

Josje Weusten

Low Hanging Fruit



Art by Vague Animal

Nov 2024 Artist Spotlight

November 2024 Artist Spotlight Digimag

We are thrilled to present our November Artist Spotlight, celebrating the profound talents of Josje Weusten. As an influential voice in speculative and contemporary literary fiction, Josje's work captivates readers with its exploration of memory, identity, and societal truths. Her unique blend of autobiographical detail and imaginative storytelling has made a lasting impact on readers and peers alike, prompting thought and empathy on complex themes.

In this special edition mini digimag, we delve into Josje's creative world, offering a closer look at her journey and the narratives behind her standout works. From the deeply personal reflections of "Flea Show," which explores family memory and loss, to the speculative nuances of her debut novel *Fake Fish*, Josje's writing invites us into layered worlds where the lines between truth and fiction blur. Through her art, she addresses timely concerns, such as the societal effects of misinformation, while emphasizing the timeless need for genuine human connection.

We are honored to feature Josje Weusten in this spotlight and invite you to experience her impactful storytelling. Thank you for joining us in celebrating one of our most inspiring writers.

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Flea Show

I had expected a shockwave of oohs and aahs to move through the lecture hall at the sight of my childhood picture. Yet the students seem indifferent.

It was the cutest photo I could find, with me being dressed up in a magician outfit, a shiny-cheap black cape wrapped around my chubby neck. The equally dark tall hat with sequined red ribbon is a tad too big. It has dropped down in front of my right eye and I am trying to pull it back up. My older brother Ryan is right behind me, wearing the same attire, his cheeks flushed from gameplay eagerness. He's holding out an empty jewellery box. The familiar wind-up type, but with a downcast, pale Pierrot instead of the usual twirling, blushed ballerina.

'As you may have guessed, this is me. Or rather, the four-year-old version of me,' I joke with a dramatic flair unlike me.

I try to read the students' responses but the room is too dim. The windows are hidden behind thick crimson curtains to keep the sun from overexposing the image on the projection screen. I can smell them though, the expensive Chai-Lattes-on-the-go on their breaths, unified in a relentlessly steady rhythm—in and out; calm and imperturbable.

Of course, they aren't moved. What was I expecting? To them this is business as usual. This generation is accustomed to sharing their most private memories with complete strangers. Putting them on display on whatever social media channel they live their lives on, carefully polished like gemstones.

Academia has become peremptorily personal too, the social sciences in particular. My colleagues, most of them much younger, lecture about their life experiences by default. The way they see it, students have a right to know what drives them to do research. And not all motivations are good ones. It's not enough to find a problem intellectually interesting, a theory challenging, or a concept enlightening. There has to be a personal tale behind it. How else can students become engaged? They need to feel that they, their professors, care.

I have succeeded in dodging the rallying cry for close candour in college circles so far. But with the ratings for my course dropping, I no longer have a choice. The department head made it unmistakably clear: my job is on the line. I have to follow my colleagues' example.

I anxiously flip through my sheets of notes, taken aback by the students' indifferent response. The thick, violet craft paper feels rough in my clammy hands. Normally, I lecture off the cuff.

Yesterday, however, the fear of forgetting crucial details began to gnaw at me. Authenticity demands specificities after all. So I turned the house upside down in search of empty paper to put them in writing; the lilac cardboard and a set of equally colourful markers were all I found.

Standing in front of the impassive young gaggle, my cautiously felt-tipped words nevertheless still seem too coarse. I continue in fits and starts, '...actually, this story isn't so much about me...it's about my brother...'

Straining my neck, I look over my shoulder at Ryan's grainy, magnified face and fall silent.

My brother used to be my hero. This photo in particular brings back how Ryan always tried to distract me from whatever else was going on under our roof. He was about to perform one of his infamous flea shows.

Spellbound, I'd watch how Ryan ordered the imperceptible insects to jump out of the music box and balance on a thin chord, stretched between two dining chair legs.

'Did you see that?' My brother would shout dramatically. 'That one did a backflip!'

Although I'd missed it, I'd nod committedly.

