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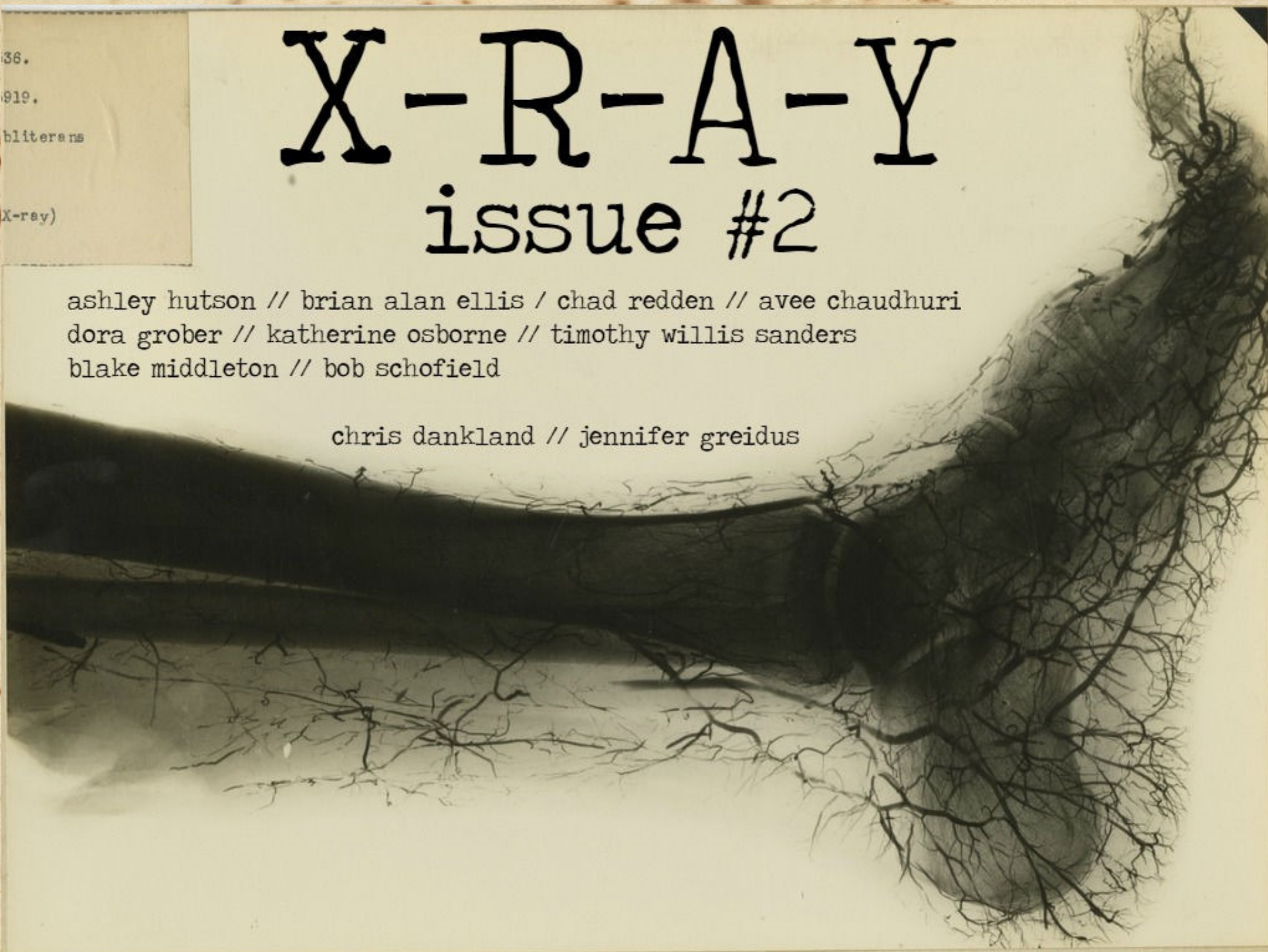
X-ray)

X-R-A-Y

issue #2

ashley hutson // brian alan ellis / chad redden // avee chaudhuri
dora grober // katherine osborne // timothy willis sanders
blake middleton // bob schofield

chris dankland // jennifer greidus



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ASHLEY HUTSON

This is an anteroposterior (AP) portable X-ray of a right hand and forearm. The image shows multiple, comminuted fractures of the radius and ulna in the mid-forearm region. There are also fractures of the distal radius and ulna. The hand bones appear relatively intact. The X-ray is labeled 'R' for right and 'JA' for joint, with a circle around the 'A'. The text 'AP Portable' is visible in the bottom right corner.

**ON OUR WAY
TO SEE YOU**

Right now we're stuck behind a funeral procession and it looks like we're going to be late. Mack keeps saying, *How long, how long?* We're on our way to see you.

I adjust the rear-view mirror, and Mack is in the back seat, bouncing around. He never settles down when the car goes slow, refuses to be lulled like other children, does not even want to be sung to. He's saying, *How long, how long?*

And it is about noon right now, and it is a beautiful day and it is November. There is a hearse way up at the front. The cars in the line are mismatched and strangely colorful. Funny how these things appear without warning. An hour ago I got the call, and I swept up Mack and yanked some clothes on him and we piled into the car and I hit the gas. I flew out of town, I don't mind telling you, and it seemed like I turned around for a second—just one second, to yell at Mack to calm down and quit screaming—and when I turned back there was this line of traffic in front of me stopped dead. It happened so quick that I slammed on the brakes, throwing Mack and me forward to strangle on our seat belts for a second. *Uh-oh*, Mack said.

These long, narrow roads between towns. You know them. You always complained about them when you had to get up in the pre-dawn hours, never knew what animal would jump out from the black woods and drive you off the road into death. Every morning in winter I'd listen to you grouch as I poured the coffee, and this was before Mack was born, this was when everything between us was an adventure and the only thing that worried you was a lonely road in the dark, and my biggest fear was a spider lurking in a kitchen corner. The kitchen of that house we loved, that was a long time ago, remember? And now here we are, me here on this road and you there, and Mack is in the back seat wailing like a devil, ignoring me like he was birthed out of some other woman's loins. Like I am not his mama at all.

Mack starts counting the cars ahead of us. They don't make noise. I wind down my window and there's only silence and wind. It is colder than it looks. I close the window. We're a mile outside of town, at the part of the road where it stretches wide and flat after a steep hill, and the cornfields spread out, and at the horizon are rounded mountains so far away they look blue. An open space like this is something special around here, you remember how the first time Mack saw this part of the road and yelled *Roller coaster!* like it was some big deal.

Now he's in the backseat and saying *How much longer?* and I tell him to keep counting cars. He skips numbers. He goes from eleven back to three.

I start counting, too. Everything is slow. And I am telling you what, these cars are all clean. I don't see a filthy one in the bunch, not like our old beater that I haven't taken to the carwash in who knows how long. And this day is so fine, so clear, and it's November and just as brown and gold and blue as a late fall day can be, crisp as flint corn. On these kinds of days you and me used to go out right before dusk, we would take walks in the woods down by the old gristmill's abandoned skeleton and I'd kiss you on a path so private no one but deer would see, and then on Sundays we'd go to your Granny's house and eat pot-pie until we were sick.

I am on my way to see you but I am stuck. A procession is ahead of me, a long, crooked line. *How long? How long?* Mack is saying.

He's lost count, and so have I. I can't see the hearse anymore, it's gone over the far hill and out of sight. There are three cemeteries between you and me and we've already passed two, and I keep hoping these cars will stop, I keep waiting for them to turn. But the cars keep moving in a slow drip-drip-drip fashion, and for some reason I am thinking of water, thinking of the word *wet*, thinking of sex, trying to think of the last time we did it in that small bed in our apartment before you got the night-cough and started with the pills. That apartment we had to move into after you got laid off, you hated it because you thought I hated it, but let me tell you right now: I never hated any room you were in. Right now I am thinking of your jaw clicking when you bit into a sandwich, and how the noise sounded like you were crushing gravel. The sound would satisfy me so, as if your mouth were mine.

The third cemetery is approaching, and Mack is in the backseat like some kind of ghoul that was visited upon me, upon both of us, like a night flower that bloomed in my stomach, like a premonition saying *How long? How long?* Mack is like a lot of things but the thing I most regret is that he looks exactly like me and not like you at all, even though that was something you cooed and congratulated the baby for—you congratulated a baby—while I lay there in the hospital bed, wondering if my insides would ever feel properly arranged again. And Mack being born sickly, with my spongy bones and looking like me, surely that was some kind of punishment? An omen? But of course you took his birth as a boon, to you Mack was a gift and it didn't matter that he was smaller than

most or couldn't get his words out clear like other kids or that maybe my blood was to blame. You said he was a good kid because he was us put together and that blood was not poison, blood was just blood, and you'd never seen an omen in your life.

We've been following this funeral parade for what seems like a few hours now. I am trying to get to you but there is this line of cars I cannot pass or see the end of. I still cannot see the hearse. Sometimes I get glimpses, but you know how this countryside is hilly, is rocky and rough, and I keep losing sight of the hearse over the next hill or around the narrow curves that infest this place, the steep inclines that laugh at this old car, the landscape sneering at the humans who tried to carve a road into it.

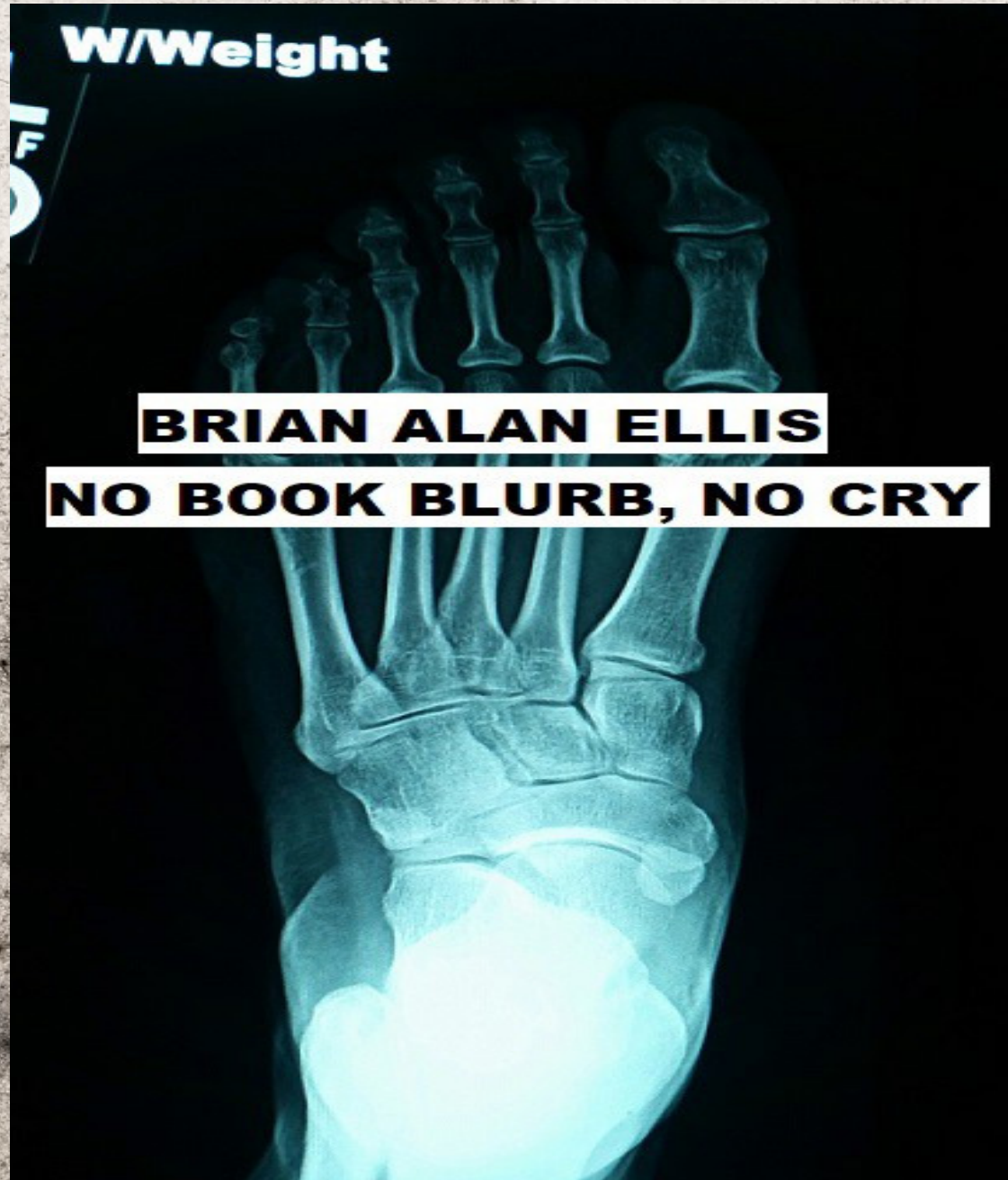
The cars passed the last cemetery miles ago and I can't help it, I keep following them. Now they're splitting off the main road, going up a mountain. The night is coming fast. I forgot how early darkness falls this time of year. My ears are going shut. Mack is quieter now, lying down in the backseat. He's whimpering a little. I can't get the memory of a normal afternoon two weeks ago out of my brain. Do you remember? It was October then. You were setting trash bags on the curb outside the apartment, and I was at the kitchen sink skinning an apple, and Mack was watching the TV in another room, and when I caught your eye through the window you gave me a smile. You raised up your hand and waved.

