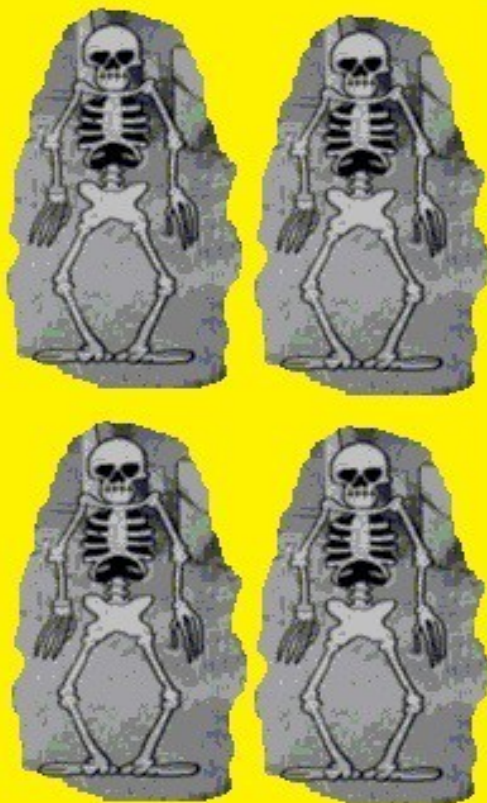


X-R-A-Y #6

SENTENCES THAT
SEE THROUGH THE
SURFACE. FLESH
DISSOLVED IN AN
ACID OF LIGHT.



Zachary Kennedy-lopez // Benjamin Niespodziany // Jonathan Cardew
Troy James Weaer // Bob Raymonda // Anastasia Jill // Naye Rundquist
Kevin Sampsell // Joseph Grantham // Paul Curran // Marston Hefner
S.f. Wright // Sam Phillips // Dylan Gray // Bud Smith

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RIVALS

BUD SMITH

Last night a cop came uninvited to the party and tasered people for ten dollars. He was a year away from retirement, and so, was relaxed, even breathing from the mouth, acting like a pal.

A lot of guys tried the taser. One even was shocked while he was downstairs in the shower. The cop got so excited. Three women did the taser too, holding hands together sharing that electric. They paid \$3.33 each, pretending to be Siamese twins.

It was whatever it was. They secretly hated each other. They publicly hated each other too.

When the taser ran out of battery the cop went out to the cruiser and got the charger. He also carried in his 'spoils o' war' collected in a big plastic bin, hoisted on one shoulder.

Now he had left his badge and uniform in the car, and he was down to his white undershirt and his boxer shorts, black athletic socks, shined up cop shoes.

It's impossible to love anyone more or less out of their costume.

I mean, I should know, I used to be the mascot for the local college. The team being the Charging Bulls. Their uniforms were brown and shaggy and they had little foam horns on their helmets. Because of their uniforms, and their losing record, they were known un-lovingly as, the Shit Monsters.

The Shit Monsters had never won a game for as long as anybody could remember. But then, out of nowhere, my twin brother leapt out of the gene pool and started throwing touchdowns.

Speaking of things changing, now he is on death row, awaiting execution.

We've all got our biblical problems just like any small creature would. Put it to you this way, I don't love my brother any less now that he wears those orange coveralls and spends his time in the penitentiary getting fat, smoking and watching TV. I love

him the same now as I loved him when he dressed up like a Shit Monster.

While the cop charged the taser he leaned back on the couch and put his hands behind his head, fingers laced together. The little sister of someone else I didn't know had her hand on the cop's knee and the little brother of someone else I don't know had their hand on his other knee. There was a show then that began in the bottom of the sunken den.

Two friends of mine were rolled up in an emerald carpet and having sex inside the carpet. Or making faces like they were. It's always hard to tell. They urged everyone to step harder on the carpet while they grunted. Step harder! The hostess stomped and stomped and the couple seemed on the brink of orgasm, and the hostess started jumping on them with both feet. But the phone in the kitchen started ringing and she went away.

