



Pangyrus

Six

Introducing Zest!
and new Science writing

Poetry by

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Fiction by **Vincent Yu**

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A Butterfly Story

by Mike Sinert

The room is the color of Andes chocolate mints, the kind I once ate by the handful from a crystal bowl on my grandmother's coffee table, and a mess of folding chairs holds a dozen heavy women chatting, a few silent guys, average sized, and a handful of thin girls, too thin, dressed in skin the same faded green as the walls. Meeting in Progress, reads a sign on the door. It's handwritten, yet anonymous.

I've got a hundred pounds on everyone here. One-twenty-five. I feel fat and out-of-place, more ogre than man, less macho than – hungry.

There's a Biker Dude twirling a pack of Marlboros. Or Winstons. I can't tell. The red logo's blurred.

I want one. I don't smoke. Never have.

A girl with scraggly black hair stands, quieting the room, and my eyes go straight to her chest. Not to the obvious, but to the tattoo centered between the exposed straps of her bra. A butterfly, large and swirly and blue. I stare. For too long. Until the chant starts. I've heard it before. Dozens of times. On television. In movies. It's

bullshit. Nonsense for the alcoholics.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Oh god, grant me some fucking fried chicken.

And the Butterfly Tattoo Girl says, My name is Marni and I am a compulsive eater, and everyone says, Hi Marni. Everyone but me.

I'm fixed on her ink. I'm not a tattoo guy. Never was. But this one has me. The detail, the style, the intricacy. The sharp contrast with her rotted teeth. She's a puker. Stomach acids eat the enamel.

Not me, thank heavens.

And she says, I am sitting with these open containers of take-out around my kitchen table. It's barbecue. I'm saying to myself I'm only going to have a few bites. Just a little. And then I have a bite, and another. And I'm saying no but soon I'm eating right from the containers, with my hands and my fingers, and then I'm filthy and sticky and soon it's all gone and I run to the toilet and make myself vomit and then I want more and I hate myself. Again.

She's crying, and something hits me and suddenly I want to cry. I don't, but one day not long from now,

when my belly is stuffed,

when I'm fighting the urge to vomit and clinging with despair to the fullness pressing from the inside out,

when a therapist asks why I binge and I won't open my mouth for fear of losing it all,

I will cry.

It's like when I masturbate, the Butterfly Tattoo Girl says. Sometimes it's too much and I want to stop but I can't. So I keep going. Over and over and over. I keep eating and purging and eating and I can't stop. It's my escape. It's how I don't feel.

Whack job.

But she's not. I know what she means. Not about the purging

PANGYRUS

but the desire, the hideous craving I feel every moment of every day,

and will for another decade-and-a-half of secret, compulsive eating,

for another eighty, ninety, hundred pounds.

We're more alike than I can admit, eating to escape, to hide, struggling with our crazy, searching for structure, any kind of structure, to keep us from the depths of our addiction.

One day I'll know.

Right now she has more guts than me, this blighted, filthy person, standing before a roomful of strangers, exposed to the world, sharing her worst. All I can do is gawk at her chest. At the butterfly. And she asks, Will that next binge make you happy? Will it fill that void? Food's not love. Learn to love yourself. That is the path.

My path is burgers,

pizzas,

Chinese.

I want a hit, I need it bad, and even her retched-up barbecue sounds lovely. So who's the whack job?

Control your compulsive eating or it controls you, she says. Control it or they control you—

the salt and sugar-suppressed feelings you can't bear to feel,

the chemical engineers, with their umami-inspired, hyper-processed, neuron-warping, highly addictive delights, feeding

the corporate-controlled supply lines — pre-packaged, convenience stored, super-sized, Kentucky Fried, Golden-Arched, plumping

Wall Street profits and shareholder values, at the expense of waistlines and self-esteem.

Control it all or it all controls you, the Butterfly Tattoo Girl insists. Work the plan. Trust the higher power. It's one day, one meal at a time.

Higher power. That's it. That's what she's got, despite her teeth, her hair.

It's that tattoo.

And for a fleeting moment, I imagine her butterfly is mine, drawn beneath the dark hair of my own chest, blackened into the skin above my own beating heart. My redeemer. My salvation. My satiation.

But it is not to be. I am not a tattoo guy. Never was.

I stand and turn for the door, acknowledging what I already know. What I've known all along.

The Biker Dude whispers, Stay, Man. We'll talk after. He holds out a smoke. A Winston. I push past and run, a hard move for a man carrying so much, my mind already steps ahead.

Reality: I've been planning the binge since the girl with the tattoo first uttered the word.

Barbecue.

I have no control. No plan. No higher power.

No butterfly.