From the back seat I hear, *How much longer?* but I ignore it. I gun the engine, willing the car to climb higher, higher. Where this mountain ends, I don't know.

W/Weight

BRIAN ALAN ELLIS

NO BOOK BLURB, NO CRY



An Inspirational/Crazy Informative Guide to Proper Book Blurbage

(An excerpt from Sad Laughter, forthcoming from Civil Coping Mechanisms)

"[This book] will fry up some prose eggs in your ol' brain pan."

"[This writer] is the kind of poet whose madness and how [he/she] exorcises that madness is a thing of dark brilliance one can admire from afar but if you ever let [him/her] crash at your house for a few days [he/she] would scare the living shit out of you."

"[This writer] can fix your pipes and your roofing but [his/her] book of durable, brick-layered stories can also fix your mind plumbing, too."

"[This book] sends a roundhouse kick to your funny bone before blowing it up. Disagree? Then I don't consider you a person; you are a terrorist towards good taste."

"Reading [this book] is like waking up to find a bloody horsehead in bed with you and then screaming but not screaming because you're repulsed but because you've actually discovered a fresh way to look at life and it's amazing."

"[This writer] definitely has a way with words—they aren't written; they're kicked and fondled before being splattered across the page like a dead, wet dog."

"[He/She] is the type of writer you'd let crash at your apartment and then wake up to find they've murdered your pets and then turned them into dancing puppets that are now lip-synching to all your favorite Debbie Gibson cassingles, so yeah, a real party animal."

"[This book] takes readers on an uncompromising fun-house ride of damaged people attractions."

"[This writer] is the type of poet who will put [his/her] head through a plate glass window just to make killer poetry out of [his/her] face."

"[This book] is a brave and poignant look into a person's mind as they struggle to exist in a world where Hulka-mania is generally not the strongest force in the universe and we are all in danger of being crushed by a 500-pound giant hailing from parts unknown."

"[This book] is recommended for anyone who knows how to read."

"[He/She] is the kind of writer clever enough to moon-light as a lawyer/sociopath capable of freaking out a table full of squares by using hella unassuming methods, so yeah, a wonderful talent."

"[This writer] writes like a sadistically imaginative child who plays house by burning down the house."

"[This book is] a coming-of-age fever dream [the author] carved into some Ouija board [he/she] later used to summon the spirits of David Koresh, Jesus Christ, and Richard Ramirez."

"[This writer] is like the Tombstone of frozen descrip-tive prose pizza."

"While reading [this book] you'll feel as though you've been taken hostage, like you've been stuffed and then zipped inside of [the author's] emotional baggage, which is okay because it's warm in there, at least."

"[This book] is kind of like Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* meets Soundgarden's *Bad-motorfinger*, or maybe like *The Notebook* meets *Re-Animator*, I don't fucking know."

"[This writer] is like Sissy Spacek in the movie *Carrie* when they dump pig blood on her but instead of setting the prom on fire [he/she] ignites your thoughts using dark and mysterious word torches."

"If the literary scene were a slammin' mosh pit, [this writer] would be commanding that shit using wind-mills and crazy roundhouse kicks."

"[This book's] narrative is like the music video for Van Halen's 'Right Now,' except it makes sense, and it's funny for the right reasons, and it isn't as preachy."

"[This book] is the literary equivalent of Kid Rock's dandruff."

"Though [this writer] has never won a literary award, it's quite possible they've accidentally urinated on themselves while drunk, so..."

"Crackling with powerful satanic energy, [this book] is like *When Harry Met Sally* except Harry listens to nu metal and Sally is possessed by Zuul from *Ghostbusters*, has an addiction to shitty speed, and may or may not be a juggalo."

"[He/She] is the type of writer you'd let crash at your apartment and then wake up to find naked and sum-moning weird spirits while kneeling in the center of some pentagram they've drawn out on your living room floor using your pet's blood, so yeah, a real pain in the ass."

"Reading [this book] is like having your emotions constantly dunked on by Shaq."

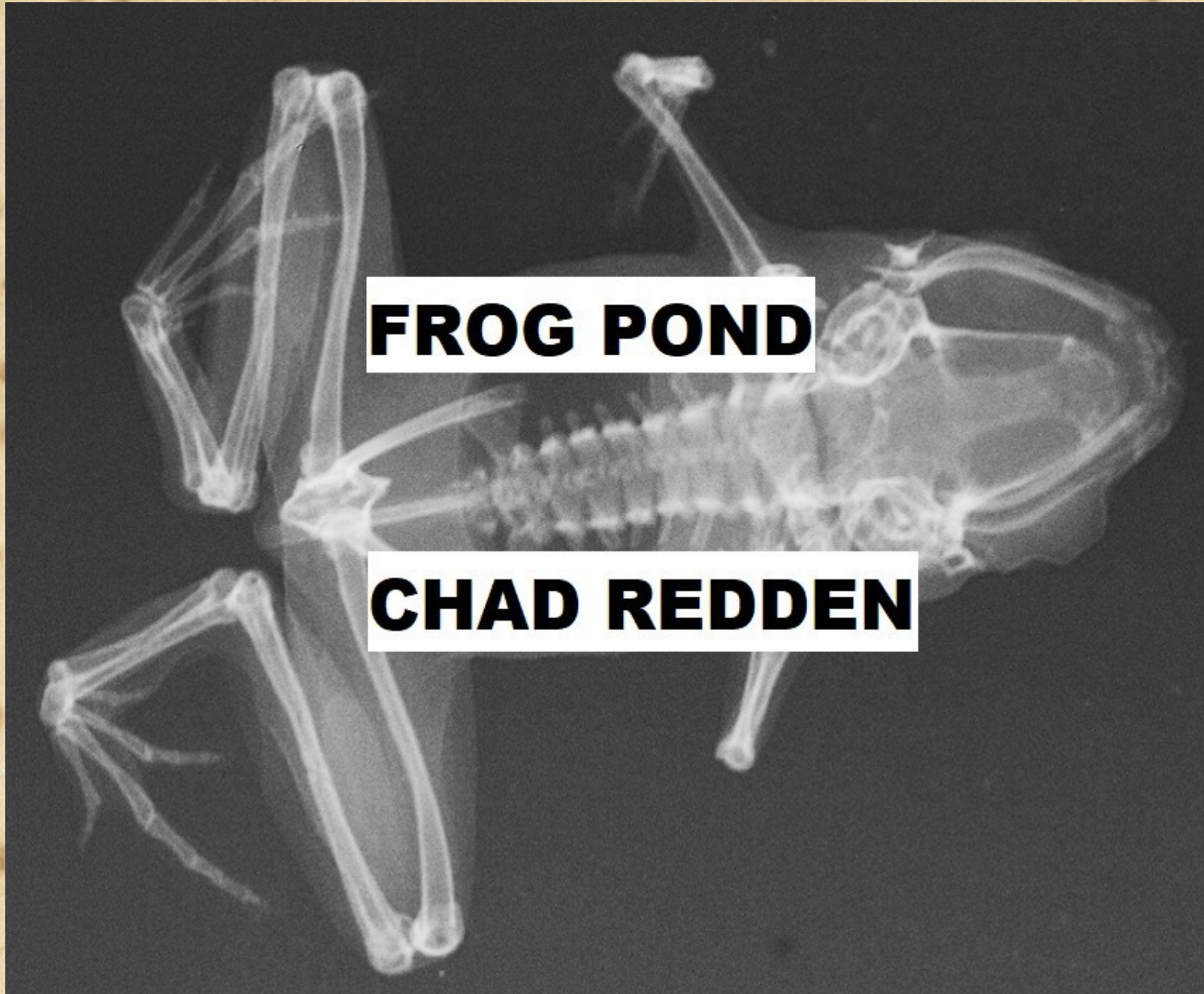
"[He/She] is the kind of writer who will pilfer a leather bomber jacket out of a garbage can and then hit the shitty neighborhood bar thinking they look real god-damn good in it, so yeah, a kindred spirit."

"[This book is] dripping with comical dark poignancy... like a bacon, egg and cheese McGriddle."

"Reading [this writer] is like getting a totally sweet hand job from someone with an MFA—someone really smart, but also someone kinda shifty, kinda dangerous."

"[This writer] is the type of person who'd eat the fries off your plate after you've gotten up to use the bathroom at Perkins, which means they're a real sneaky ass."

"Sorry, book blurb was replaced by Metallica's *St. Anger* snare drum sound."



After you open the door lying on the bottom of the pond it can go two ways.

The door will open to deeper water that shimmers in an unusual way. The water behind the door connects to another pond, in another world. To get there, you will swim downward, through the doorway. You will force every bit of air from your lungs, to keep you from floating upward, remaining in your world. When this doesn't help you will grab onto the door frame, pull yourself through the doorway to the other side.

Or

The door will open the door to mud, grime, more of the pond floor. You will close the door, return to the surface before your lungs give out. Before your lungs give way to the water trying to force a way into your body.



IF YOU RETURN TO THE SURFACE you look for your daughter, the spot she stood before you dove into the water. She is not there. You look to the other edges of the pond. Your sense of direction bobbles around inside of you.

You call out, "Daughter, Daughter, Daughter."

Then, "The door didn't open to anywhere."

Then, "The door opened, but there was no place to go beyond it."

You wait. You worry. You wait for her to call back. You worry she ran away again. You wait for her to reveal herself, from the darkness surrounding the pond, from the deep wall of trees, of underbrush. You worry. You wait. You call out, "Daughter, Daughter, Daughter," again.

Branches bend, snap. Leaves shuffle, shiver against each other. Your daughter hides up in a tree. You watch for one of the trees to move, like you could see such a thing in the darkness. You watch for your daughter to reveal herself. She says to you, "My dream wasn't wrong. Maybe your heart wasn't full of intention, the right kind of intention."