I'd placed the call, my friend who was on the bottom had turned blue.

I said, The call is coming from inside the party.

And she said, Oh you, Bozo.

She slammed the phone down.

I came out of the garage with a lite beer and the couple was unrolled from the carpet, all sticky and sweaty and with basically Xs over their eyes. I kept waiting for someone to dump a jug of icy Gatorade over them. But nobody did so I walked over and poured my lite beer over them and they laughed like people did when it was revealed that they were on Candid Camera.

The mess didn't matter. There was a big tarp on the floor with plastic over that. You could have cut someone apart with a saw and the tile underneath would still be nice the next morning.

And then the cop had got off the couch and the taser was ready and he prowled up the

stairs like a creep, visible boner. Socks off. I wanted to call the cops on the cop but I was worried that the cops who came to arrest the cop would be worse.

The hostess sat down at the table. She said, You're acting weird.

I figured she meant the collar and the leash around my neck. The lead, my own, was in my hand. So I said, I lost my dog the other day.

She said, What's your dog's name?

My name, I said.

Oh, she said, raising both eyebrows.

She was digging around in the spoils o' war cubby by the coffee pot.

Confiscated heroin, oxy, PCP and magic mushrooms.

I think we are on the honor system, the hostess said.

I put six dollars in the cubby and bought a 1/4 oz. of mushrooms and ate them immediately, handful after handful washed down with Sprite. Then I went out looking for my dog.

I lead myself away from the glowing house and into the peppermint night. Calling my name in a booming voice. There was two inches of crusty snow where I started, falling forward. Sometimes the snow got waist deep, and then got shoulder deep, other times it disappeared.

At the end of the cul de sac I saw my childhood home lit up in red and yellow. It had fallen to a fascist regime. Spaniards. My mother and father were dead and the Spaniards could not get them in the underworld where the Norwegians go to be with the other Norwegians. Our dead parents could sit together and drink aquavit and munch on crispbread. They'd killed themselves just a week after Scotty's sentencing. The

suicide note said they'd had this pact since they'd met as youngsters at the skating rink. Sixty years old was as far as they were willing to go. Also the note said, Uncle Kim and Aunt Aud, can go fuck themselves. Well! Thanks for the heads up Mom and Dad. Enjoy your crispbread and aquavit. I'll make sure Aunt Aud and Uncle Kim never see this sad note. Yet, considering their suicides, I was neither proud, nor ashamed. With the money from the sale of the house, I bought a house boat that sank quickly in a freak storm and I bought a tractor trailer full of Marlboro lights, which I still cart over to the prison at the bottom of the valley.

Before too long I found myself sitting in the warm grass, and my hands were quaking uncontrollably and I got furious again at the college's museum which had made me pay for the damage that Scotty had done to their suit of armor. He'd cut the metal hands off and had started wearing them whenever he wasn't on the field.

I should tell you how it happened, once and for all.

First those boys broke my hand because of that nursery rhyme regarding how to deal out the treatment of identical twins: Cause one pain, the other feels it. This was during a football game of no significance other than 100 years of rivalry. Well my pain didn't stop the winning touchdown pass. After that those boys got me again, our teams meeting in a further bowl of no importance. Mind you I was just a nobody but the team mascot, with my rodeo clown head off, feeling the breeze. Pre-game they got me. But this time they were dead drunk and mistaken in another way, thinking I actually was my brother, the star quarterback. They shattered my other hand, so now I had none to use. My brother was wearing those heavy gauntlet gloves. When he heard the news of my attack, he came out from the locker room to seek revenge. It's sad but it's funny. He killed two of the three, one punch each, and went to prison instead of playing the rest of the game. So, after all, it seemed, they got us. Our second stringer throwing four interceptions and losing it before halftime. But still I say, we won. Some fans broke the mascot's hands. Our QB took two of them out of this world.