There were no actual fleas, obviously. I know that now. Back then, however, his flea circus felt like sheer magic. I can still conjure up the coldness of the terrazzo flooring on which I sat, cross-legged, chin in my hands, observing him. It penetrated right through my terry cloth shorts. It's my most genuine recollection.

Apart from the picture, there's no evidence the music box actually existed though. Our father had smashed it to splinters in one of his fits. Lashing out at Ryan for the umpteenth time, he had hurled the music box at the floor, intentionally hitting the speckled nature stone flooring rather than the carpeted ground. The sound of the glass and wood case snapping when he put his foot down to finish the clown off was soul crushing, and, as it turned out, the last straw for Ryan.

Yet even today, my mum denies our father is responsible for sending Ryan over the edge. Our father was smart enough never to focus his violence directly on my brother. There were no visible marks on his body to testify to the tyrannizing truth. Besides, our father seemed anything but brutal to the outside world. With his university degree, well-groomed pronunciation, and golden pinkie ring with engraved family emblem, he managed to deceive everyone, including my mum.

Even I didn't acknowledge what had happened to my brother at first. I had in fact felt relieved when my mother told me the tragic news, feeling sure that Ryan wasn't actually dead. After all, the night before he took his life, Ryan had let me in on a secret: he had mastered the ultimate magic trick; he now knew how to turn invisible, to become as elusive as his fleas, uncatchable.

The horrific truth only sank in years later, together with the realisation that I might have been able to save him.

'Professor?' One of the female students in the front addresses me worriedly.

I haven't spoken for several minutes. I shake my head and turn my attention back to the students. Bored, most of them have started to talk to each other, their voices whispering but swelling.

I must say something. Go on as I intended. There's nothing on the cardboard cheat sheets about my father, just the little anecdote about my brother's imaginative flea show, and its potential connection to my research on conspiracy thinkers. I merely have to read my notes aloud. Gazing up at Ryan again, I, however, cannot bring myself to it. From this close, my brother looks as if he'll break up any moment. Yet the light of the projector refuses to release him from its grip.

I hesitantly step out from behind the pulpit. Alarmed by my movements, all at once the students stop talking. Ignoring their suspicion-filled silence, I walk over to the whirring projector, using its glowing power switch as a beacon.

I inhale deeply to reach for the switch.

A split second later, a solemn click echoes through the lecture theatre, and then, as if by magic, Ryan is gone.



WRONG TIME

by Josje Weusten

(Previously Published by 101 Words Magazine)

‘You’ll have to come with us to explain what happened.’

The police car’s rotating blue light wrests Martin’s body from the dark at intervals. Her boyfriend lies on the gleaming pavement, near the freestanding clock across from the busy pubs.

They did this... She was just waiting for Martin next to the tapered clock-pole, when those drunk men started harassing her, lifting up her skirt with an umbrella. They only left when she got her hands on a loose cobblestone.

‘It’s time,’ the officer says.

His colleague bags the bloodstained stone.

How could she’ve known it was Martin tapping her shoulder?

DOPPELGÄNGER

by Josje Weusten

(This story was previously published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*)

His hair is as grey as the snow-pregnant sky above. Yet almost every other physical aspect fits the fading memory I have of him. Sharp profile: check. Powerful stride: check. Cigarette balanced on lower lip: check. The familiarity of it all throws me off so much I freeze in my steps.

I squeeze my mother's upper arm. We tightly linked the moment we left her flat for a walk with her Pomeranian. "Is that...?"

She follows my gaze to the man passing us. "No," my mum replies, no trace of doubt in her voice. "But I can see why you might have thought so. He has the same nose. I always thought it would make him look like John Lennon until he started wearing glasses."

"He is too old, I suppose," I muse, still not entirely convinced the man isn't who I took him for. "And too thin."

"He was never skinny," my mother answers, while Spud pulls her in the direction of a plot of snow-covered grass. "But not fat either. He was muscular. And tall, like you."

Ever since I was fifteen, I have been a foot bigger than her in every direction. Petite is how you could best describe my mother. In that specific 1970s French way. Growing up with her has made me feel awkwardly clumsy. As if I am taking up too much space. Which is why I don't come home very often. Only for holidays. It'll be Christmas Eve tonight, the trickiest one. So many memories lying in ambush.

