” Moriah shifted and I curled up behind her. My index finger followed the outline of her back. Her legs were rock hard and her feet felt like sandpaper against my shins. I touched her face, twisted her hair in my fingers, and her hand found mine. I squeezed her fist as one would juice an orange. For some, love is about letting go and letting in. For me, love is holding on for dear life.

I’m not alone in that respect. I’ve heard that anglerfish—nasty-looking beasts that prowl the coldest, blackest, deepest seas—mate for life. Imagine a more sinister swan: the males sink their teeth into their mates and hold on till doomsday comes. The two become one, even share a common bloodstream. But I wonder what the price is for such intimacy. Is the male a soul mate, appendage, or parasite? And which one am I, holding onto my love almost tight enough for her not to slip away? I think of myself, hugging onto Moriah’s tiny frame for dear life. *Parasite*. It seems as preposterous as a tree wrapping itself around a vine.

“You’re restless,” she told me. “Your heart beats like a little bird’s.”

“Only to keep up with you.”

“Do I move so fast that your heart must chase me?”

At times like this I don’t know what will happen if I let go. So I hold on too tight.

Moriah tells me that my love subsists on urgency, a restless, ceaseless passion. It’s emergency, though, that fuels my emotional avarice. I love her like madness, because I know that madness will end, our time and place will pass. I am a whirlwind in a whisky bottle. I don’t just burn the candle at both ends, I snap it in half and light four flames.

Spin me. That’s what I’d say to my dad when I was three. Spin me, spin me, spin me dizzy, weightless, floating, falling, spin me more and more, faster, faster, my pivot a pinprick, my brown hair a blur. Spin me. I can never love a man like I loved my father. And I can’t love a feeling as much as spinning till I feel sick. They’re both something I could always count on, I could always trust. Give love and you will receive it. Spin and you will fall down. I lost my father to cancer when I was six. I became a dancer that same year.

Elis doesn't look for love. "Love finds you," he tells me. I agree. At least I want to. Nathan was and still is love to me, so pure and innocent, I can't go back, no matter how hard I try. I found him, and he left me. No, he pushed me away from him, toward my dream. But which dream? To dance is no mere dream, it's an obligation to myself. To love like I did the first time is the only dream I have left.

The romantics die for love. They are forever throwing themselves off cliffs, over waterfalls, or under eighteen-wheelers to prove that love is more important than life itself. I assure you, I am no Juliet. I don't buy that stuff at all. Love can't be more important than life because love is life. Breathing and sleeping and eating and fucking are all the same thing. And dancing is all four of them together, as far as I'm concerned.

But above all, dancing is spinning and spinning and never falling down. It's what love should be: clear-cut, rhythmic, full of back flips and rigorous enough to leave you sweaty. Life with Elis leaves me soaked, leaves me tasting salt on my upper lip, but his rhythm is syncopated, frantic like a one-winged bird caught in a hurricane. His spins make me dizzy. I twist in the opposite direction sometimes just to right myself again.

Nonetheless, I love Elis for what he is. I love Nathan for what he wanted. (Me.)

"You're hurting me," she gasped. Her knuckles were white. I shriveled up behind her and slid off the bed.

"I didn't mean to."

"You're trying too hard, you know."

"I know."

The weakest force always wins. That's the center of my profession, the outskirts of my practice, the contour of my patience. I pretend that, when the stars blink out, the Cosmos will keep unfurling like a carpet. Without us, without anything we know or see or care about, the universe tools on. But how can I believe that when every moment in life brings me closer to a Big Crunch of my own. Why won't the fabric of time snap back and smack me in the face?

"I love you."

"I know."

“Do you love me?”

I said nothing.

“Do you?”

“Tell me: why does love leave you more alone than loneliness?”

And so it went. Elis and his ideas. He told me that he lost himself in me. He doesn't have a clue. Then again, neither do I.

Is love merely wanting? Is love merely selfishness refined, neediness gussied up in Sunday dress? Is love merely a feeling or a consequence of feeling?

I wonder why I said to him, that first night, “Spin me. But don't let go.” Elis wound me till I dropped, then caught me and held me still while my heart still spun inside me like a gyroscope. But spinning me is letting me go.

I know that he hurt me that night. But he wasn't holding me too tight.

“I love you,” I breathed. “But not for you, and not for me anymore. Almost for its own sake.”

She didn't even arch a brow.

“Look: I don't know what exists outside of love, this love for it's own sake, love turned in on itself like an origami flower, like a collapsing galaxy. But it isn't me and it isn't you and I don't think we can survive it.”

“You feel *too much*? You wouldn't even say you love me.”

“Look, what I want for you and what I am for you ...”

Shift like sands. The door slammed before I could tell her, before she would tell me.

Jealousy is the death of love. Doubt is the death of love. Hell, *love* is the death of love.

This love, this formless fantasy, this chemical cocktail, is more real than a dancer, than an astrophysicist, than a couple kids with more potential than patience. But when consistency in life is measured by a body constantly sloughing skin and shifting atoms, by a universe screaming toward incompleteness, by a sun waiting to explode, and by all of matter spinning, spinning, spinning—why can't I trust it?

We have no time for love, to lose ourselves while finding each other. No time. Some of my dreams stand in front of others. I need time. I need myself. I think she understands that. I think I do, too.

Elis loves ideas. More than people, I'm afraid. At least more than me for now. That's what that cat-lady told me on my way out. I never met her before. I wonder if she tells that to everybody.

She stared at me as if my hair were on fire and not my heart. Then her hazy eyes found the sun. I begged the moon to cancel it, to punish her, to cool me off. I wanted Elis. Each step grew heavier and heavier, hotter and hotter, like I was wading into a boiling sea. For the first time, I felt the sun pull on me, the sightless stars behind it pull on me, and Elis in his bedroom pulling on his hair pull on me. What's even stranger is I felt my pull on them, of countless suns—countless loves, lusts, needs, wants—racing toward me. Would I run for cover or face them down?

I stopped momentarily and stared at the sun myself. The cat-lady looked over and smiled pinkly at me. I shivered despite the heat and trudged on.

Moriah's body still tugs on me, even though she's moving farther and farther away on each breath. Strange, but even after she's gone, the spin of her body, her atoms, her eyes drills a tunnel through my body, threatening to make my heart see light, breathe air, flutter away from me once uncaged.

In the end, no matter what it is—love, doubt, gravity—the weakest force always wins. This isn't over yet. She'll never come back to me, nor me to her, but I feel that someday we will fall together, collide by mutual attraction alone. It will only take time, the same time that makes me up, that I pull out of nothing and twist around my finger like cotton candy. Sticky, sweet time. Gravity will happen on its own, and fashion time to suit its needs.

That's what gravity does: tugs time. Imperceptibly. Pulls. Time.

Love is like a black hole. Its appetite holds everything together. And eventually, it leaves nothing left outside it.