I tied a bandana over my eyes, spread out in an X on the fifty yard line, and entered into a world inside my lost dog. I searched through her guts and then her veins. I

came to a big beating heart. The heart was afraid. I saw there was a door. I opened the door of the heart and looked inside and saw an even smaller room with a couch and a TV and a bookshelf full of books. I picked up one of the books and it slipped from my hands because my hands always have lightning bolts of pain. My friend at the video store did the surgery. Finally though I was able to open the book with my teeth and my tongue and wouldn't you know, the story in my trip was a story about me, about how I was no longer in any kind of danger. I'd finally found peace. Euphoria washed over me.

There was some noise and I lifted the bandana and the marching band was taking the field and the players in their Shit Monster costumes were running drills all around me and the stands were filling up with a few straggler Shit Monster fans on one side and a throng of opposing fans waving orange pendants on the other side and the moon was an ice cube eyeball and I stood up and got out of the way of the marching band which looked to me in that moment like a panzer tank engulfed in flames, set on annihilating everything in its path.

That's when I was apprehended by the Shit Monster coaching staff who thought I'd returned! Thought I'd decided to accept my fate again as the mascot of their sorry team!

Someone was yelling, What are you doing? Get dressed get dressed. The game is about to start.

I tried to pull away but the football team wasn't having it. A Shit Monster line backer had my left arm. A Shit Monster defensive end had my right arm. A punter had my foot, I shook my foot free and kicked him in the gut. A Shit Monster tight end gabbed that foot. The assistant coach came running over with the rodeo clown outfit and I went into wild hysterics. The mascot's outfit was pulled over my thrashing body. They finally released me when I was zipped up in it and had the zipper Velcro'd down so I couldn't find the way out. I'd become the clown and I was loose on the field, stumbling and rumbling across the thirty yard line and then sharply into the visiting team's orange huddle.

I broke away from them and fled under the bleachers. Some kids were under there, I didn't see them first as kids. They were crabs passing glowing white orbs back and forth in their pinchers. I burst out the back of the bleachers and hit a chain link fence, kept thrashing against it. And behind me there was cheering, something had happened on the field. I could hear the marching band making mistakes. The whistles went wild. Voices were closer and mumbling my dog's name.

I grabbed the clown head and I pulled it and then there were other people helping and it came off with a savage tearing and I began to scream. I'd wrongly assumed that my actual head had been ripped from my spinal column. But there was the cool night air and the back glow of the stadium lighting bathing the cedars in blue, and I was alive!

The pinchers hoisted me over the fence and I crashed down into the forest on the other side. That's where I learned I still had my own skull and my own face and my own past and my own future. I took the head of the jester in my oversized gloves, with my bells jangling, and threw it violently back over the fence onto the playing field. The size twenty clown footwear, acted like snow shoes that helped me trudge through deepening powder, away from the contest.

When I reached town, I saw my reflection in a shop window. I looked like a mutilated cartoon, but all the gore was scribbled on with a white crayon. I decided to walk to the jail to see my brother. On my way there, I saw a pile of dog shit outside of the VFW hall and I stood in that spot for an hour or so, trying to figure out if there was any chance it had come from my dog who was lost out here. I'd take a gun from a sleeping guard and I'd shoot the locks and break Scotty out and then we'd go to the underworld to get drunk with Mom and Dad. But I knew—ah, my brother is in the underworld already. And headed to another, as soon as the judge finally signs the order. Wait, on closer inspection, this couldn't possibly be my dog's shit. It was just a paper bag stuffed between the leg of a park bench and an overflowing garbage can. I put my hands on the icy chain link, composed myself.

Down the street I saw the cop coming. He was shirtless in his car. He stopped, You need a ride?

No.

I found the velcro, I found the zipper. I gave him the costume for his bin.

He waved and kept going around the bend.