"He was a good-looking man, you know." My mum usually mobilizes a different vocabulary to talk about him. Corrupted. Degraded. Despicable even.

I glance at her sideways.

She exhales slowly, her breath clouding in the cold air.

Was he attractive? I can't remember him well enough to say, but people were drawn to him. He had a way of making them feel good about themselves. Friendly and accommodating. Creative too. He had volunteered to craft the life-sized, papier-mâché manger scene they'd put up at my primary school. He even crocheted their tawny-colored outfits.

They didn't use it anymore afterward, obviously. I guess it was because of that amiability that they also hated him so much in the end. They felt fooled. And my mother and I were unknowingly part of his cover-up. No wonder everyone loathed us.

I didn't learn about his unscrupulousness from my mother. I cobbled it together from the children at school. Little pieces of information were whispered in passing. They didn't dare say anything aloud. Not because they were afraid of me, though I did once pull out a strand of Cynthia's hair, which must have made an impression.

Cynthia was a large, coarse-spoken girl who had to repeat the year when she joined our class. She immediately singled me out as a target. Each day, she'd wait for me outside of the gate, out of sight of the other children, and most importantly, their parents and teachers. They wouldn't have done anything to prevent her from lashing out at me anyway. They all knew about what he had done, well before I did.

I found myself reaching for one of her pigtails during the final rehearsal for the annual school play. I yanked until I saw blood. A piece of her skin was stuck to the roots of the tuft of hair I had pulled out.

I got expelled of course. My mum was beside herself. "You are just like your—," she started on the way back home in the car, after collecting me from the principal's office. She didn't finish the sentence, but I knew what she wanted to say.

From that moment onwards, the shame started to build up under my skin. I tried to ward it off by not talking about him. If I had to, I would do so in the same way as my mother did: by othering him completely. Whoever he had been beside the unspeakable part of him ceased to exist.

I stopped remembering how he loved to spend hours on the tiled living room floor playing with us or that he liked comic books as much as I did. I only recalled he didn't let me touch the house he built with Lego when I wanted to make something different with the bricks, and how angry he got if I read the latest *Mickey Mouse Weekly* before he could lay hands on it, and I dog-eared some of the pages.

It helped for a while. Yet as I grew older, I started to take increasingly after him. Not in terms of looks—although I am indeed relatively tall; I have my mother’s blonde hair and green-blue eyes—but in habits. Like him, I feel compelled to tell stories to stroke people’s egos, making them think well of me. No big lies, just minor compliments, but I’m disturbingly good at it.

It upsets me to realize I am my father’s daughter. Not that I have any of his “preferences,” which isn’t the right word. But I don’t want to think or say that other word. I will never be ready for that word. I am definitely not that word. Still, who knows? His weird, fucked-up stuff might be tucked away inside me too. I worry it’ll get out someday.

“Can you hold Spud’s leash for a moment?” Without waiting for an answer, my mother pushes the leather loop into my hand. It feels unexpectedly pliant. She rummages through the pockets of her wax coat to pull out a little, see-through bag. I watch her bend over to pick up Spud’s shit.

“I don’t know if he was handsome. But he was charming, wasn’t he?” My voice is soft from diffidence. “I’m not, Mum. You know I’m not.”

As my mother gets back up, she gently zip-locks the plastic bag with poo. Her cautious smile expresses remorse as well as affection. “No, you’re not, honey. Not at all. Not like him.”