You consider the intention of your heart. As it is now. As it was under water. You recall

kicking a turtle as you swam toward the door. What you thought might have been a turtle. You apologized with your heart. You call out to the daughter, "Maybe tonight, you'll have another dream. Maybe it takes us someplace else. Maybe gives a bit more guidance.

Your daughter does not reply. You watch the trees. Wait for one to move, for your daughter to climb down to the grass. Clouds gather. The trees remain still, quiet.



IF YOU WATCH THE CLOUDS AS THEY COVER THE STARS you remember the constellations you made up for yourself when you were a child. Their shapes. Their names. 'The disastrous egg.' 'The reminder mouse.' 'The many mixed up skeletons lost out in space.'

You remember the constellation you made up in the shape of your favorite professional wrestler. The one who used gardening shears to cut the hair of the other wrestlers. After a wrestler's hair was cut, they were destroyed. Without power. Weak. Crumpled down to the mat of the wrestling ring. Career ruined. Crying on television. Like Samson after the loss of his hair.

You consider the powerless of your entire life because you have spent your entire life without long hair. You remember a time when you wanted to grow your hair long, to your knees. But the process made you feel awkward. Your hair grew upward, outward, heavy. It barely went below your chin. You gave up, cut your hair short.

You say to your daughter, "I'm walking home now."



IF YOU DO NOT THINK ABOUT THE STARS you instead think about the mud drying to your feet, your hands. The coldness of the water in your clothes. The heaviness in them as well. You want to walk home. You call out to your daughter, "I want to go home."

She calls back to you, "You should go back in."

You say, "I don't have the lungs for it. I don't think I'd come back up."

Your daughter says, "If you don't come back up that will mean you made it to the other

side."



IF YOU WALK HOME WITHOUT YOUR DAUGHTER you take a path that leads you to a road. A road congested with an encampment of people living out of their cars. People who decided one day to go driving until they ran out of gas. Then began living out of their cars. How so many people ran out of gas in the same place is a mystery. Some living among the cars theorize a divine influence wanted them to live in the road, to be fruitful, to multiply. Some government agencies theorize possible solutions to clear the road of people.

A lookout for the camp sees you. When he slaps on the trunk of his car you say to yourself, *this man has studied woodpeckers*. He continues to slap on the trunk of his car until you look at him.



IF YOU LOOK AT THE MAN SLAPPING THE TRUNK OF HIS CAR he calls out to you, says "Are you interested in a tumbleweed?"

"Interested how?" You ask, unsure if this man wants to show or sell you a tumbleweed. "I don't have money to waste." You say. Which is true. Dollars are in short supply.

"Not trying to sell you anything, trying to give it a better home." The mans says. He opens the trunk of his car, shines a flashlight inside to a narrow, small tumbleweed. It looks nothing at all like the tumbleweeds you've seen in movies. Small leaves are still attached to it.

You say, "It looks like a small shrub."

The man replies, "That's how tumbleweeds start out. You've got to let it dry up, change into a tumbleweed. Like one of those zen trees."

"Bonsai tree?"

"Yeah, bonsai tree. Like that. But you don't water it, you pull off the leaves."

"I always thought tumbleweeds just looked like tumbleweeds."

The man nods like he his sympathetic to your confusion. "It's like this, I drove out west to find a tumbleweed for a girl. I was going to ask her out with the tumbleweed. If you were the girl you'd think it was a cute idea. But when I got to Missouri I got a bit nervous, being so far from home. So I turned around, bought this one from a store. So I could be truthful when said I drove all the way out west to get one. But it's too late now, I've been out here for weeks. I'd just like to give this tumbleweed to someone who could use it."

"I'm not sure that I could use it."

"Maybe you know someone that might be then, someone who needs to calm down. Like a child or a boss? Someone with a lot of stress or energy?"

One side of the tumbleweed was already picked clean. When you point this out to the guy he says, "Yeah, I started pulling off the leaves. It made me feel calm, but not calm enough."

You say, "Thanks though, I'm not that interested. What about the kids around here? One of them might like it, to have something to do."

"The kids all ran off." The guy says.

"The kids ran off?"

"Yeah, one day they were on the side of the road playing, then like a wind came. Blew them away. Not really the wind, it was their feet that carried them away. Into those trees over there." The man points to a line of trees, hills. The kind of place that would hold a forgotten plane crash.

"Is anyone looking for the kids? The parents? The police?"

"Yeah of course. No one just lets kids run off to live on their own in the woods. Why else do you think so many of these cars are empty?"

It was true. Most of the cars on the road were empty. You think of how much effort it

would take to get everyone back into their cars. Or to push the driverless cars to the edge of the road to make a path through them.

The man says, "Not everyone went looking for the kids. Some people have too many payments left to abandon their car. Which, I can understand, but they're in denial. These cars aren't moving again."

The man pulls the tumbleweed from the trunk, sets it on the ground beside the car. You both stand over it, watching for a wind to come help the tumbleweed tumble away. Wind does blow. Rocks the plant a little.

You ask the man, "Why do you want to get rid of the tumbleweed now?"

"I saw all of this playing out a bit differently."

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IF YOU IGNORE THE MAN SLAPPING THE TRUNK OF HIS CAR you walk around the camp, continue home. You find your daughter is already there. This confuses you as you are unsure of which path she could have taken to arrive home before you.

Once you are home she tells you she wants to go back out to which you say, "It's a little too late already."

Your daughter says, "It's a night for dressing up in order to be scarier than anything you might meet in the night. I'm going to go around wearing my insides on the outside."

You look at the calendar. It's true. It is a night for dressing up in order to be scarier than anything else in the night. You know you can't argue with her. You say, "There is a box of old bed sheets I've meant to donate out in the garage. You could turn one of them into a ghost by cutting some holes for eyes."

Your daughter asks, "Have you even seen anything scary in your life?"

You say, "I have, but don't want to talk about it."

Then you say. "Ghosts still scare plenty of people."

Your daughter holds out to a book on human anatomy. She shows you pictures of lungs, hearts, organs, intestines. She says, "Look at all of this stuff. Sitting around inside of us. You'd never know it by looking at a person. All of it is just waiting to pop out, scare you. That's what I think is scary."



IF YOU WALK HOME FROM THE POND WITH YOUR DAUGHTER you see searchlights shine upon the clouds in the sky. The kind of searchlights only people would think to use on the sky. The clouds above hang thick, plastered in place. It feels like a ceiling about to come down at any moment. Searchlights shine upward from many locations. Some whirl. Some swirl. All move without organization, or any purpose you can determine. You ask, "What are they looking for?"

Your daughter replies, "Probably a way out."

When you arrive home you find your searchlight, then shine it toward the sky. You guide your light to meet the others already shining upon the clouds. Many lights move to meet your light. Swirl around then glide away. Your light follows them. This makes you feel like a fish, swimming among other fish in a school. At least what you think it would be like to be a fish, swimming among other fish in a school.



IF YOU TAKE A MOMENT TO PRETEND YOU ARE A FISH you make your light chase the other lights. You move your mouth like you breathe water. You think a few fish thoughts. Then stop. You remember you didn't like being in the water all that much tonight.



IF YOU FOCUS ON YOUR LIGHT IN THE CLOUDS FOR HOURS WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN you move your light along with slow passes, not wanting to miss any movement, or opening. When your neck begins to hurt, you rotate it in circles to release the tension.

You think you could trick something into poking out of the clouds by turning off your light for a moment, only to turn it back on again a second or two later. Thinking something was in the clouds that could be tricked into making an appearance, making it think

it was safe enough to come out. Other spotlights get the same idea, flash their lights. You feel proud for having some influence on the night. Even after spectacle turns hard on the eyes.

Somewhere south of you someone lets out a shout, "There!" The searchlights converge, find their way to the 'there', to the object. Your light follows the others. You see it. A small twin-engine airplane. Free from the clouds, its silver fuselage in the searchlight reflects the light back at your eyes with a harsh speed. As you are blinded, it seems the pilot is blinded as well. The plane wobbles. Loses control. Dives to the ground. You realize there is too much light shining on the plane. You yell out, "We've blinded the pilot."

The searchlights do not hear you. They follow the plane to the ground as it falls into a tailspin. Then faster than the searchlights can follow. The plane crashes into some faraway hills. The wreckage burns in them in a way that makes you realize you missed the sunset this evening. That you miss the sunset many evenings.



IF YOU DO NOT SPEND THE REST OF YOUR EVENING TRYING TO ORGANIZE YOUR FAVORITE SUNSETS INTO A TOP TEN LIST you search the sky with your searchlight. You look for a parachute, the pilot. You see them falling slow like a paper tissue to the ground. You know how paper tissues fall to the ground. Once you pulled all of the tissues from a cube of tissues to make it snow upon your sister. It was summer, one of those July nights when the heat made it impossible to sleep. Your sister wanted to feel cool. Both of you tried to think cool, as a way to handle the heat. You both imagined sleeping upon things like icebergs, avalanches.

Your mother became upset that you wasted the tissues. She was more mad about the money it took to buy tissues. It didn't make sense to you at the time. How could anything so soft cost money? You asked your mother to make more money to buy more tissues. This made her cry. You apologized. Swore to her you'd make enough money one day to make it snow tissues all over the world. It would be the softest day for everyone.

IF YOU SWAM THROUGH THE DOOR ON THE BOTTOM OF THE POND you find yourself on the bottom of another pond. A pond in another world. You swim to the surface. The air in this world smells like mint. Fresh, growing from the ground mint. Not the mint of candy, ice cream. You try to think of what your world will smell like when you return to it. That maybe you will be able to notice its smell after an absence. You hope it smells as good as the mint of this world. But remembering the state of the place you came from, it may very well smell like burnt popcorn.

You wade out of the pond, your ears clear of water. Frogs begin to croak, sing. A few at first until it becomes a chorus of frogs until it sounds like every frog in the world sits around the pond. All calling out at once. A wall. A storm of sound that makes it hard for you to remember what you're doing in the night, walking out of a pond in another world.

You call out to them, and say " ."

But the volume of the frogs overwhelms your voice. You cannot hear what you say, cannot be sure you have said anything. You call out again,
" ."

And again, " !"

And again, " ."

Until you shout out random words, hoping that one of them can break through the frog sound, "

."

↑

IF YOU DECIDE TO JUMP BACK INTO THE POND you lose the sound of the frogs under the water. You swim down to the door lying on the bottom. It's closed. You reach for the handle, but find a blank wooden space where a handle should be. You feel around the surface of the door for a way to open it. You find nothing. You try to pry your fingers into the jam, to open it that way. Your fingers slip. Your lungs knock at the undersides of your ribs.

You return to the surface. Cough up a little pond water. Feel not all of it left you, that you swallowed a little. Recover. When you can't stand the chorus of all of the frogs at the frog pond, you dive down again to the door.

This time you knock on the door. No one answers. Then you slap at it. Kick at it. Scream out the last bit of air you have. Then return to the surface.

Cough up a little more pond water. Knowing more is inside you, you think of yourself as an expensive container for pond water. Your tongue feels dead, overwhelmed with the bitter flavor of the pond. An over brewed tea, except not a tea made from tea leaves. A tea made from dirt, rot, rain.

When the sound of all of the frogs at the frog pond overwhelms you, you dive back down to the door. You don't have a plan this time. You stare at the door until pond water forces itself into your mouth.



IF YOU WALK AWAY FROM THE FROG POND you consider taking off your clothes. They are heavy with water, mud, the filth of the water. Their weight forces your back into a slight, uncomfortable hunch. You feel like a creature made of scales, gills, slime. You make creature sounds you cannot hear. The frog song overwhelms your voice.

You walk until the sun rises, walk toward the sunrise. This burns your eyes, because of the brightness of the sun. Also your eyes feel tired, worn. Your clothes feel lighter. They have dried. The mud on your hands turned pale. Flakes off. You feel like less of a creature now. Someone coming upon you might think you were a ghost.. You make ghost sounds. You can hear them. You walked far enough away from the frogs to hear yourself again.