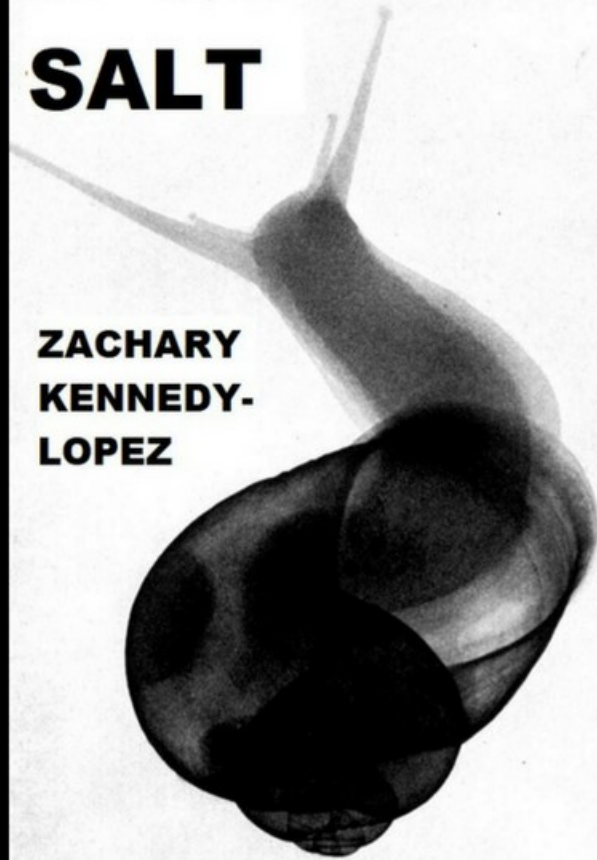
Did I tell you? I forget if I told you.

At the joint wake, my father's identical brother, Kim, was there looking down into his brother's casket, holding the edge so tight I thought he'd splinter the wood. While just feet away, my mother's identical twin sister, Aud, was looking down into my mother's casket and her palms were up as if supporting an invisible baby.

Meanwhile, our lives whatever was left of them, were suddenly, same as ever, our own to live.

SALT

**ZACHARY
KENNEDY-
LOPEZ**



You've come to cherish the fragility of snails, come to love them in a small sort of way. When you see one attempting to cross the sidewalk, you pick it up—and it shrinks from you—and you move it to the other side. When it rains, you become more careful, you walk home with the light on your phone on. When you step on a snail in the dark, the shape and timbre of that sound taps something deep within you, and you imagine paying someone to take a needle and ink and carve colored lines into you, marking your own skin with a rendering of a snail as a sort of penance for all you've crushed. You think about what meaning could be assigned to a snail shell: home, vitality, retreat. You imagine a snail your own size, and wonder how strong the shell would be then.

/

Your parents have a corner lot with a sizeable yard, on which for years they've grown fruits and vegetables. You had corn when you were young, blueberries too, and raspberries, cherries, squash, and grapes. Many of the plants and trees had to be wrapped in black mesh so that the ever-present birds, snailkind, and deer wouldn't make off with everything.

You'd heard, likely from someone at school, that salting a slug or a snail would cause it to shrivel and vanish, and you wanted to try it—not out of maliciousness, but because you are, always have been, insatiably curious. You knew nothing of the chemical properties of salt, and that you could pour salt on something in the world and cause it to disappear seemed a form of magic, a formula that tapped into something hidden about the rules of existing. Likewise, for some time as a child, you thought that spraying water on wasps would kill them, extinguish them as though they were flame, but you discovered one summer that this was untrue.

Once, when your mother was working in the beds behind the house, and she'd removed a slug or a snail from a plant, you asked if you could salt it.

She said no, and reminded you that salting the slug or snail would kill it. You hadn't considered the implications of ending a life, that snuffing out a being so small and

inconsequential was still killing, and her response stopped you short.