TRIPPING

by Josje Weusten

(previously published by Burningword Literary Journal)

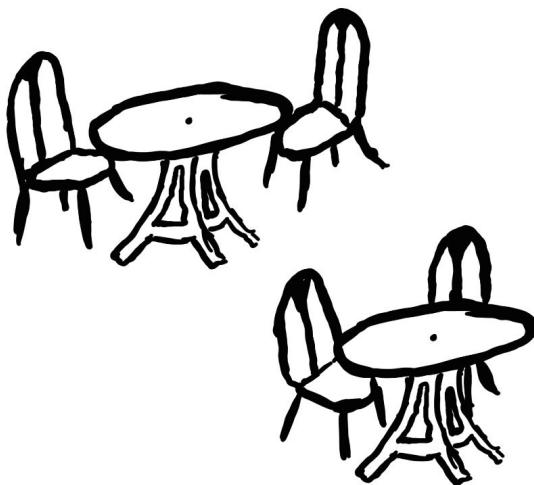
The blond man in front of her is too tall. European of course, Dutch perhaps. It's claimed the Dutch are the tallest people in the world. She'll find out if it's true soon enough. Amsterdam is their next stop. Kyoko stands on her toes. She can't even get a glimpse of the woman with history's most mysterious smile, only the right upper edge of the gold-varnished, renaissance-inspired frame. How she'd love to see a friendly face, even if it's just a painted one.

She planned the ten-day Euro trip with her daughters right after the divorce. A chance to forget, at least momentarily, to "make new memories together", which was what the travel brochure said, "while admiring artworks with a lasting impact".

Now, she's standing here alone. She'd already booked three tickets and didn't want them all to go to waste. Her teenagers preferred shopping on the Champs-Élysées, without her. She just wants her daughters to be happy again. It already means the world to see the girls getting along. That hasn't always been the case, but a common enemy unites.

She's the guilty one, the instigator. She's not even sure why she did it. She simply didn't have a choice but to leave their father. If she has to describe the reason, the feeling when growing out of her favourite dress at the age of thirteen comes closest, the blue one with ruffles. She still loved it, but it didn't fit anymore.

She had expected the Louvre to be busy, but not like this. Crowds are a strange phenomenon. Each has its own distinct character: some fierce and loud, others dumb and dangerous. Though obstructing her vision, this one seems kind, rocking her softly from left to right, holding her tight, making it impossible to fall over.



Poetry



Happenstance

A swifter return,
returns
a scenery
not written fully.
Splitting my head,
my sight
steering on drift,
driving chewy.
Sticking, hard tires
in fright
on slower turns,
floating effusively

*

Lost Second

A split-second
of forgetting
in different hands
with various smells, skin and age,
leathery, soft,
with or without cigarette stains,
scars, moles,
freckles, deep lines but sharp nails.

Morning Rush

Come on, come on, get up, get up!

Yes, yes, yes! Rise and Shine!

Come on now, first your head

no, no, no. No time to cry or wine;

go down and butter your bread.

Come on, come now, hurry, hurry,

no, no, no. No time to play; stop that chase!

Come, come, go downstairs and butter your bread

Go, go, go, did you girls wash your face?

Hey, did you hear what I said?

No, the chocolate sprinkles are all gone,

now, now, now, you stop pouting,

here, give me that, than I will butter your bread.

No, no, no! No time for tears and howling!

You both want some fruit with that?

It has been seven thirty, really, get going,

no, no, no, now leave each other alone.

Be careful with that! Look what you've done:

the milk all spilled;

be careful, is that not what I said?

Yes, yes, yes, that looks just like the moon,

ano, really I'm looking at it, really true

Shoes on? Yes, I will help...

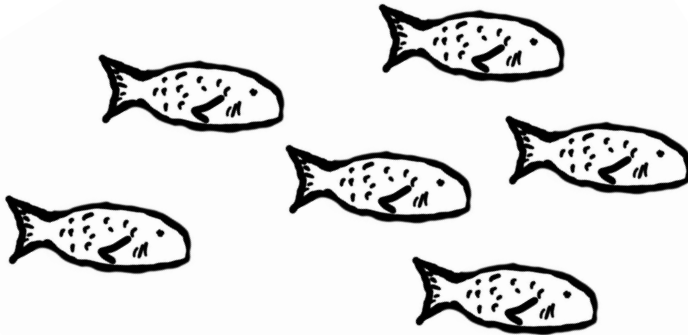
Stop shouting... with the laces.

I cannot be in two different places!

Eight thirty, Yes! We've made it. Give me a kiss now, off you go.

What? No, I am not angry. Why would you think so?

‘Fake Fish’ Review



Fake Fish Book Review

Truth in the Age of Deception through *Fake Fish* by Josje Weusten

Written by Rosella Weigand

You can't believe everything you read. And thanks in large part to the world's rapid rate of AI technology advances combined with the ever-growing spread of 'fake news,' we also can't believe everything we see and hear. In Josje Weusten's "Fake Fish," deception and fabrication come at a high price, costing those closely affected by it most both their personal and professional relationships.

Initially set in Present Day, Maastricht, the Netherlands, events are told through the perspectives of four main characters -- Martin, an aspiring filmmaker, his girlfriend Eveline, his professor Ditte, and her daughter Lou(na) -- allowing us the opportunity to see more sides of one another's interlocking stories. But in doing so, however; we're also presented with differing variations of truths, making us question just who or what we can honestly believe. We end up having to infer our own opinions based on how they interpret the facts, which broadens our views but doesn't necessarily mean we're given the whole truth and nothing but.

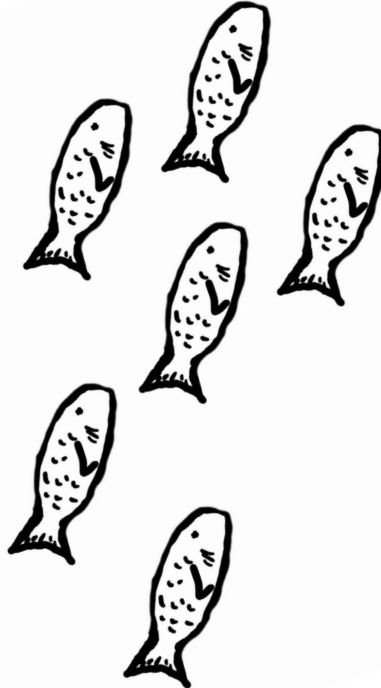
The cycle of deceit and betrayal of trust seems to begin with Martin's involvement in a viral deep fake video that not only destroys the reputation of one of the most respected voices of his sought-after profession, Jude Prior, it also causes his friendships and relationships around him to slowly implode. Martin's guilt starts to eat away at him, yet 'coming clean' with what actually happened doesn't exactly solve his problems. If anything, it seems to only make matters worse, which must make us wonder if rather or not the truth is capable of ever really setting anyone free.

It's actually through Eveline's eyes, we're able to learn more about Martin and their love for each other. She's just as career-driven as he is, if not moreso. But it becomes clear early on that they both want different things and are meant for separate paths in life. Similarly, Ditte and her daughter Lou's relationship faces its own set of challenges. Ditte starts questioning where she stands at work and her role as a mother, as her daughter deals with her own emotions, while falling in and exploring new love.

It's certainly interesting and refreshing to learn about things from different characters in this story, yet not everyone has a voice. We're never fully presented with Prior's take on events, something that would've allowed us to better understand his views and reactions to everything unfolding. By not giving him his own chapter almost feels intentional on Weusten's part, as if she wanted to further illustrate that we don't always have much say or control on everyone else's perceptions of us and our own character/actions. Still, it would've been nice to be in his head if only for a little bit.

While Weusten's rapid-paced storytelling keeps us on our toes and swiftly turning every page, it's in Part II where these characters really come alive. We fast-forward twenty years later to a world that seems vastly different than our own. Following the collapse of the European Union, the Dutch government starts enforcing stricter rules. Any source of fiction is deemed outlawed. Movies and books are forbidden; even quoting song lyrics aloud or on clothing can get someone into trouble. The Internet is restricted, of course; it almost feels like a given that it would be, since it's the ultimate roadway for misinformation. But to go to these great lengths of ridding the world of art feels like such an extreme measure to take. It's frightening to fathom how living in such a world would effect our judgements and daily lives. Our morals and creativity. Everything we hold near and dear.

"Fake Fish" shows us how damaging and dangerous technology can/will be when used with the intention of deception. Lies become facts too easily, and the spreading of false rumors has gone beyond simply 'getting out of hand.' Our humanity as we know it is at stake, and if we're not careful, we will continue to divide as nations and as groups of people in our own local communities. If anything, Weusten's "Fake Fish" acts as a warning of what may come as a result of misinformation and a wake-up call to what we take for granted each and every day. But when it comes right down to it, as Weusten writes, "All that matters in the end is whose story is being heard and believed."



Interpretation



Unfollowing in Her Father's Footsteps in "Doppelganger"

by Josje Weusten

Written by Rosella Weigand

As human beings and children, we are more than just the collective make-up of our parents' DNA; we often adopt bits and pieces of their personalities, their senses of humor, their styles, their rhythms, etc., as well. And in Josje Weusten's "DOPPELGÄNGER," it's these similar traits and comparisons that cause concern for our protagonist. Over the course of Weusten's short story, we discover suggestions as to why her family is divided and why those who were once so close should now remain at a far away distance.

While walking with her mother, a daughter notices someone who reminds her of her father -- "His hair is as grey as the snow-pregnant sky above. Yet almost every other physical aspect fits the fading memory I have of him. Sharp profile: check. Powerful stride: check. Cigarette balanced on lower lip: check. The familiarity of it all throws me off so much I freeze in my steps." But while this individual's appearance is similar, it's not actually him, which is met with a sense of relief. As the narrative progresses, little hints as to why her father is no longer a part of their lives begin to reveal themselves.

One can't help but feel an uneasiness as we trudge further down the rabbit hole of learning more about this "unspeakable part" of him. But how far her father acted on his "preferences" is never fully explained, leaving us to fill in the gaps with our own imaginations. We're mainly provided with merely fragments of his backstory, such as "He had volunteered to craft the life-sized, papier-mâché manger scene they'd put up at my primary school. He even crocheted their tawny-colored outfits. They didn't use it anymore afterward, obviously." Whatever he did, the school and those working and attending are well aware of his past behavior. So was he abusive? Had he committed any form of sexual assault against a young student? Was he fantasizing about doing so and got caught in an uncompromising position at her school? How far he actually went doesn't necessarily matter; his actions come off as despicable and disgusting all the same.

His daughter is haunted by the notion that she too will one day start having the same or similar kinds of thoughts and act out the same behaviors. "Like him, I feel compelled to tell stories to stroke people's egos, making them think well of me. No big lies, just minor compliments, but I'm disturbingly good at it." Even though whenever we learn about someone who fantasizes about committing sickening acts or discover those who carry out their twisted fantasies in real life, we naturally wonder how could anyone ever possibly do such horrible things? What could drive someone to hurt or take advantage of another human being like that? But she was once her "father's daughter," so she's concerned that one day, she'll turn out to be just like him. It's only natural that she would have this fear, since we often take after our parents, for better or worse.

Despite the heavy subject matter of Weusten's story, there's a sensitivity taken when describing such an unsettling, triggering topic. The word is never mentioned. The daughter can't even say it. She admits, "I will never be ready for that word. I am definitely not that word." From this, we may infer that her father had to be the absolute worst of the worst, the scummiest of all scum, and there's only one sick, repulsive monster that comes to mind -- a pedophile. Despite this subject not being an easy topic to talk about, it unfortunately remains an important discussion we must continue to have. In doing so, hopefully more light can be shown on this darkness, so more people who find themselves in these unspeakable situations either with strangers, friends, or even family members can use their voices to ask for and receive help.



A Conversation with the Artist

1. A lot of your book "Fake Fish" deals with lies and misinformation. Where do you find that such falsehoods are more detrimental -- when told by leaders who hold high positions in our governments? Or when heard from the ones we know, love, and trust most in our personal lives (friends, family, etc)? Please explain why you chose your selection.

Politics for sure. For a society to work and for people to trust each other and their government, it is fundamental that policies are based on facts and that the state is transparent about its decisions. Political lies can have far more far-reaching consequences than the lies told to us by our loved ones. Those can be devastating too, but they would only be tragic to a specific individual, while political lies often have repercussions for many and on a very personal level. The overhaul of Roe vs Wade is a sad example of how the political seeps into the most personal aspects of many women's lives.

