

Inside the Issue: An Interview with Ryan MacDonald



Ryan MacDonald's American Short(er) Fiction Prize-winning story explores the relationship between a father and his four-year-old daughter with refreshing honesty. The economy and disarming humor of the piece soften the punch of what is actually an unsentimental look at the natural limitations of our love. You can read the story, "The Observable Characteristics of Organisms," [here](#).

AR: Tell us a little bit about this story-- how did the idea come to you? Where did it start?

RM: I grew up in the zoo. Well, my mom and stepdad both worked at the Kansas City zoo so I spent a long part of my childhood there, running around and getting into trouble. Many of my stories are zoo based. That's a big part. Another part came from the time I witnessed the birth of my friend's daughter. The experience was incredible. I cried like an idiot. It did leave me feeling a kind of lack though. I'll always be envious of a woman's ability to do that. And then another part, the short form, came from grad school. It was one of the first in a long line of 1 page stories which have now become a book (in the editing process they have been opened up and paragraphed out). I was making these big wax landscape dioramas as well as short narrative videos at the time, so these mediums were all informing each other in the sense of diorama. I really got obsessed with the challenge of making these big, swelling worlds happen in a single page.

AR: We were excited to learn that FC2 is publishing your new collection, *The Observable Characteristics of Organisms*, titled after this prize-winning story. Through the grapevine, we heard that each story focuses on a different animal/organism. Can this be true?! Can you tell us a bit about the new collection?

RM: I'm honored there's a grapevine! But no. No that's all wrong. Most of the organisms in the stories are actually human, though there is a large variety of animals. I love a list...here's a list: There's our penguin, polar bear and rhino. There are flamingos, a macaw, rabbits, horses, javelinas, a couple of red tailed hawks, possums, a poodle, a few elephants, parakeets, skunks, deer, wild dogs, a woodpecker, a daddy long-legs, cats, an ass, a pony, worms, oxen, termites, field mice, cattle, finches, a pack mule, mosquitoes, a few puppies, a beta fish, a goat, buzzards, a carp, crabs, a coyote, brown bears, a chicken, a crawdad, raccoons, a part of a zebra and a part of a gibbon, and snakes.

There are several mustaches, an angry goldfish named Norman Mailer, a story that must be read aloud with a lisp, and the reader gets to give Richard Gere the finger.

AR: The father in this story says that his daughter sings a song about the "observable characteristics of organisms with favorable phenotypes." First, we'd love to know if this song really exists, and what it is, and if it's downloadable on iTunes. And then more importantly, since the line is a nod to the story's title and the collection as a whole, can you talk to us about how observation, characteristics and the idea of observable characteristics, work thematically in your writing.

RM: The song does not exist. Though it should, and I think Bill Callahan should write it, or Kris Kristofferson. Or Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott.

I think these stories are at the heart, a conglomeration of observed characteristics, of myself, of others, of no one at all. I think writing is, to be basic, just the carefully (or clumsily) observed characteristics of organisms. I've always been the quiet type in a group. When I go home my mom warns her friends to watch what they say and do because "my son the writer will figure out a way to use it." This is not exactly true, but I am drawn to the tiny and/or extreme eccentricities of human behavior.

AR: What are you working on now?

RM: Something with teeth and hair that will one day become a novel. Or it won't. But no, no, it will.