You've never salted a slug or a snail, but you imagine them bending in upon themselves, as might someone in the throes of vomiting, shrinking, becoming less pliant, contorting like a receipt tossed into a fire.

/

You think of your manager, the one who's vegan and has a pupil shaped like keyhole. You think of how he was heartsick for so long when they couldn't get the baby bird out of the walls of his office, couldn't lure it down through the air vent. You think of how he told you about an injured animal he picked up on the side of the road—a blackbird, or a raccoon, you can't quite recall—and you remember how he'd been quiet one day because the sanctuary had called to say the animal didn't make it, that it had died, and even he was surprised at how broken up he was. You think of how you asked him about the shape of his pupil, and you even had the word ready, *coloboma*—a word, incidentally, that appears in a story by one of your instructors, a story you return to again and again, even-though-slash-because you're convinced you'll never understand all the pieces in play, a story that you've had your own students read—but you come to your manager armed with this word, and he says no, that's not it at all. He tells you about how he was wilder in his youth, how he and some friends had been on the banks of a river, when one of them lobbed a beer bottle from a distance, and it struck him in the face, exploding on impact. Your manager has scars on his forehead, and a nose that never straightened out. He tells you that some of the glass entered his eye, and he had to be awake when the doctors attempted to remove it. Each time the surgeon brought the utensils up close, his eye twitched instinctively, seeking escape, trying to evade being touched. The cycle repeated once, twice, again, until finally the surgeon told your manager to quit fucking moving his eyes unless he wanted to go blind.

/

Your manager, who was nearing fifty when you worked for him, had an older brother who died in his twenties. It might've been suicide, it might've been a drunk driver—another thing you wish you could remember. But his brother was involved in theater, like your husband, and your manager tells you that your husband reminds him a lot of his brother.

You saw Alejandro Iñárritu's film *Birdman* with your husband, and when it was over, you looked at him and said, Don't ever do *that* to me.

/

You bought a shirt recently and a pair of jeans, both massively marked down. One tag reads *Made in Madagascar*, the other *Made in Indonesia*. You think of a conversation with your brother about the \$6 H&M t-shirts advertised as being eco-conscious, made with organic cotton, *Made in Malaysia*. Your brother says something like, Mmp, yep, child fingers made that.

/

When you were younger, but old enough for your parents to leave you and your brother at home unsupervised, you went to one of the cupboards and took down a repurposed butter tub filled with salt. You carried it through the house to your brother's room, and said, Look, I found sugar. He licked a finger and dipped it into the white mass, stuck it in his mouth.

Years later, he still brings this up.

/

Your husband won't touch pecan pie. Hasn't since he was a child, when his grandfather

made one and substituted the sugar with salt by accident. Your husband and his sister complained, said, This doesn't taste right. Their grandfather was furious and forced them to finish their pie. He was a man steeped in the belief that food on a plate is a contract: you finish what you take, you finish what you're given. When your husband tells you this, he says, Because that's a great way to teach a child about obesity. There are things you sometimes forget about your husband: that he was not as slim as he is now, that there are years of his childhood he's blacked out.

Your husband's grandfather cut himself a slice of pie, ate one bite, and threw out the rest without saying a word.

/

A member of your cohort tells you no, you've got it wrong, salt doesn't dessicate snailkind, just the opposite—they bubble up, boil over, and melt.

In a way, both are right: as salt removes the water from the body, a snail emits a slime in order to protect itself. The bubbling, the boil—that's the air leaving as the snail shrinks, compresses, has nowhere else to hide.

CORPORATE CLIMATE

BENJAMIN NIESPODZIANY



Corporate encourages that we ride to work on company pogo sticks. Company bicycles and unicycles are also okay, but everything else is frowned upon. "We can't force anyone," the CEO laughs. Sheryl hates to bounce, rides in on a skateboard every morning. Everyone used to adore Sheryl, used to throw morning glories at her in the staff parking lot. Now co-workers spit on her as they pass her new office in the broken elevator full of fax machines. I remain a loyal employee, a pogo commuter covered head to toe in Band-Aids. My bruises and scabs are the only things that make my wife laugh. I take a pogo stick to work every morning and my poor balance never wins. I fall four of five times before sunrise and my work is only two blocks from my bed. My boss loves the commitment, adores the blood. Can't stop giving me raises.