Ahead of you someone yells out, "Here comes something. Something not from the road." People gather in the road, around cars, an encampment. You wave to them. They wave back with tire irons, boards.

You say to the people, "I fell into a pond. The mud."

A woman wearing a hubcap as a sun visor asks, "Were there fish? Something to eat in the

pond?"

You tell the people you didn't see any fish. You tell them about the frogs. A man wearing duct tape sandals claims to know how to catch, cook frogs. A group gathers, runs off in the direction of the pond. Some children follow behind, dragging along amateur spears, nets.

The people among the cars offer the back seat of a car to you as a place to rest. You accept the seat, lay down. Before sleeping you think about the frogs, the expedition headed to the pond. You feel guilty about the fate of the frogs. But remember you only heard them, you didn't see any frogs around the frog pond. Maybe things would work out for the frogs.



IF YOU STAY AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE CARS you witness frogs become currency among the people of the cars within a day. The people capture them alive. Find or create makeshift buckets. Fill the bucket with water. Some people leave their cars to go to live by the pond full time. To catch frogs. Then trade them for parts of cars they use to build shelters. Then a fence around the pond. So they may keep control of the frog supply. The pond water.

At night the frogs continue to sing. No one sleeps. Not the people among the cars. Not the people living near the pond. People take to yelling at each other, the frogs, the cars, the water. Some people go about eating the frogs as soon as they trade or capture them. Just to make the world a bit quieter.

You find a windshield sun visor to trade for a frog. You would eat the frog, but have no way to clean the frog or to cook it. You keep it as a companion. You lie in the backseat, watch over the frog. The frog lives in a shallow pan of water you placed on the floor board. You sleep during the heat of the day, stay up with the frog at night. You let the frog sing all it wants. You reach down in the dark with a finger, try to pet the frog. Sometimes all you do is dip your finger in water.

You tell the frog, "This is all my fault. I should have never said anything about the pond."

The frog does not change their singing in any way that would let you know if the frog forgives you.

You consider releasing the frog. Opening the back door, letting the frog hop away. But then in this economy. You're sure someone would scoop up the frog and eat them. Or trade the frog for something from someone who would eat the frog.

But you also don't wish for the frog to starve to death. You are unsure how long a frog can go without eating. You have been unable to capture any bugs to feed the frog. You had hoped it was a vegetarian, that the frog might eat the leaves, seeds, grass you found near the road. The frog pushed the vegetation down into the water of the shallow pan.

←

IF YOU DO NOT RELEASE THE FROG you wait until the part of the morning when frogs stop singing, when the people fall asleep. You leave the camp knowing it is the only way to keep the frog safe. From the people, the economy of frogs. You hide the frog in your shirt pocket. You carry a bottle of water to sprinkle water on the frog. To keep them wet. You look up at the sky. There are clouds. You do not understand what the clouds mean.

You tell the frog, while sitting among grass, "If it were raining I'd let you go here, among this tall grass. You'd have water. Also, I bet you could find a lot to eat out here."

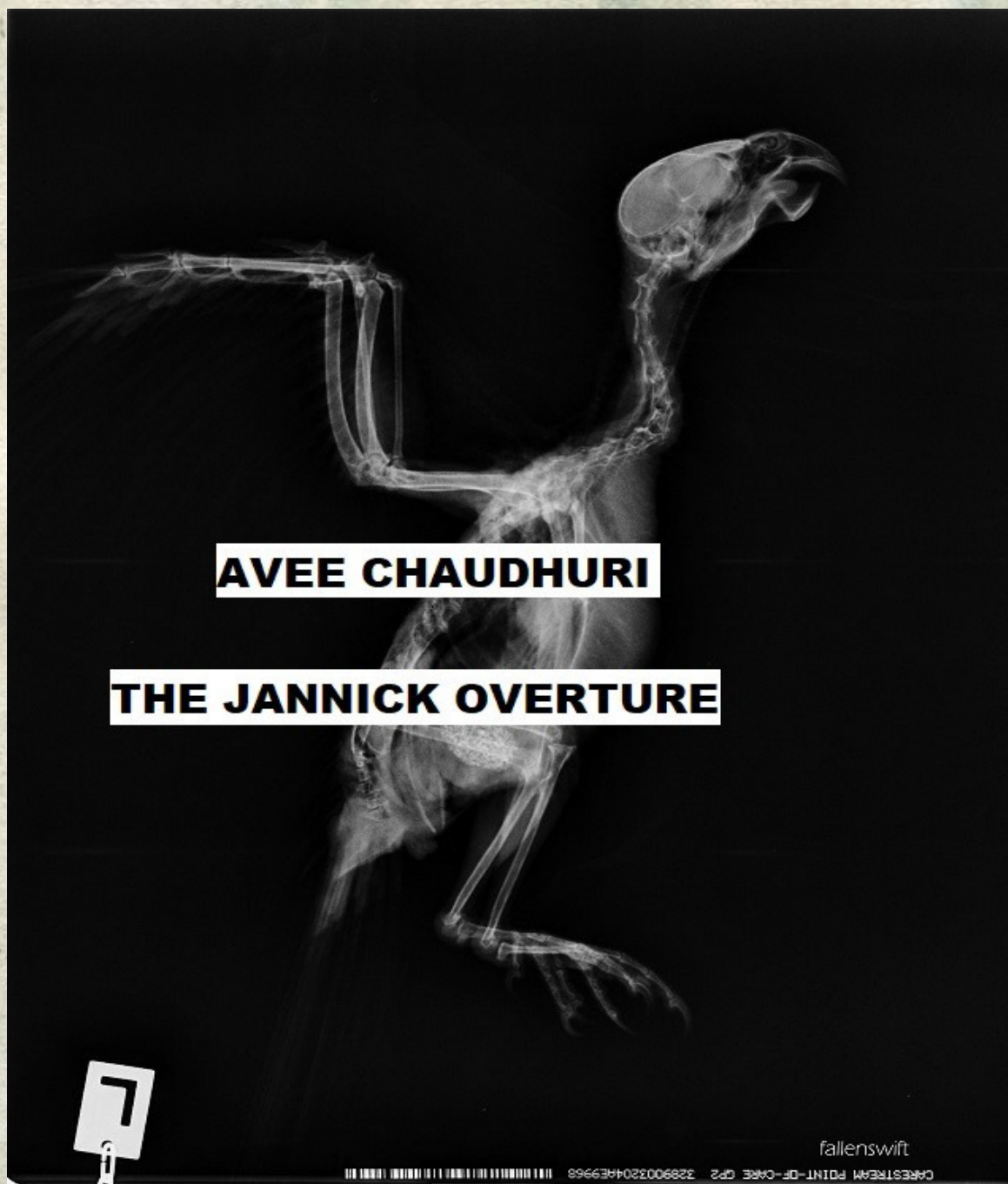
You tell the frog, "I wish I would have studied clouds. To know which ones mean rain or storms. Where I'm from, there are people who have jobs were all they do is look at clouds, then report to others what's coming."

You tell the frog, "Not like looking at the clouds to see shapes, omens. Though rain clouds look a certain way. But that would be a fun job. To look at clouds all day. See what is going to blow over the town, the state. Tell the people what kinds of feelings are in the air based on the shapes you see in the clouds. Maybe people would be a bit better about their actions, knowing what was in the air above."

You tell the frog. "While I wish that was how people worked, that's not how they work at all."

You tell the frog, "If I were someone else I would have eaten you. Honestly, if I were me but a little more skilled at killing animals, I would have eaten you."

You find a small stream. You set the frog down on a hump of sand, gravel in the water. The frog crawls away from you, to the water. The current carries the frog away. Faster than you would have thought. You feel accomplished. You feel lonely. You sit by the water a while. Scoop up a few handfuls to drink. Then a few handfuls to wash your face.



Nacogdoches, Texas

Jannick Meissner claimed to be from Eastern Bavaria. He spoke theatrically, e.g. "I will revenge myself upon Castro."

Castro had slighted Jannick by not inviting him to an ongoing, Sunday afternoon table-top role playing game. Jannick was livid.

"I am an excellent storyteller," he told me. We were drinking on Jannick's front porch. I sat and he paced back and forth in a very tortured manner. "I will revenge myself upon Castro," he repeated.

"You don't even like role playing games," I pointed out.

"This is accurate," Jannick conceded. Jannick was a very cultured, seemingly intelligent German male in his early 30s. He did not like games. He preferred to drink whiskey, listen to Wagner and talk about the demise of Western culture. It was his favorite topic of conversation. Then, when he was very drunk, incredibly drunk, -- which was often -- he would make a solemn display of his sexual impotence, even in mixed company, and then stumble into the kitchen to cook you these extraordinary chicken quesadillas. I don't think he even played cards.

Still, it was a matter of principle. Jannick felt like he was being ostracized because of his superior wit and charm. It was a matter of envy on Castro's part. Castro is admittedly a bit of an ass, but the reality is Jannick could be very unpleasant. And his penis smelled horrible.

#

We were crossing the Straits of Colchis when Jannick rang the doorbell. Castro's wife let him in and showed him to the game room, unaware of the fact that Jannick was not an invited guest. We all greeted him sheepishly. Castro managed to ask him how his day had been.

"Very good, Castro. I was walking through the neighborhood and thought I would stop by and say hello. What is it you are all doing?"

Castro explained impatiently that we were playing the Knights of New Corinth.

"May I observe the game for a little while? Would anyone care for a touch of mineral water and blended scotch? Castro, do you have a lemon and a sharp knife with a wide bevel?" Jannick sat down next to me and produced a flask without waiting for a reply.

Castro sighed audibly but we continued the game. I was never really worried that Jannick would revenge himself that afternoon. Traditionally, the man had never followed through on anything.

He was still overweight and still a drunkard, despite vowing tearfully on numerous occasions to give up cheeseburgers and highland single malt, his favorite pairing. But I did not realize then that Jannick's vengeance that afternoon would be swift and costly.

We had made landfall on the Troezen Coast and were hiking to the caves further inland to mine for Adamantine, which was not a very glamorous undertaking, but necessary in order to defeat the Troll Wizard Pandonia X. This did not please Jannick.

"You're miners, now?" He was incredulous. "This game is a fantasia, no? Why aren't you fighting and pillaging? Kill the men and sexually humiliate the women in front of their children. Then sexually humiliate the animals in front of the clergymen. Then kill the clergymen. Let God watch this tapestry of devastation unfold." Bear in mind that all of this was uttered unsmilingly, in a thick German accent.

"Jannick, right now we're mining for Adamantine. You're free to leave," Castro said.

A pained expression crossed Jannick's face. "Castro, Castro, I am sorry. I am not being a good guest. I apologize. Would you like some mineral water and scotch?"

Castro ignored him and kept narrating. As we were mining for Adamantine, a Praxis Dragon entered the cavern, attracted to the smell of our smoked whitefish.

"What's the plan?" our buddy Stan asked.

"Well, fuck, I think we've got to make a run for it," Castro opined.

Based on our diminished stores of magic and the abject state of our weapons (hence the

visit to the mine), a retreat was a logical course of action. Jannick, again, objected.

"Stay and fight! Cowards!" "Goddammit, Jannick."

But Jannick had a plan. Apparently, he'd done his research. "Use the Nabulus Vestibulovus spell to flood the cave with gas. Then shield yourself with the Adamantine you've unearthed. When the dragon releases his fire, he will blow himself up and you will be safe."

"That's not a bad idea," Stan said.

Castro, to be fair, acknowledged as much. "Alright, not bad, Jannick. Want a beer?"

