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## TEXT prose

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#### Story Monster

A story monster is huddled inside my chest. She dangles in the centre of my sternum, her tentacles woven between my ribs so that she can spin and swing like a spider dropping from a branch. She wraps her purple hydrostats around my heart in a firm hug and squeezes in time to my pulse: clench, release, clench, release. The meaning behind her action is obvious, *you're onto something*. I reach for the pen, open a notebook, find the familiar thread.

Story Monster is a hungry beast. She is a cannibal, but the type of cannibal that gives as well as takes. She has integrity, ethics, good karma, and is careful with her resources; experience has taught her the cost of inattention. *You cannot run a well dry*, she told me, *and then expect to drink*.

Story Monster snuck inside me one night when I was younger and participating in a magic trick. I was curled beneath the bright flora print of my doona, but I was also walking through another world made real by words on a page. In this place, I was disguised as another, a person who could do things I could never do, who knew things I had previously not known, and who lived somewhere I could never visit. Story Monster got inside because I was distracted living someone else's life. Story Monster is a skilled hunter: she knows when to strike.

Story Monster is food-driven. She is as hungry for a good tale as a stray dog is for bone, but she is not wholly self-interested.

Story Monster is a generous cook. She loves to feed me and be fed.

Story Monster stands before a six-burner stove; she likes to show off the delicacy and precision of her many arms and legs as she tends to the bubbling pots. She uses all the burners, but only one is on high heat. This pot demands her attention with its bubbling aroma, full of potential, but her keen skills mean the others are not forgotten. Whenever there is a moment to spare, she tosses bones, scraps, or spices into the simmering pots, adjusts the temperature, stirs up the dregs. She seasons the pots on the backburner with extra salt, preserving them until it is their turn. When the stew is finally ready, the flavour all infused, Story Monster feeds me and the food is good. Ideas bloom in my mind, images previously unknown, snippets of conversation between strangers. My fingers itch for inky pens and thirsty paper.

But Story Monster lacks patience and half way through my dinner she turns on me and her fattest tentacle curls into a fist, demanding payment.

*Stories must be paid with stories.*

I am not a crook, on the take, or ungrateful. I am familiar with the terms of our agreement. From the knapsack by my feet I produce three fresh novels: they are not new releases, only new to her. Story Monster's eyes widen at my offering. Like a hawk she snaps the books up in her beak, rips them apart, pulls out the meat, and pushes aside the gristle.

Bloated and satisfied, she slumps in her chair. A candle cracks between us. *Finish your meal*, she says, lazily.

Sometimes Story Monster leaves me.

She releases her grip on my heart, rolls away, and slumbers; she abandons her story stove and me. I watch on as the pots of fine ingredients are left to spoil, grow cold, and rot. I hate when Story Monster sleeps. The world becomes dull, predictable, and blasé in her absence. Life is richer, fuller in her company and I long for the night when we will break bread together again.

Sometimes I cannot wait for her to wake.

In my impatience, I become cunning and tempt her with all her favourite treats, ‘last meal’ stories, books she’s wolfed down in a single sitting and then dragged her papery tongue over the covers to clean up the crumbs. Books prepared in a style she adores, and tales that offer a fresh take on an old familiar recipe rejuvenated with an unexpected element or subverted trope. Eventually, as always, Story Monster stirs. She is intrigued by the bounty I’ve presented.

I’ve taken great care in decorating the table with candles, flowers, fresh linen and un-intrusive music. Story Monster taught me that a pleasing environment is conducive to good work and that ambience can heighten the culinary experience.

Story Monsters stirs, drawn from her rest by the smell of aged paper and conflict. She unfurls her tentacles, slops onto the floor, and slithers toward my offering. At first, she is cautious, nibbling at the edges of the stories; uncertain if this is the dish her heart truly desires. Her stomach grumbles, awakens. With growing confidence, she gathers the books up and holds them high overhead so their contents can drip into her open maw. In moments, the table is empty. The banquet complete.

I raise my glass to the monster, ‘Stories must be paid with stories’.

Her returning grin is loose and drunken; several teeth are missing. I shiver. With great exaggeration, Story Monster slides from her chair and slithers towards the stove. She reaches up with one purple tentacle and turns on the gas. My stomach rumbles at the scent of her abandoned pots growing warm with life. Promise. Potential.

*Tara East is a doctoral candidate and sessional academic at University of Southern Queensland with degrees in Journalism, Editing and Publishing and Creative Writing. Her articles on writing, literature, gender and culture have appeared in Writing from Below, Queensland Writers Centre, The Huffington Post and The Artifice and her fiction has appeared in TEXT and October Hill Magazine among others.*