HOOKS

TROY JAMES WEAVER

A few days after I heard the news, that he'd tried to carve a hole for himself inside the earth, I wondered if it were possible for a man to rip out his own vocal chords. One night, I actually Googled it, came up with a bunch of misleads. Wouldn't have mattered anyway—I'd just get a little black board and hang it around my neck and write it all down for him with chalk. The things I saw, the thoughts I had. Voices still exist, even if you can't hear them. Maybe it all came down to selfishness. For a minute I thought I'd just swallow down some fish hooks and rip them back out of me and hope for the best—what I'd call "trying to be a good friend."

Often he'd stand at the corner outside Al's, sipping at his Mocha while holding court with himself, just talking and blabbing away to nobody. If anybody tried to join him, which, as friendly and welcoming as his smile was, was often, he'd clam up and do more drinking than talking, staring right though their caring faces out beyond and over the dirt road to a place where the sun patched the hills with gold.

He hadn't always been like that, sure, that all started up after Marti took the Mazda and hitched a U-Haul to the back, stuffed all of her belongings into it, and headed off into the great belly of America, telling him she had to go out and find herself, where exactly she fit in in this too-short disaster called life. That's when he stopped talking, around then, even though he kind of still talked to me. You couldn't call it conversation, or exposition, or anything, really, other than short observational bursts, guarded clues into the state of his thinking. I even made him go to the doctor one time, and not without a fight, either, because I figured maybe he'd had a miniature stroke or something, but Dr. Bruner said he was healthy. His face didn't droop any more than usual and he still seemed to walk just fine.

After the attempt, though, he had to spend a few weeks locked away with some head doctors out in Mulridge County. The day he got out, I went over and found him in his rocking chair on the front porch whittling away at some totem he held tightly in his palm. From where I stood, it looked like he'd fashioned himself a tiny baby.

"Hey, Scott," I said. "Long time no see."

He looked up and nodded, kept whittling away at the infant, sweat beaded along his brow in thin rows. I detected in the dying light a few streaks of gray in his sideburns. He was only twenty-five and starting to age at a rapid clip, though his face remained boyish, in fact, strangely so, and you couldn't help but think that there were a million other faces that were just the same, you'd just never seen one.

He finally folded and pocketed the knife, set the baby on a little table to his left, and said, "Finn. Been a minute."

"What'd you carve there?" I said.

"Marti," he said.

"Looks like a baby."

"It's Marti," he said.

"All right, then," I said. "Marti it is. How're you feeling?"

He didn't say anything, just nodded.

"Looking good," I said.

He lit a cigarette, took a long pull and sighed, staring off through the lighted windows of the house across the street.

"Well," I said. "I'll go ahead and get out of your hair. Just wanted to stop by and say hi, that's all. Don't want to be a bother."

As I was walking away, I heard him.

"Sure is hot," he said.

I turned around. "Hit ninety-seven today," I said.

"Hot," he said.

I nodded right into an immense moment of silence and just kept nodding.

"Want to come in?"

Still nodding, I followed him in and sat at the dining room table, a darkly varnished thing littered about with unopened mail, while he rummaged through the fridge.

"Want a Coke or something?"

"That'd be great," I said.

He sat down across from me, offered me a cigarette.

"Thanks," I said, but he just sat there staring at me, not saying a word.

We smoked in silence for a while, sipping our Cokes.

"I have to clear the air," he said.

"You don't have to do that, trust me. It's okay. Don't worry about it."

"It's not Marti. It's my job. My job's got me all fucked-up," he said.