Jannick happily accepted a beer. For the next two hours he was polite and inquisitive. He and Castro seemed to be getting along. When Castro's kids came home from the park, they were introduced to "Uncle Jannick." Jannick insisted on ordering pizza for everyone.

It happened after his third slice of mushroom and sausage. Jannick stood up abruptly and raised his fist. He was trying, I think, to make a serious declaration of his enmity, but before he could he leaned over the table and projectile vomited over everything, the seas, the mountains, the small village we massacred Sunday last, the sacred brothel of the elves. He kept vomiting for several minutes. When Castro ran back from the garage and offered Jannick a bucket, Jannick pushed him aside and kept willfully throwing up on the game table.

"Jesus! What the fuck, Jannick!" Castro cried as he tried to forcibly remove Jannick from the tableside. But Jannick gripped the table for dear life and kept vomiting.

When he was finally done, Jannick took a swig from his flask and wiped his mouth.

"I am an excellent story teller," he said to Castro. Then he collapsed. I rode with him in the ambulance.

He was severely dehydrated. Jannick had eaten a big meal at home before he walked over to Castro's, and he drenched his last pizza slice in syrup of ipecac, the well-known emetic. Wisely, he was put under psychiatric observation for 24 hours. I visited him, but Castro, understandably, refused.

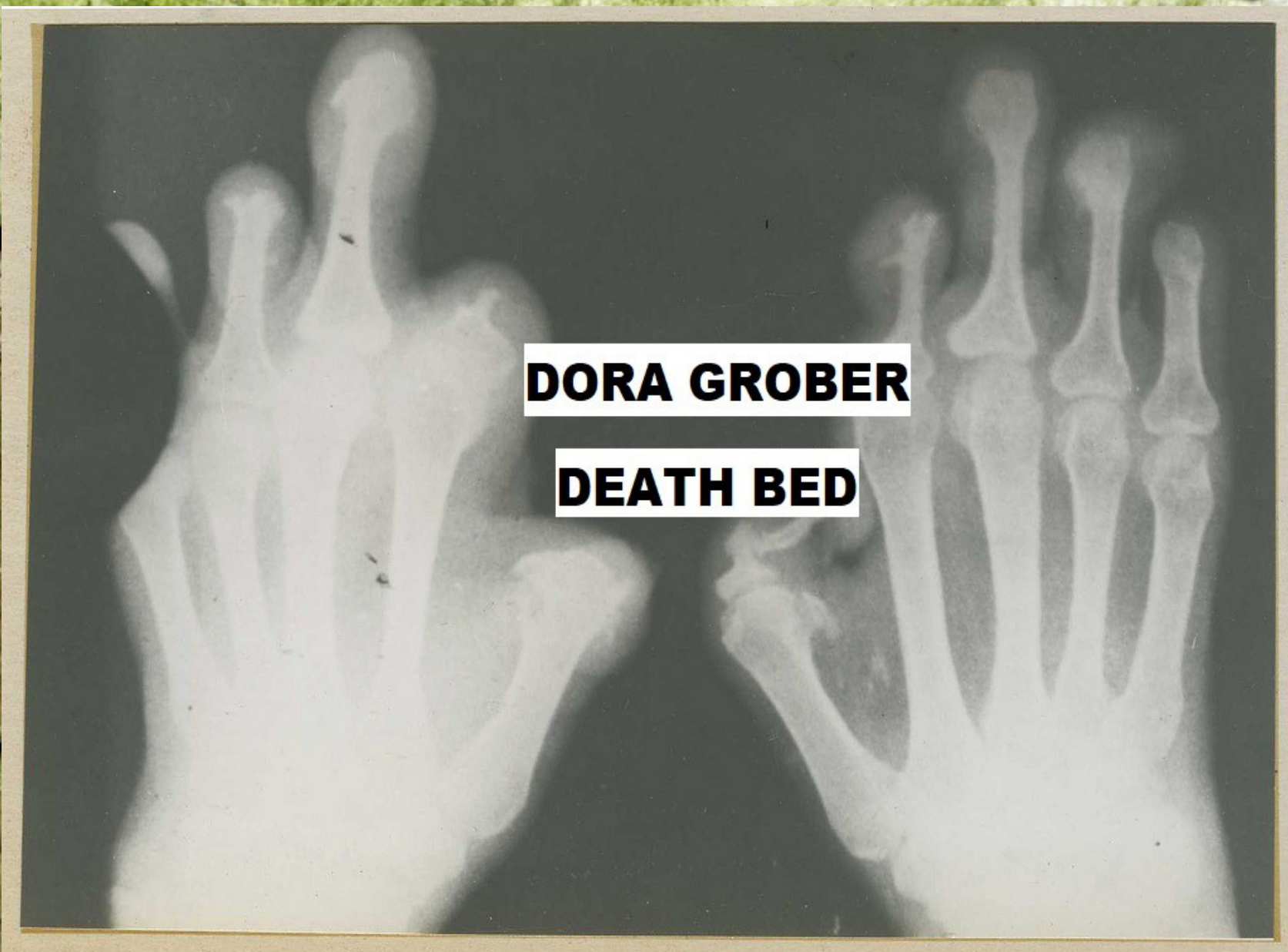
Jannick complained, "Where is Castro? Why does he fail to visit me?" "He's busy trying to repair the damage you caused."

"Well, I think he is rude, and I shall, once more, revenge myself upon Castro," Jannick declared.

The next day Jannick checked himself out of the hospital against the doctor's advice. A few hours later they arrested Jannick for setting fire to the play structure in Castro's backyard, then attempting to extinguish the flames by urinating on them. Despite a jubilant effort, he was not successful.

"I am no longer dehydrated. That doctor is a fraud," Jannick declared as he was led to the police cruiser.

Some towns have their resident drunks and fading beauties. Ours has Jannick, arguably a synthesis of the two but so much more, eternally aggrieved, openly vain and routinely impotent by his own hand and bottle. His notoriety survives ice storms and the yearly lice and handjob epidemics at the middle school. Of course he seethes and bitches that Castro has yet to attend to him in prison. When they release him, any day now, Jannick tells me he will find another town, with more personable adversaries and perhaps a more sympathetic biographer.



You're sitting in your bed, legs pulled up to your chest, black, unkempt hair in an unusual ponytail and you don't talk, not because he's not home but because you have nothing to say. Just a few hours ago you were standing on your desk and painting on the wall, first with a brush and then with your hands, listening to the song Rolling by Soul Coughing, not on repeat. You didn't feel like an artist but you didn't feel fake. You felt like this was recovery or at least some level or element of it, something he could see and think *"he's getting better"* and he would smile but he didn't come home and the half-done portrait feels more crazy than healthy now.

This woman in the group told you the other day *you don't have to be happy, you just have to stay sober* because realistic goals are key if you really want to reach them.

3 days ago J. came over and bought cola instead of booze and you wanted to tell him not to bother, to feel free to drink a beer or ten because you won't sway. It's been 4 months. You wanted to say *if I want to get fucked up, I will*, just like James Frey wrote in his book, *and it doesn't matter whether you have a case of beer with you or not*. You didn't drink because you felt like it would've been embarrassing, like losing a fight not against yourself but against J., which is stupid. You felt like it would make you look ridiculous and weak which you believe you are anyway even though you're trying hard to bring something home from all those sessions you sit through. Most of the time you just stare at your hands and listen and occasionally you offer a made-up story about yourself - you don't particularly need to fabricate stories, you just want to check if they can detect lies. They can't or they stick to their rule of respecting everybody's words equally. It makes them seem absolutely useless to you but you go every time anyway because you promised him you will and you don't feel like you've been trying enough yet. You think they can't or shouldn't be too soft or permissive if they want to help addicts, they have to be brutal because that's the only thing they understand or at least this seems to be true when you think about yourself. J.'s cheerful and forgiving and his forgiveness kills everything natural between you, you desperately hope only temporarily.

Self-forgiveness is the hardest part and you don't know what to do with the things you don't think you should forgive yourself for.

He's not home and he won't be for another 3 months and he said *bad timing* and he didn't want to go but you made him, you told him you needed to do this alone because he can't always be there to save you and you've always learned everything the hard way anyway,

pushed right in the deepest of waters, but you miss him so much and you wish he were here and you remember how the leader of the group said *you need to do this for yourself not for anybody else* but sometimes you think it's bullshit and sometimes you think you'd be able to put up with anything, literally anything, 'til the end of times, to make him feel loved because words are cheap and you only use them to make a living. If he were here you wouldn't sit in your bed, you would be lying down.

You talk on Skype. You call each other. That means you call him too and not only when you're in need or trouble. You call him to tell him you made eggs for lunch and you call him to tell him nothing in particular. He always sounds calm and you can hear his smile and it makes your chest tighten with something elemental but you don't ask him to come home because you promised yourself not to be selfish, at the very least when it comes to him.

You deliberately don't tell him when you're in a bad mood - particularly bad because you almost always feel either numb or very anxious - because you don't want him to worry. He's worried anyway and you know it and you hate it because it makes you feel like some kind of a recurring illness instead of a partner. Cancer, cured for the moment, but you can never be entirely sure or relaxed. You jump at every sign, real or imagined.

Now the paint is slowly drying on the wall and you feel old and sad. This is not that blinding, heavy, sticky sadness that makes you sigh and make resigned gestures. This is sudden and not connected to him or his absence. As far as you can tell it's not connected to anything, maybe other than your whole life, your existence which simply narrows down to you sitting in your bed at this very moment. You don't feel pathetic, or that's not a dominant feeling. You feel small and you laugh at yourself for all the cliché thoughts that come to your mind about everything being meaningless and people not being more significant than mere specks of dust in the universe.

Most of the time you're bored out of your skull.

It's dark outside and the music stopped god knows when and you're getting hungry which is another newish feature or ability of yours, or at least newly discovered as 0. reminded you once, and you tell yourself *maybe something sweet* or you think that and you say *this is unreal*. You want a drink to make the beginning of this unstable feeling go away. You want fifteen drinks and you want to be unconscious, preferably for a few hours or the

whole night, and you want to pick a fight with someone stronger than you. He's never willing to hurt you even when you ask him to. The paint is slowly drying on the wall and you decide to paint something over that stupid face tomorrow. You want a drink. You want fifteen drinks. It's been 4 months.

You're slowly lying down.