That being said, we often tend to think of truth and lies as opposites. It's important to hold on to that distinction in governance. However, there are also areas and situations in which the relationship between truth and lies isn't that clear and we are better off embracing this ambiguity. For example, when my oldest daughter wanted to go on a Scouts' camping trip for the first time, I felt anxious about her being away from home for a week. I didn't show this to her, as it would have undermined her confidence and ruined an otherwise fun experience for her. What we are saying, or doing, in such moments might not be factually true, but reflects a larger truth; our love for that person.

We find these larger, more fundamental truths in fiction too. Fiction is essentially the result of our capacity to make things up, to fabricate stories that have never happened but they still communicate other types of truth, more philosophical ones, about how to live a good life, about love and responsibility.

2. There are a lot of ways in which false information gets spread around these days. What made you decide to use a deep fake video as the main cause leading to the downfall of someone's career in your story? Are there any benefits to deep fake technology or is it solely meant to harm and mislead others?

I was mostly inspired by discussions with my students on the impact of AI and synthetic media, such as deep fakes and ChatGPT. Many of my students fear that these technologies will fuel cultural polarisation and might take over the work of creatives, such as writers and artists. I am cautiously optimistic that the latter will not happen. After all, my students are very outspoken about not being interested in reading a poem or a story written by AI. They turn to art and fiction looking for a human connection. And they are right to do so. Poems, stories, novels, paintings, sculptures and other art forms are means to reach out to somebody else; to create a connection beyond time and space. One reads a novel or studies a painting to be touched by it precisely because it was made by another human being. It is, as my publisher Lesley Affrossman says, about 'a meeting of minds'.

I had thus already been toying with the general idea for my book for some time, but it was only when I saw an online deep fake video of Tom Cruise (or rather not-Tom Cruise) that I decided to make a deep fake a central element of the story. The clip was so stunningly realistic. In "Fake Fish" the synthetic technologies that have made this deep fake of Tom/not-Tom possible, have become widely accessible to the general public, as experts also predict they will be in just a couple of years.

I sketch a rather dark world in my book, but there are also possible positive applications of AI. Psychologists are experimenting with deep fakes to treat anxiety disorders and the artist who made the cover of my book used AI as a creative tool. This adds an ironic layer to my story. And although the future in my novel seems bleak, I hope it ends on a positive note by showing how fiction can serve as an antidote against cultural polarisation. I truly believe literature can be a life buoy in a time in which we are about to be swallowed up by polarisation. After all, fiction allows us to explore and empathise with multiple perspectives. We come out somewhat changed after reading a novel. At the very least, we might be a little more understanding towards people who are or think differently from us. This is also why I chose to tell the story of "Fake Fish" from multiple perspectives.

3. Martin seemed to have it all -- a supportive girlfriend, a great education, a promising career ahead of him. What would you say motivated him to jeopardize all of that? Knowing the outcome, do you think he still might've been tempted to still go through with it all?

Martin indeed seems to have it all, but does he really? He doesn't have any real friends or any responsible adults in his life to which he can turn for help. His life has been riven with loss. His mother dies when he is young and his father, the most important person in his life, passes when Martin is just eighteen. No wonder he desperately wants to belong. That's also why he tries to impress Zac and jeopardises his future. Of course, he wouldn't have gone through with it in hindsight, but it's always easy to make the right decision then.

4. Why was it important for you to tell Lou(na)'s story? How do you think her perspective and involvement served the larger narrative overall?

Ah, Louna, yes, she is absolutely my favourite character. I initially didn't plan to have her in this novel but she kept popping up when writing. I like to think she fought her way into the book. Her resilience also shows through her role in the story. She is the only one who really dares to take risks, and who fully sees the importance of art, music, and fiction and how they are integral to human relationships and meaningful connections.

5. Among all of the sources of art & fiction that become restricted/forbidden (books, music, movies, etc) 20 years into the future, which one could you simply not live without & why?

That's a tough one. All of these art forms mean so much to me. They each have been a lifeline during more difficult periods in my life in their own way. If I had to choose, it would have to be the latest collection of short stories by Margaret Atwood. They are cinematic, poetic and picturesque enough to keep the memory of some of the other art forms alive, as well as open-ended enough to allow me to expand and develop the stories further in my own mind.