"You're an IT guy, right?"

He nodded. "You don't know the half of it."

"The half of what?" I said.

"My job."

"Well?"

"I work in the city." he said.

"And?"

"I sit at a table with rows of other people. These people, they do the exact same thing as me."

"Yeah?"

"I worry about them." he said. "They don't even know what kind of damage they're doing to themselves."

"Okay? What do you mean?"

"What I do. You want to know what I do?" he said.

"Of course."

"All the evil shit you hear about being on the internet. My job is to view all that stuff and decide whether or not it should be scrubbed from the internet."

"Seems like the lord's work to me," I said. "Why you feel so bad about it? Somebody has to do it. It's honorable, right?"

"You just don't get it. Nobody gets it. Marti didn't get it. You don't get it. The doctors don't get."

"Hey, hey, slow down," I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset. Just get on, you should go. But finish your fucking Coke first. Don't want it going to waste."

I chugged the Coke down and said, "You need to chill a bit, okay. Calm down. I love you."

"There is no such thing," he said.

"Whatever, man," I said. "I'm leaving."

When I got out onto the porch I took his stupid little wooden baby he'd carved and threw it across the street into the neighbor's yard. My anger got the best of me. I started thinking about how if he tried killing himself again, he'd do well to pick out a surer method. Rather have him dead than crazy.

We didn't talk much after that. His hair grew long. He stopped going to Al's, recused himself from the world around him. And in a way, so did I.

Maybe if I could've kept my mouth shut long enough, his silences would've been voice enough for me to "get it." Perhaps that's the real matter, after all—"getting it."

It's never so much the swallowing that hurts, it's the ripping out. If fish hooks could talk, I swear to god they'd tell you to run.



FRIENDSHIP WOLFCHEESE

JONATHAN CARDEW

Slide through the doors of the convenience store. Live a little in your skin. This skin was given to you in about 1975. Friendship Wolfcheese made sure you got the kind of skin that earned you favor. Ask for cigarettes. Carefully enunciate the vowels and the consonants. Friendship Wolfcheese was very particular about sounds.

Marllllllborooooo Liiiiiights.

Feel the heat in your cheeks. Why the heat in your cheeks?

Marlllllllborooooo Liiiights.

He doesn't understand you. This boy of fifteen, with the fresh coat of paint on his face. Squints in your direction. He's speaking, but the speaking isn't happening in your ears.

Friendship Wolfcheese lived on a boat. He hunted for fish with a stick and string, and then he fried the fish in a sea of butter. Fish eyes popped because of the heat. Because of the way they were being cooked.

Marlllllllboroooooo Liiiiiights.

This boy of fifteen. He doesn't know you. He doesn't care for you. He's got the phone to worry about and the hair to worry about and he doesn't know you.

Point.

Marlllllllborooooooo Liiiiiiiights.

Point again, hitting the plastic separating you and the boy.

Marlllllborooooooo Liiiiiights.

Fish eyes popping. More of a melt, really. Friendship Wolfcheese could melt a fish in butter whole. A whole melt.

Marlllllborooooooo Liiiiiights.

Until the fish was just butter.

Marlllllborooooooo Liiiiiights.

You could live without. Friendship Wolfcheese could live without. Fish could live without water for nine days. Flipping and flipping. On a chopping block.

You walk back.



THE RAZOR

**KEVIN
SAMPSELL**

This is the black shirt my ex-wife gave me before the divorce. The one her father used to wear. I have another one just like it, but it has long sleeves. These short sleeves fit me better. I imagine her dad wearing it. Standing outside, on the roof of his house, a cool breeze blowing through the looseness of the cloth, against his sloping shoulders. His arms, freckled and tired at the end. Patches of gray hair, waving.

I wonder if he died in this shirt. Probably not. You don't pick a black shirt to die in. I look in my closet and wonder what shirt I would pick if I knew I was going to die. