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**Review: *Folktales for the Diseased
Individual: Personal Essays by Palaces***

by Jesse Smith

Pascale Potvin, 2021 | <http://www.pascalepotvin.com/order-folktales.html> | \$15.99 USD print, \$7.99 digital

CW: grief, trauma, masochism/self-harm, alcohol and unhealthy consumption, coercion/rape, intrusive thoughts

“I was never alone, without the ghost of my shame.”

Are there things you'd like to forget? Did you humiliate yourself chasing a middle school crush, or play sadistically with insects, maybe even classmates? Did your parents catch you enjoying yourself through something strange? In this innovative and soul-rend(er)ing chapbook, Palaces faces us up to one main truth: often, the moments of our childhood tell us, or have made us, who we are.

Folktales for the Diseased Individual is an opening-up of an age-old diary for strangers to bear the wounds that haven't healed. With the efficiency of a children's moral tale, Palaces tackles trauma in its multitudinous subsets: she broaches the inextricable link between external inflictions - like sexual coercion - and internal afflictions. But this is more than a poetic spinning of trauma into language. Told from a looking-back first-person narration, Palaces sits us in her eyes as she flicks through the pages of young her - the schoolgirl, the girlfriend, the improv actor - unable to help sinking back into those memories, occasionally commenting or concluding from this stepped-up place - a narration style as effectively utilised as Delphine de Vigan, LP Hartley, and Ocean Vuong. She shows us a mind in healing - and demonstrates that process. *Folktales* is an expert representation of trauma-induced dissociation, harsh self-criticism, intrusive thoughts, bodily entrapment. It's a stark reminder - and visceral invocation - that trauma haunts.

“To the things I still won't admit”.

This evocative dedication haunts us as we read through this collection of confessions. So swiftly, Palaces descends a fog onto our reading: that there is more than we're about to uncover. Each of seven wounds she presents is opened by an illustration of a reminiscent folktale, film, document. The opening section, “They Are Very, Very Sick People”, shows us a traditional illustration of Hansel and Gretel. The speaker - Pascale - talks about school. “Drinking Me” is prefaced by Alice at the Mad Hatter's tea party, and talks about a boy, an unhealthy relationship, and alcohol. These fairytales physically and mentally hover in the penumbra of your vision as you read, making FOLKTALES “not just a chapbook [but also] a new universe,” according to Palaces on Twitter. Palaces perfectly embodies the ‘disembodied voice’ expected of the written word and makes precise work of the creative non-fiction genre: this chapbook's use of memoirist language - the seemingly critical, de-emotioned mode - weaves a jarringly flat voice for the weighty things it holds. Her voice brushes over an open wound and doesn't wince - but the sting sinks into us. “Mother gave my hands a ‘soothing bath treatment’, not realizing it was based in salt.” and there. The paragraph ends. Full-stops never felt so cold, so heavy. This is deceptively simple prose reminiscent of Ocean Vuong's bitty prose passages in the grief-stewing portion of his novel - there's so much weight in so little text, the surface's voice unable to reckon fully with the trauma. It hands you moments of loss and suffering with an unempathetic voice - the speaker choosing numbness - only for the grief and trauma to ghost inside you as you walk through the rest of its world. There's no space for the body in this text, but we as readers are left with that grating on our hands - our tools for reading, holding this

text - as she moves on, moving away in time and space, further away from this sensation. It's rare for a writer to reach the reader so viscerally and so efficiently.

These works will sit like a lump in your throat with no sense of when they will leave you, even when you walk away. I feel an echo of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* for the way the injustice sits in my body, wanting to be righted. When someone pushes for sex, she "would force [her]self to go along". The agency she gives herself here is far from the shoulder-shrug *lie-back-and-think-of-england* given that assumes women feel passive instead of actively uncomfortable when coerced. This activeness, amidst this flat narration, is jarring - a 'force' that wants but cannot exert itself. A discomfort that cannot make itself known. It's "Cult Classic" - the central piece - that orients us to dissociation not always being a viable coping mechanism. "Metaphors About Being Traumatized by an Acting Career", or "Cult Classic", is a claustrophobic cell of whiplash. Metaphors for trauma are often focused on a kind of metaphysical escape - as Palaces does earlier: "I'll drink every day, trying to turn into something other than myself." But this part feels like the constant turns of someone stuck in a laughing circle, turning to each laughing face already focused on them. We're whiplashed between two surely incomparable things but Palaces is simply helping us realise how similar they are: improv as cultish, audience as God. The use of *The Wicker Man* (2006) through its humourous reception of a torturous sacrificial display is astounding. (It makes you wonder whether we, reader, are engaged in that very show.)