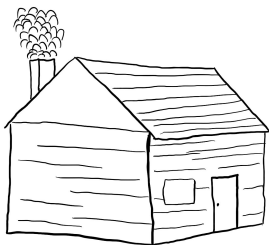
6. In *Flea Show*, there's a powerful exploration of memory, family, and personal history. What inspired you to weave such personal and vulnerable elements into a lecture setting, and how do you view the relationship between academia and personal narrative?

'Flea Show' is a mixture of autobiography and fiction, and slightly speculative. The main motivation for writing this story concerns a personal struggle with experiences from my past. I have found writing about them difficult, partially because of their triggering nature but also because of the fragmented memories I have of them. The auto-fictional form allows me to articulate them indirectly, without having to worry about the factual truth, but instead being able to do justice to their fleeting, fragmentary nature and the emotions involved.

I chose to integrate it in an academic setting as this is not where you would normally expect this to come up. Yet there seems to be an increased attention to the personal stories of academics in research and education. While I think it is important to share the stories of how and why we became interested in certain topics as researchers, as it can inspire students to do research too, I find myself shying away from it. Writing this story has allowed me to explore the increased focus on authentic personal experiences in academia by pushing the trend further and placing it in the context of traumatic experiences that are difficult to verbalise.

7. Many of your works, like *Tripping*, deal with the sense of displacement or seeking comfort in unfamiliar settings. How does travel or cultural displacement impact your creative process, and do you find yourself exploring this theme frequently?

I grew up, and currently still live, in a border region where the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany meet. As a result, I am used to crossing borders daily. Although I can feel very quickly displaced when travelling, the mixture of languages and the exchange between cultures that result from living in a border region are part of what defines home to me. As my cultural home has always been hybrid and multiple, I often write about questions of cultural mixing and border crossings. The human connections we can forge beyond cultural differences and language are a central theme in several of my stories, and art often plays a mediating role in this.



Credits and Acknowledgements

Josje Weusten (PhD) is a writer of speculative and contemporary literary fiction living in Belgium. Her shorts have appeared in Litbreak Magazine and Flash Fiction Magazine. Her work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions 2023. Her first novel Fake Fish, a near-future story on the devastating impact of fake news, will be released on November 14, 2024 with Sparsile Books (Glasgow, UK). She is a Faber Academy London alumna. Next to a writer, Josje is an academic, teaching literature and creative writing at Maastricht University.

Thank you to Josje. We have enjoyed all your pieces and are thrilled to bring this digimag to our readers. Low Hanging Fruit is honored to publish your work, and we hope to continue receiving wonderful works of literature.

Congratulations on your book release this year!

Find more information about Dr. Weusten here:

Website: <https://josjeweusten.com/>

Insta: <https://www.instagram.com/josjeweusten/>

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FAKE FISH KE

In a world drowning in a deluge of falsehoods, “Fake Fish” confronts the insidious rise of false news, and unmasks the far-reaching consequences that extend beyond mere headlines. With an unflinching gaze, this novel exposes the alarming impact of deceit on a global scale, as personal and national reputations crumble, and the very fabric of truth is torn apart.

JOSJE WEUSTEN

Released November 14th

BOOKS & SHORT STORIES BY DR WEUSTEN:

- Fake Fish
 - Wrong Time. In 101 Words Magazine
 - Doppelgänger. In Flash Fiction Magazine.
 - Flea Show. In Low Hanging Fruit.
 - Wide Angle Perspective. In LitBreak Magazine.
 - Exposition. In Flash Fiction Magazine.
 - e Stu Stories Are Made Of. In Mosaiek Magazine.
- Several poems and prose pieces. In Stephenson, P. & Wyatt, S. (eds.), Letters in Lockdown. An Anthology. Maastricht: Maastricht University Press.
- Several poems. In Stephenson, P., Wyatt, S. & Parkinson, J. (eds.), Quarantine Spring. Maastricht: Maastricht University Press.
 - Tripping in Burningword Literary Journal
- Book Deal (Forthcoming July 20) in Low Hanging Fruit.

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