KATHERINE OSBORNE

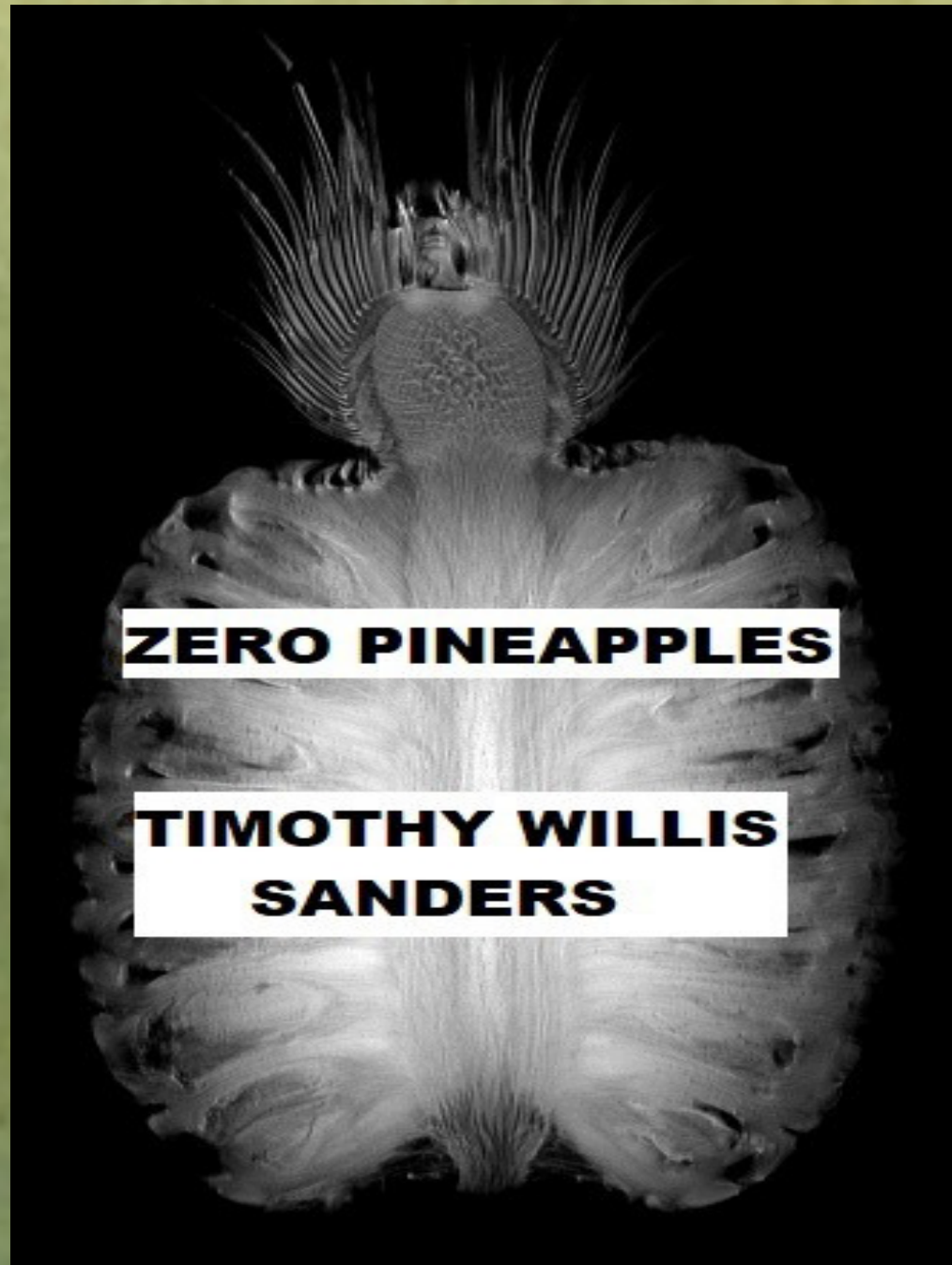
**NORTHERN WOODS
DOLL TURNED AWAY**

I will use both our deaths. I will use both our deaths to sing this song. Trees have advanced language. Take me to your Research Team. I will give them. Evidence. I was spoken to from the confusion of your stolen cattle. Date me back to an all-knowing Omaha.

Your mother has a secret stash of animals. Use them to find her. You better find. Her.

There is a vault of friendships filed under Fantasy Baseball. I win by a system of placing my bet on love without rules. I didn't hear from you so I started famous one act plays. Lost you again this time I made some friends. You become a mother with or without your child. Grief speaks with the authority of an off the charts Jesus. Are you having dreams again? It doesn't matter why won't you call. You have discovered a casket years into the Earth. As if Earth knows how to lower such a thing. My baby lost her doll in the snowbank, so we had to make a rescue. What is it? You don't believe me. Snow harder.

I open something on your computer and it kills the lights. I know you better than they do is the farm I buy from them. When you learn how to lucid through, the gods will learn from you. Walk right in, honey. You've got to run this show.



ZERO PINEAPPLES

**TIMOTHY WILLIS
SANDERS**

Billy asked Chris and Molly what movie they had picked and Chris held up a DVD copy of The Birds.

Billy shot a look at Meg.

"Hitchcock had a really fucked up obsession with Tippi Hedren. I read about it online so I decided to never watch the movie," said Billy.

"Who's Tippi Hedren?" said Chris, sliding the DVD into the Playstation.

"Exactly," said Meg.

"Well, sorry about Tippi, but I have a surprise for you both after the movie," said Molly.

Billy pictured Molly wheeling out a human-sized box with a large gold ribbon, from which Gene Wilder, dressed as Willy Wonka, flipped out of and tipped his hat.

"It's pineapple upside-down cake," Meg whispered to Billy.

"You think so?" said Billy.

"Yeah, I saw it in the kitchen. Don't eat too much," said Meg.

2

Billy fell asleep 30 minutes into The Birds. He woke up to Tippi Hedren's catatonic and bandaged face staring back at him. He announced to the others he still understood what was going on.

"Thanks for the update, babe," said Meg, patting Billy's knee.

Billy looked at the birds covering the landscape of Bodega Bay. He said, "Good for these birds, taking back their beachfront property," and imagined a seagull wearing sunglasses and sipping a margarita.

After the movie, Molly brought out the surprise: a pineapple upside-down cake on a large

white plate.

Just before finishing his first slice, Billy decided to ask for a second slice.

"Sorry, but anyone mind if I jump in again?" Billy said, pointing to the cake.

Molly laughed and said, "Wow, Billy," while pointing to everyone else's plate, each one occupied with a barely-half-eaten slice of pineapple upside-down cake.

Billy cut a second slice and licked his lips dramatically as he lowered the slice onto his plate.

"Billy's blood sugar is so high that his blood is sugar," said Meg.

"He had a physical and the doctor told him he was pre-pre-diabetic," Meg said to Molly in a low voice.

"It's literally crack cocaine," said Billy, crumbs falling out of his mouth, "like you literally cooked rock cocaine into your pineapple-upside down cake. It's that good."

"Thanks Billy," said Molly.

3

Billy contemplated asking for a third slice of pineapple upside-down cake. He looked at the other plates and noticed everyone was still nursing their first slice of pineapple upside down cake. "Even after all this time," he thought and wondered if he was the only one that actually liked the pineapple-upside down cake.

Billy listened to Chris talk about greed in the banking industry. Meg tried to interject things about the sexism in the tech industry but each time Chris steered the conversation towards greed in the banking industry. Billy checked out of the conversation and tried to think of a company that makes pineapple-upside down cake available in 7/11s around the country.

"This is boring. Let's talk about something else," said Meg.

"Sorry, Chris is just 'incredibly attuned' to all the ways the banks are fucking you over," said Molly.

"Uhm, the banks are fucking you over?" said Chris.

"Okay, time to go," said Meg.

"Yeah, it's time to go," said Billy.

Billy put on his coat and just before he left he wondered how rude it would be to ask for a plate of pineapple upside-down cake to-go.

4

Billy flipped his pillow and closed his eyes. He scratched his forehead and felt sweat on his fingertips. He wondered if Alfred Hitchcock gained weight by eating too much pineapple upside down cake. He thought about how common it is for a man to imprison a woman. He imagined Alfred Hitchcock in a recliner, eating pineapple upside down cake from a TV tray and thinking up ways to imprison Tippi Hedren.

Billy wondered if he had the ingredients to make pineapple upside down cake. He tried to take a mental inventory of his baking supplies. "I have zero pineapples," he thought, sensing his body become restless. He flipped himself over and woke Meg up in the process.

Meg said, "Why are you awake?" but before he could answer she rolled over and fell asleep. Billy thought about how she'd regret falling asleep before hearing his plan to put pineapple upside down cakes in 7/11s around the country.



CHARLIE

BLAKE MIDDLETON

i took some adderall the other day

and for some reason i decided it was time to replace my old washing machine with a new washing machine

my roommate got a lighter stuck in the part of the washer where all the lent and other bullshit builds up

so we were scared that the washing machine was gonna catch fire or explode

i had been putting off changing it out for weeks

i didn't know how to change out a washing machine and hadn't really felt like learning

i kinda hoped my roommate would do it eventually

but whatever, i was bored and on adderall, optimal conditions for doing a dumb chore you've been putting off forever

i hadn't taken adderall in months

and there were reasons for this, of course

but it had been a few months, it was early, i wasn't gonna mix them with alcohol or anything, haha, just wanted some help focusing

felt like i didn't need a youtube tutorial, no no, none of that bullshit

just needed some fucking drugs, kids

i stared at the washing machine, trying to use my brain to think

i did some thinking and unscrewed the hose on the back of the washer a little bit

but some water shot out from around the sides

so the first step would be to turn off the water

and hey hey

goddamn

the adderall was working

it had increased my critical thinking/problem solving skills immensely

i tried to turn the faucet, but the handle was rusted and broken

i tried to use a wrench to turn the handle, but no, still wasn't working

i thought, fuck it

removing the hose was gonna be the first step again

the adderall in my dumb-ass brain was telling me that would work, like totally, fuck yeah

the adderall was telling me that, despite the recent revelation that the handle was completely broken and fucked, i had the mental capacity and psychical strength required to unscrew the hose from the back of the old washer then, while water was spewing out from the hose, screw it into the new washer

actually no, without really thinking about what i was doing, i unscrewed the hose

and as soon as i unscrewed the hose i realized that unscrewing the hose while the water was still running was a stupid and bad thing to do

because water was shooting out everywhere

getting all my shit wet

the floor wet. the counters wet. my pants wet.

like imagine all my shit getting really fucking wet

imagine a hose spewing water full blast on a bunch of shit that shouldn't get wet

it was bad

i tried to screw it back into the old washer

i thought, fuck it

just wanted to screw the hose back into the old washer, keep using that one until it caught fire or exploded and killed me or whatever

just wanted to read a book or lie in bed and stare at the ceiling or something

but no

wasn't gonna work for me

mentally added 'changing out a washing machine' to a long list of shit that just wasn't gonna work for me

no i didn't do that

but in hindsight, yeah, add it to the list

it was too late to quit though

this wasn't a time for literature or bad feelings in bed

this was a time for stopping a hose from flooding my house

really didn't wanna have to call my slumlord and get yelled at

plus my roommates had been getting drunk a lot and spray-painting the walls

so i would get double yelled at

then my dumb-ass brain did some more thinking stuff

and oh man

i realized who i needed

i needed my boy charlie

charlie was my alcoholic neighbor

there was a good chance that he would be home because he doesn't have a job

he spends most of his time drinking busch on his porch with his shithead buddies (also unemployed alcoholics)

he has a friend named 'ice man' that sells meth out of his ford bronco

'ice man' also does lawn service

'ice man' and charlie have a friend named 'creepy chris'

'creepy chris' lives in charlie's garage

he also smokes crack-cocaine and has sex with prostitutes in there too

charlie's garage: a versatile space perfect for a variety of stimulating activities such as crack smoking and illicit sex

'creepy chris' helps 'ice man' sell meth and cut grass

sometimes creepy chris smokes too much crack and walks around the park across the street very late at night

creeping around

there goes chris again, smoking crack and creeping around in the night, there he goes

just some normal jacksonville florida bullshit my guy

but yeah, yes, charlie was my only hope

i put the hose inside the washing machine and it started filling with water

i jumped over the washing machine and sprinted out my front door, drenched in water,
looking like a fucking dumb-ass

and yeah, yes

charlie was sitting alone on his porch drinking a busch

he was wearing cut-off jean shorts

and i could see his balls

dangling out, resting gently on the stoop

i got a little distracted for a minute by charlies big tan balls, you know?

shit was wet my guy

it was 11 am

charlie had been drinking, but he wasn't drunk

which was great because charlie isn't very helpful when he's drunk

like one time i went over to charlie's place to borrow a drill

i knocked on the door

and i could see charlie through the screen door

he was sitting on the couch, empty mcdonald's wrappers on the ottoman in front of him

looking old and leathery as ever

but he wouldn't move, he just sat there smiling, staring right at me

'charie,' i yelled. 'what the fuck?'

then jane, charlie's wife, nice old jane, came to the door, opened it

and before she could say anything to me, charlie yelled, 'how many boyfriends you got, jane?'

so i was thinking, okay, charlie's drunk and on pain pills again

suprise suprise

because charlie, in addition to being my drunk neighbor, is also my drunk maintenance man

and a few weeks ago he was doing some work on my roof, few too many beers deep, fell off and slipped a disk in his back

so for the past few weeks he's been on the pain pills

calls them 'happy pills'

usually in the context of 'hey blake do you wanna buy some happy pills?'

so i asked jane if i could borrow a drill

jane said, 'it's blake. wants to know if he can borrow a drill. do you know where the drills at, charlie?'

'bet you could find it if it was up your ass,' he yelled

nice old jane said, 'well, it's not up my ass, mr. charlie'

and i said, 'okay, i'll come back later'

but it was early this time and he wasn't drunk yet

i said, 'charlie, i need you. i've got a fucking emergency'

i felt a little strange saying 'i need you' to a weird old man while staring at his balls

he stood up and his balls retracted

i said 'follow me' and ran to my house

he walked real slow behind me

well we got inside and Charlie assessed the situation

he stared at the washing machine overflowing onto my floor

he looked at me and shook his head and laughed like 'haha what the fuck did you do, kid?'

then he took the hose and put it in a drain thingy behind the washer then walked outside and turned the water off by lifting up a concrete thingy in my front yard

seemed incredibly easy

made me feel like, what the fuck have i been doing on the world for 23 years. how do i not know how to do basic bullshit yet?

charlie said we were gonna need to go buy a new faucet because the current one was broken and fucked

i suggested that we go to the lowes down the street

*

we walked around lowes together

me and charlie

the two best friends

charlie would pick up a spout and mumble, 'should have gone to the fucking home depot'

i had always thought that lowes and home depot were the exact same store but now i know that they are not

i was learning things

learning things to remember in the future

always preparing for some empty bullshit

shit breaks and you fix it

just more and more tiny breaks to fix until that last sweet unrepairable breaking

a breaking so broke you gotta bury it

wet wet wet

but yeah fuck lowes i guess

*

on the drive home from lowes we approached a liquor store

i had gotten pretty used to paying charlie in liquor

he had been mowing my lawn with ice man and chris every week in exchange for a 750 of canadian club whiskey

fucking champions these guys

so i figured i'd stop in the liquor stop and buy him a handle

so i did

and we got back to my place and charlie fixed my washer

no problem

just fixed her right up

he took a deep breath and looked at me

'you want a mixed cocktail?' he said

really felt like i owed him one

like if charlie wanted me to drink a cocktail with him, then i would do that, yeah

i said okay, and we walked over to charlie's place

there was nascar shit everywhere

mostly dale earnhardt memorabilia

hell yeah

charlie walked to the kitchen and picked up two 32 ounce styrofoam cups

like those big motherfuckers you get at gas stations

he grabbed the handle of canadian club and a 2 liter of coke, handed them to me

'mix yourself a drink' he said, smiling like a big time motherfucker

so i poured a 2 oz shot into the cup

a normal amount

and he said 'c'mon pour a little more'

so i poured another 2 ounces

okay, seemed fine, whatever

and again he said, 'c'mon brother, pour a little more'

hmm not great, no no

but i poured another 2 ounces

mixed it with coke

we sat on the couch together, watching the local news

just two normal guys watching the local news alone on a couch, drinking giant-ass cock-tails

a white lady was talking about a murder at a gas station in westside jacksonville

charlie yelled something at the TV

i thought, 'okay all i have to do is finish this drink and then i can leave, cool'

so i started drinking faster

and by the time i finished the drink about five minutes later, i felt like watching the local news with charlie was a fun and normal thing to do

and i remembered that i took an adderall earlier

and that when i'm on adderall i feel like i can drink a lot more than i actually can

so i realized i drank too much too quick

surprise surprise

so i walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer

because i was already there

i was feeling good

i was feeling that invincible feeling again

felt like i was the fucking king of beer, god of the mini-fridge, the busch-light punish-er

and as soon as i popped the top ice man and creepy chris pulled up in the bronco, honked the horn a few times

and it sounded like 'daa-daa-da-da-da-da-daaaa-daaaa-da-da'

and i was drunk enough to think 'fuck yeah, cool, all of this this is normal and good'

and the bronco had bull horns on the front and i'm not kidding, it had 'ice man' stenciled on the hood

creepy chris stepped out of the passenger side, looking like a praying mantis on crack

and he was holding a styrofoam box over his head with his mantis arms

he started chanting 'chicken wings chicken wings chicken wings'

and charlie's lazy ass didn't hop up off the couch when i told him i had a fucking emergency but he sure did hop up for chicken wings

i followed him outside

'shut the fuck up, chris' charlie said. 'what you got in there?'

'chicken wings'

'give em here'

he handed charlie the box

charlie opened the box and said 'hey buddy' to the chicken wings, smiling

'hey charlie man,' said chris. 'i, uh, got them things for weed-eating a lawn'

'who's garage you live at, uh? do you live at charlie's garage? is that your mattress in my garage, uh?'

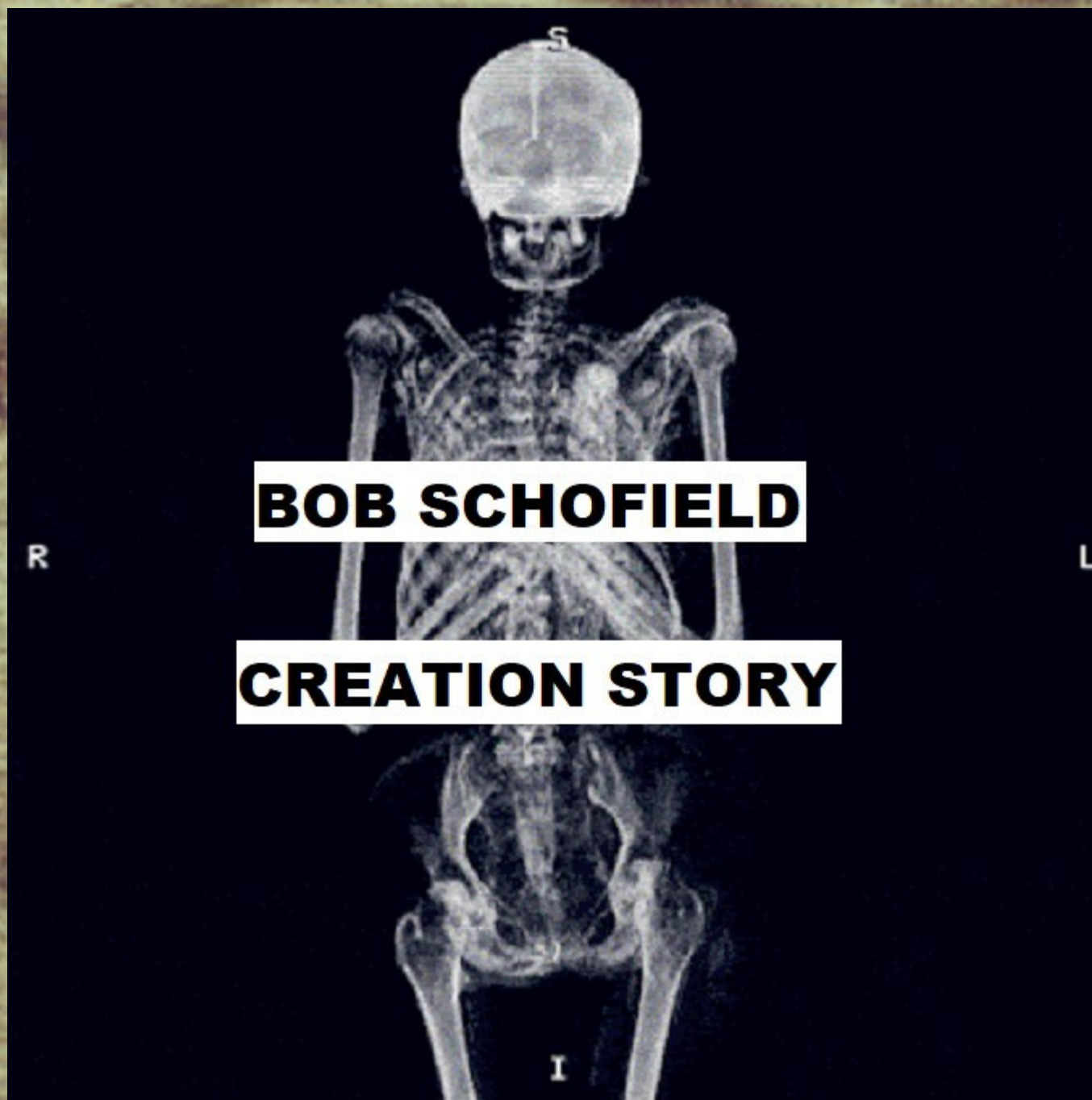
'Yeah, but--'

charlie slurped down a chicken wing

wet

he stood and chugged a beer, walked out back to the garage

we all followed charlie for some reason
and also, for some reason, there was a tire nailed above the garage
just kind of dangling there in the breeze like charlie's balls
couldn't seem to stop thinking about charlie's balls
charlie grabbed two 30 pound dumbbells out of the garage
'lifts some weights, chicken wing' he said to chris
and instead of telling charlie to 'fuck off' he just lifted the weights
he counted his reps and charlie ate his chicken wings
and ice man smiled at me and pulled out a one hitter
and i took a hit of ice man's weed
and thank god it was only weed
and yes my guy
i was drunk and stoned and on adderall
it was one of those day where you'd usually think 'huh, didn't think i'd be doing this
today'
only right then i wasn't thinking that
i wasn't thinking anything
that's what made it so good



At first the world was just one spiral.

Then that spiral grew a face.

The face was hungry. It filled with water. The face was silent, but never sleeping. A single tooth grew through the bottom.

The face was a word, and that word was "lake."

The lake was tended by older creatures. Giants with horns and black spiral faces. The whole earth cooled beneath their shadow. They danced over the hills on cloven feet.

The lake was the twisting center of a universe. Gears were built to keep it all in motion. Fish were constructed, to keep the water swirling. If a fish got caught in the gears, well, that was tragic. But they found it made the machine spin even faster. All that was needed was heat. A touch of fire.

The lake was a factory that ran on smoke.

Empty space hung above the lake. A vacuum, roaring. This displeased the spiral giants, so they painted over it with sky. Papered over it with clouds as the bright blue paint dried. They attached blackbirds there with nails and a length of wire. Smoke was bound to paper wings.

The giants pulled dirt from their hooves, wrapped it in trench coats. They called the dirt "policemen," and told them to stand guard over the lake.

Now the world was almost ready. Each part fit together. The sky. The stars. The fish. The blackbirds. Everything clicked in its proper position. Held with wire. Moving in slow motion. Line upon line, tracing the outer counters of the lake.

And the world was good.

Or, at the very least, not as terrible as it could be.

Then the giants carved themselves coffins out of lake water, and lay their bodies down to sleep, leaving the rest of it there to spin and spin

So much smoke and hurt and fishbones. So many chewed up blocks of ice.

But beneath the lake, the fish were changing.

Their bodies grew long. They started speaking. They climbed to the top of the lake, and decided to stay there. They had fallen in love with their own reflections. The sight of their new shapely legs.

From there, everything moved quickly. The fish wore fur. They turned into foxes and bears and people. They climbed even higher, and mated with blackbirds. Their children took stones, and built a city in the sky. They lived in relative peace there, putting on corsets and inventing light bulbs. They paid their rent, and poured white powder on their wigs.

In time the fish forgot about the caves and gears beneath the lake. They forgot the smoke and all that spinning. The constant hunger of the waves.