In "Home From School, Searching for the Man Who Will Kill Me", we hear the whispers that taunt a paranoid mind. The bracketed 'there not-there' looks to the corner of their eye, the italics intrusive thoughts, the weighty is-it-really-silent white space between single sentences. There are apparitions, too, in each title: who is "They", who "Drinks", where is that "Man"? That man, and that thought - *I can't stop thinking about going downstairs and cutting my hand open with one of the big kitchen knives???????* - lingers like a smog. Even when Palaces mentions something just once, it lingers, and we have no choice but to keep holding on. We actively make it haunt us.

It's the formal ingenuity of "Nasty VVitch Symptoms List" where Palaces shows her hand. There are two poems here, two threads jarring against each other like Narcissus in the water. We see the way a struggling and overly self-critical mind lurks between the person seen on the outside, seen as "unempathetic" and uncaring, weaving innermost thoughts with their real-life events. We finally see the pounding self that lies behind the seemingly distant speaker, the traumatised girl choosing numbness to stop hurting. As you try to read only the lines relevant to your Thread, lines of the other keep slipping it. They dance just off-centre and emotionally infiltrate your reading. Between "I was worried / about the audition" hovers "the day after the news", giving reason for her worry. "I confessed" is laced with the accusation "it was my fault". "Fault" becomes the emotional backdrop for her confessions as it through the line "ghost of my shame".

“Ghost,” we now know, doesn’t just signify something that is barely there, or something that is but shouldn’t be. There’s a meaning that haunts the concept. Palaces reminds us with this work that ghosts’ haunting is a kind of echo, a never-being-able-to-forget. In *Folktales*, ‘ghosting’ means ‘mirroring’. We *have* to confront ourselves, our trauma, in order to get past it.

Palaces haunts her body. And between the struggle of the mind to be in the body - “he’d told me it was my wild hair that held me back from his affection”, “he had turned me into a competing tale”, “I had the potential to be just an arrangement, another styrofoam apple on the table” - “Spinning Under Flowers” pulls together snippets of sapphic signifiers into a physically sensual but emotionally delicate bouquet of a sexual awakening. It contrasts the trauma - the forcing, the wicker man. It isn’t until now that she really gets in touch with her body. “Oh damn this stuff made my pussy wet” is out against the just-before “I would always keep going, keep pleasuring, keep burning up under their watch.” The voice *itself* is finally in touch with its body. She exclaims. She says “my.”

The general idea of the written word being ‘disembodied’, the question of whether the author is the speaker of their poems, the over-scrutinising of real minorities in the name of #OwnVoices, makes this perceived other-self all too topical for Palaces, who was recently assumed to be “too abled” to have written the book she had submitted to a particular literary agent. She was subsequently interrogated for her painful and personal truth (“query materials”), only to be rejected after all that vulnerability had been laid bare.

There’s often a fear for writers, particularly from underrepresented situations and identities, that writing about themselves will lead to criticism that they’re ‘self-obsessed’. This is definitely Palaces’ chapbook - *her* trauma, *her* reckoning-with. We look at her reflection with her eyes. But this is not self-obsession. Rather, Palaces intricately weaves a demonstration of the effect and reckoning-with of trauma. Her dissociation is vivid. For some, this acts as a demo to take into their own lives. Palaces has mapped that assumption of self-obsession in someone’s writing onto its assumption in someone ‘getting better’ - “*This email is extremely manipulative and unfair*” - which, being exactly what she combats in this book, demonstrates the former.

This is a vital, revealing and relieving read for the ‘diseased individual’ wishing to confront and heal their trauma. It’s the rip of the bandage: for your personal development, the soothing comes later.

Folktales is available for pre-order for Sep 2021 here: <http://www.pascalepotvin.com/order-folktales.html>

Palaces can be found on Twitter [@pascalepalaces](https://twitter.com/pascalepalaces).

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jesse smith is a queer poet and budding reviewer in the uk, where there are studying for their ma in poetry with the university of east anglia. they specialise in gender and sexuality, mental health and trauma, and their interplays with the body and language. this is their first review, with poems published by Stone of Madness and Delicate Friend and longlisted by the Young Poets Network.

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stoneofmadne
sspress@gmail
l.com