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The Rice Artist

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KATHERINE VAZ

the rice artist

the explosion blew up Angelo's daughter. a crazy teacher had planted the bomb. no bodies existed for burial. Karen and the other little ones were atomized.

Angelo looked for her on the vibrissae inside nostrils. strong winds might carry her to plug a limpet's hole. was she that sparkle on the eyelashes of that woman in love? she landed like spice on the tops of coffees in the café, and when he thought of Karen in stomach linings—people shitting a girl who'd done them not a speck of harm, who'd sung to cats and who'd written, 'I want to be a spy when I grow up'—everything tasted of a spade. he shut his mouth.

using his magnifying glass and a stiff thread dipped in ink, he fit the Our Father onto a grain of rice. another grain was the Hail Mary; another, the Glory Be. when he ran out of prayers, he marked a sack of rice with *Paradise Lost*.

his wife, Eliza, flew sideways out of the house. she sent him a postcard from a bar in Texas. a blank card from St. Louis. he'd watched her sail off as if she were a bride in a painting by Chagall, though instead of her hair being wild from nights of love it was tangled as if she'd been rolling alone in a forest.

trucks rumbled past his house, carrying spare, Swedish furniture, disturbing him.

he moved to the shore, but crickets sawed their legs.

roses screamed with the sex life of bees.

he moved inland, and a yogi taught him to control his nerves and the flow of his blood. he stopped feeling his skin. his fingers, once the size of piano keys, shrank into a paper swathing skeleton. his testicles dried until the veins appeared dabbed on like the lines on the lips of orchids.

he carved specks of sawdust into dogs, cats, and owls that scanned the night. he used a high-power magnifier to create witches out of sugar grains, cutting only in the second and a half between his heartbeats. a comb's teeth offered crevices to trap a platoon of witches. each carving took three months. women in cocktail dresses he set in the eyes of needles. an espionage agent rested on a match's head. he

could work between his heartbeats for thirty hours without stopping, and often the yogi needed to pry Angelo's fingers apart, because his nerves, laboring so closely, stuck together.

his crowning work was to carve angels out of sawdust. one angel he set on the head of a pin, and two angels danced on her head, and three on each of their heads, until he had not only a spray of angels but, in his miniature way, the answer to an old riddle of the universe: an infinity of angels can dance . . . but infinity has gotten away with murder in that it refuses to be reducible and countable, so dozens of angels made of dust are as valiant as any infinity—more, since they offer their tender, minute bodies for a counting that so sadly falls short. the angels took three years to finish.

New York: I've met someone new, read Eliza's postcard.

at a gallery displaying his angels, rice, agents, witches, and animals, he did not hear the cries of amazement as the crowds surged from one glass globe to the next; everyone was forced to stop and bend down to be shocked by the magnifications. at the opening, he spied a woman with the haunches of a panther, and the gold off the overhead lights fit coins over her eyes. a spume of champagne fizzed on her lip.

Angelo was alert to distant noises when he took her behind the gallery, but no one was anywhere to be seen, and, absent from his own show, he kissed the woman madly and when she said, *enter me & stay there*, he did, his heartbeats going mad, all training lost, and when he exploded he did not mind having gone to so much care, all for an uncontrollable flinging of his limbs, a moan he failed to swallow, a sensation of other skin ripping through him so it might well kill him, all so he might go back as if forever to the beginning of his time.