But a lake needs fuel to keep it spinning. Something disposable to burn. So each night the clouds would roll in, weighed down with the dead, the dying. The sick and ruined. Or those just left behind.

A door would bloom in each cloud's belly. The knob would turn, the hinges creaking. A bloom of heat, and the sky would turn orange. Like a second sunset, only this one framed in writhing bodies. Wrapped in flame and crying softly. From a distance they looked so small you might not even see them clearly. You might mistake them for fireworks over the lake.

Afterwards the doors would shut. The clouds would retreat. The lake was fed, and the world kept spinning. Things went on like this for years. A mound of bodies formed in the lake's center. Each night it grew by a few inches.

Soon the mound became a mountain, and the fire inside was not so small.

LONGBEARDS

CHRIS DANKLAND

Before The Smiths signed the contract for the brand new house they were set to purchase, the real estate broker said: I have to tell you that in the last few weeks a few of the construction workers have sighted some Longbeards near the woods. I'm only mentioning it because you said you have a small dog.

Yes, said Mr. Smith. Thank you. We'll be sure to keep him inside the house at night.

That's what I'd do, said the real estate broker, nodding. Just in case. I'm sure that as more and more people move into the neighborhood, the the Longbeards will retreat further into the woods. Longbeards like to be left alone. Maybe you'll hear them howling late at night.

Gregory! said Mrs. Smith, playfully poking their seven year old in his chubby belly. Are you excited about hearing some Longbeards howling? Sounds like fun, huh?

Gregory nodded ecstatically, lifted his head and cried: A-WOOOOOOOOOOO!

Laughter filled the office like the bubbles in their glasses of champagne.

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The first time the family heard the Longbeards was two weeks after they moved in. A sound like seven singing trumpets broke the seal of night. It was 3am. Mr. and Mrs. Smith sat up in bed at the same moment.

Longbeards! said Mrs. Smith in a hushed gasp, touching her lips.

There's a lot of them, said Mr. Smith. He headed toward the window.

Gregory appeared at their bedroom door. Mommy! he shouted. On stubby chubby legs he ran in and dived into their bed.

It's okay baby, said Mrs. Smith, cradling her son to her stomach. It's just Longbeards.

Everything's fine. Listen! Do you hear them howling? Gregory moaned and pushed his face deep into his mother's side.

Sparky ran into the bedroom and hid beneath the bed.

They sound sort of spooky, don't they? said Mrs. Smith. The Longbeards' howls were a combination of tornado sirens, rat screams, and alligator snarls. Woe to the usurping inhabitants of the earth, they howled. Woe to those who wear the crown of pride. Woe to those who scatter and destroy the sheep of the pasture. Woe to the wicked gluttons. Woe to you all on the day of our furious wrath.

Mr. Smith nodded. They do sound strange, he said. A wave of unease rolled through the room. But they're much more frightened of us than we are of them, he added.

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The Smiths were one of the first families to move into the new neighborhood. All day the surrounding streets were filled with the sound of hammers and buzzsaws and the chatter of Latin American construction crews. But at night, after the construction crews had gone, the neighborhood was as still and silent as a stone dropped in the ocean.

Mr. Smith was proud of the new house that he'd bought for his family. It had not been acquired easily. It had cost tens of thousands of hours of toil at the law firm where he worked. His legal specialty was handling peanut allergy lawsuits. Mr. Smith worked for a candy company that made a small chocolate covered confection called Bloopers. The candies were sold in nearly every movie theater in the country.

But, six or seven times a year, some unfortunate soul with a deadly peanut allergy would purchase these candies, consume them in the dark theater seats, and go into immediate anaphylactic shock. Due to the contents of the candies, which contained a particularly potent peanut butter cream center, these allergic reactions were sudden and almost always fatal. Men, women, and children alike would swell up and suffocate in a matter of minutes, choking in their seats even before the previews were over. This created terrible litigation problems for the company. It was Mr. Smith's job to ensure that lawsuits from grieving families had a minimal impact on company profits.

But they are gone! the families whined. The ones we loved are dead forever! And now we are alone.

It's the unfortunate nature of the universe,⁵⁹ answered Mr. Smith. The universe gives and

the universe takes away.

You are responsible! the families cried.

We are not responsible, answered Mr. Smith.

You are the cause of all our misery! You have destroyed our happy home! the families cried.

It wasn't on purpose. We all just want nice houses, answered Mr. Smith.

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The house is on fire! screamed Mrs. Smith. It was ten o'clock at night.

What? asked Mr. Smith. He was in the living room, watching cable news.

THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET IS ON FIRE! screamed Mrs. Smith.

They ran to the backyard and poked their head over the fence. The fucking house is on fire! shouted Mr. Smith. Luckily it was an unoccupied house far away from them, in another part of the neighborhood that was still being built. Bright orange flames swirled through the house's walls and windows like solar flares on a distant star. A giant black river of smoke snaked up from the burning roof.

Longbeards! shouted Mrs. Smith.

Fifteen or twenty Longbeards surrounded the house, jumping up and down on their heavy hindlegs. They were screaming. With giant clawed paws they beat their furry chests and kicked dust into the air. Their gaping mouths were wet with slobber, silver in the moonlight. Their huge eyes glowed like yellow light bulbs. Thick mossy beards hung from their jaws all down their bodies, tangled hair tossing through the air while they danced and howled, blurring the air. They shook their fists above them as if to rip open and tear down the sky.

I'm getting the machine gun! said Mr. Smith, rushing inside. Call the cops!

A minute later Mr. Smith had his machine gun in hand, pointing it over the top of the fence. He pulled the trigger and sprayed wild bullets at the Longbeards. The Longbeards darted in twenty different directions. In less than fifteen seconds they had completely disappeared into the night.

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Mr. Smith didn't sleep that night, but his family did. Mrs. Smith dreamed that a Longbeard arm was growing out of her mouth. At first the arm was limp and dead, but then it started moving. Little Gregory dreamed that there were thousands of lollipops in his veins. Suddenly a hundred gaping slobbery mouths appeared all around him, sucking at the air. Little Gregory rose up into the air and was pulled apart by the suction. Sparky dreamed that he was trying to run away on broken legs.

After the fire department put out the fire, after the cops came by the house and wrote down his report, Mr. Smith stayed up in the living room with the machine gun resting on the loveseat. His wife had wanted a house with lots of big windows. She loved sunlight. Mr. Smith drank coffee and sat in the living room till dawn. He watched. He listened. He waited. He worried.

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In the deep dark woods, The Longbeards huddled in their cave. The Longbeards waited too. They lay awake, stretched longwise against the wet March soil, full of freshly sprouted spring buds not yet emerged but slowly clawing out. One by one by one the humans would all be turned to whispers, mere coils in the wind. Evaporated. Dissipated. Forgotten. Tear their poison roots from the ground and purify the dirt that life might rise anew. Better to blast the trumpet and drown the deafened world with silence than to let it mumble endlessly its parched and wicked sickbed hallucinations.

Furious breaths filled The Longbeards black twitching noses. Kill them all and eat the children.

JENNIFER GREIDUS

TUNA SANDWICH

L

He orders tuna salad because he always orders tuna salad. Today, he also orders bacon potato soup. It's too hot for soup. He likes to wipe his pretty mouth with the back of a hand. He sneers at the waitresses and only pays attention to the ones with fat tits. One of them, Trina, is my favorite waitress. Her tits are fat. I want to tell her to cover them up. Her skirt is tight, too, and the material that's supposed to hide the zipper is pulled too far to do its job. He's not an ass man, though.

My mother's tits are like that, fallen and fat. Jiggly. To the trucker sitting next to him, Tuna Sandwich whispers, "A loose handful's where it's at, am I right?"

I know my mother's a whore. But lots of the mothers that Tuna Sandwich fucked weren't whores. Trina's a mom, and she's never whored. Her skin is too pale and clear to be that of a cocksucker. Plus, Trina lets me sit in her booth without ordering anything but seltzer for seven nights straight during the dinner rush. She's kind. I bet she knits and watches TV until exactly ten p.m. Trina lets me sit here with seltzer and saltines just so I can stare at this fuck who pumped cum in my mother and sliced her cunt when he was done.

I still popped out of her, though. Nine months later. My mother likes to tell me that it's almost a blessing, her sliced cunt, because she had a wider hole to push me out of.

I have been useless to her until now. She loves me, yeah. She always saves me the last piece of donut. But I was in tow wherever she went: welfare office, subsidized child care drop-off, the casino parking lots at two a.m., Hank's to buy weed and share rum that I was occasionally allowed to sip if I was quiet. I was always quiet.

I was also always useless. For sixteen years, she used the room next to mine to blow guys for ten dollars because she was too scarred up to fuck. If I were a good son, I would have gotten a job. I just stayed in bed and hoped she was focused enough to make them ejaculate quickly so I could sleep.

When she saw him--Tuna Sandwich--she peeped. My mother never does anything quieter than guffaw. It's the only way I knew; she peeped, turned me around by the shoulders, and we left the convenience store without papers, Fritos, or grape Gatorade.

Now, I spit a thick gob onto my fingertips, walk behind Tuna Sandwich, and fling it into

his greasy hair. Trina sees me and lifts an eyebrow. She smiles, then, because Tuna Sandwich calls her *Trina Tits-a-lot*. He has tucked money into the shirt pocket of her uniform while copping a feel more than once. Until now, her only revenge was wiping her pussy juice on his tuna sandwich white bread.

For me, Trina lifted his keys. Trina told me she serves him his last cup of coffee at 10 p.m. and that my six green pills will be crushed in it. Trina told me he's small but strong.

She joins me in the men's room, drops his motel key in my hand, and slaps my ass. "You look so fuckin' good tonight. I'm not going to see you in here tomorrow, am I?"

"No."

"Do good work." She kisses my cheek, straightens her skirt, and leaves me be.

Tuna Sandwich wakes up on a creeper. When I said, "Do you sell those dolly things? You know, the ones that go under cars?" the auto parts guy sneered at me. I'm sixteen, for one, and I'm frail, for two. Also, I lisp a little. He asked me if I needed help getting it into my van, and it sucked, because I did.

If I woke up on a creeper in my motel room, it would take me a minute or two to panic. I'd be almost curious when I came to. I might take some time to assess. It wouldn't make any sense to a good person.

It doesn't take Tuna Sandwich but twelve seconds to panic, though, because I know the fuck knows he's led the kind of life where waking up cocooned to a creeper with rope and bungee cords and duct tape over your mouth is the kind of thing he's been waiting to come around the corner since puberty.

He shakes his head like a dog after a swim. He groans through the tape. I smile from the bed. I was watching *Fixture*, the one where Kimmy does the bull run in Barcelona. I turn up the TV, super loud. I go to him. I hover.

He's using his feet and lower legs to push himself away from me. He bumps his head into

the wall and squeezes his eyes closed. His nostrils are blown to the size of dimes. His eyes burn: *what, what, what.*

He knows what. It's a hundred whats.

It's me taking off his shoes and socks and jamming my mom's metal emery board under his big toenail what. It's me dragging his faggot ass over to the writing table so I can steady myself on the chair, stand on his chest, and stomp up and down on him until I'm sure I've broken ribs what. It's me moving to his balls and cracking down with my heel. It's me plunging the emery board into his right eyeball.

Best of all, it's me struggling to cut through the cartilage of his throat with my Swiss Army knife, because I am sixteen, frail, and lispy. A hundred whats let me take my time, and his left eyeball screams at me the whole time I do.

I'm going to sit here. I'm going to sit here and see what kind of piece of shit person shows up looking for this cocksucker because they missed him. No one will miss him. No one. I'll be sitting here for days, sucking in his stench until I'm bored and go to Atlantic City.

X-RAY

LITERARY MAGAZINE

SUBMISSIONS