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Winning Drue Heinz collection is a remarkable blend of prose and poetry

PITTSBURGH—Tina May Hall has been named the 2010 winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, one of the nation's most prestigious awards for a book of short stories. Hall's manuscript, *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*, was selected from a field of nearly 350 entries by esteemed author and film critic Renata Adler. The book will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press this fall.

"This is a remarkable collection," Adler stated. "I am struck in particular by the range of imagination and the prose. The power, insistence, occasional humor, and frequent beauty of the author's voice carry the reader as surely as conventional fiction used to."

The 37-year-old Hall, born and raised in Arizona, resides in Clinton, New York, where she teaches English at Hamilton College.

The Physics of Imaginary Objects is a "miscellany of sorts, or a cabinet of curiosities," Hall explained. "The stories test how language determines being, how the body and words interact, how story can be tactical rather than strategic, and how the familiar might be made strange."

Hall's stories often take on the qualities of a poem, working with rhythm and negative space while trying to reconfigure narrative in terms of language and image. "What ties them all together, I hope, is the sense that just around the next indent, anything can happen," she commented.

Recalling her reaction to winning the DHLP, Hall said, "I was astounded and thrilled— and absolutely sure for about two weeks that someone would be calling me back to tell me they had made a terrible clerical error! I am truly honored to be included in such a wonderful list of writers and feel absolutely privileged to be part of the tradition of the Drue Heinz."

According to Hall, the Press's Ed Ochester called with the news on a Sunday night and asked if she had champagne on hand, which she did not. "I was, however, in the process of giving my two-year-old son a bath, so my husband and son and I danced around a bit and laughed and had a bubbly time of it anyway."

Hall received her undergraduate degree in creative writing from the University of Arizona, her MFA from Bowling Green State University and her PhD from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize. Her novella, *All the Day's Sad Stories*, was published as a chapbook by Caketrain Press in 2009.

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Tina May Hall

Photo by Hoa Ngo



The Physics of Imaginary Objects

TINA MAY HALL

WINNER OF THE DRUE HEINZ LITERATURE PRIZE

The Woman Who Fell in Love with a Meteorologist and Stopped the Rain

She watches him every night at 10:12. When he says dewpoint, she breaks into a sweat, and it is as if her body has stolen the moisture of his mouth as he pronounces those two syllables. He is not particularly handsome, but as he moves before a map of the United States, pointing out cold fronts and low-pressure systems, she thinks he looks like an angel in a button-down shirt wielding a battered steel pointer instead of a sword.

He is an old-fashioned man, the kind of man who would tighten the fan belt of her car when it needed it and take out the trash and reach for the high things in the pantry. Not only the pointer gives him away, but also the way he fumbles with the remote that changes the views of cloud cover and frontal boundaries and the way he fixes his gaze just a bit to the left of the camera, clearly puzzled by the miniature of himself in the monitor superimposed upon invisible geography.

In severe weather, he is disconcertingly spontaneous, appearing unexpectedly in the middle of a soap opera shootout or a talk show featuring exotic animals. These are intimate moments;

his hair is mussed, his shirt untucked. Red patches blush the satellite images as he urges her to take cover and watch for downed trees. She knows exactly what he smells like: Xerox toner and lemons. And she imagines how she will rub her body with crushed grass and cobwebs, blueberries and road salt so that he can map the seasons in the dark.

This is not a love story. If it were, there would be a certain pathos in a woman conjuring a lover out of storm watches and tornado warnings. It is instead a fairy tale, where two people can live in imaginary worlds, bounded only by the limits of the blue screen, clutching remote controls in harmony, and achieve perfect happiness in the four minutes and thirty seconds that they coincide each evening. That is, they could if it weren't for the complication of a garden.

On Thursday, wearing a halo of dots marked Boise, Chicago, and Albany, he predicts rain for the weekend. She has seven rows of split-cup daffodils that have been waterlogged by three weeks of storms. They are the last in a succession of many years of failures. Each fall, she plants the bulbs with a sense of banked hope that lasts on the promise of creamy-lipped petals and crimson hearts through the subzero temperatures and deep snows of winter until soggy spring and early summer when she excavates the barren plots to find bulb after bulb, rotten and swollen with milky pus. Obviously, her garden needs better drainage. In lieu of this, she wills it not to rain.

Friday, he nervously predicts rain again and reminds her to take an umbrella to the weekend's Little League game. She

imagines her bulbs floating like heads in the ruin of her garden and steels herself against him. It is their first quarrel, and it takes the pleasure out of the sight of his solid figure against the cartoon graphics of the five-day forecast.

That weekend there is no rain, and she finds small, tentative green hairs in the dirt of her backyard. Sunday night, he is jocular and somewhat abashed but with bird-wing gestures and subtropical magic, calls up a storm for the beginning of the week. She ignores the disapproving swirls of cloud on the Doppler scan and fantasizes forty-two spikes of color.

It is so dry and warm the next few days that the mud hardens and cracks and a full two inches of split-cup daffodil emerge. By 10:12 p.m. on Tuesday, he is pale and thinner but doggedly insists on storm patterns and imported Canadian air. She visualizes her flowers basking in the heat and sends the jet stream spinning northward, away from her garden.

As the week progresses, he grows more stubborn in his pronouncements. She feels a twinge over tricking him like this, like the wife who tosses her husband's favorite ratty sweatshirt and insists he has misplaced it. But the lines of green tongues tasting the air of her garden remind her of imbalance of their relationship, the way he has never had to wait for her, how he doesn't know the tense pleasure of anticipation.

Wednesday it does not rain. Thursday it does not rain. On Friday, he is hoarse and shadowy as he traces storm systems and bungles computer overlays. As she watches him invoking humidity

and cloud crystals, she finds regret deep like a stone in her throat and gives up willing the sun.

All weekend she waits for rain. She sits outside trying to detect clouds against the pure blue until her eyes burn and the weight in her chest blossoms into full-blown remorse. Her daffodils grow under the painfully clear sky in seven arches of reproach.

Sunday, he says thunderstorms and heavy showers, and she tries God and St. Swithun, the patron saint of rain, praying they will send another deluge and not disgrace the man who lives four and a half minutes each night to plot His terrible path in precipitation and hard freezes. Monday, she stands barefoot in the garden, her toes curled into the earth to hold her in place as she waters forty-two bright needles of shame.

Three more nights he asserts rain. He is gray and wrinkled from the effort, and his hands shake beneath the weight of his sincerity. She can see the egg-white streaks of the high-resolution radar tracking system showing through his dark-jacketed midsection, and when he gasps the words *moist air*, she feels the impact of his breath on her forehead and the coolness of her tears as they evaporate into the expanse between the sofa and the television set.

By Thursday, he has disappeared. A young man with perky hair and blanched-almond teeth who used to do the Sunday sports highlights hovers in his place. She switches off the set at 10:13 and goes outside. Beneath the heavy curve of the moon, the daffodil stalks are sturdy slashes.

There might be a moral here. But it is nothing so simple as the impossibility of holding onto two imaginary things at once, a lover and a garden. It is a more difficult thing she is feeling as she stands outside in the dark, difficult in the way a daffodil bulb is difficult, gnarled and secret. The truth is, she never really could picture him here. He existed in rectangular spaces, and her garden is humpbacked and sprawling, irregular, unkempt, maybe the shape of her heart.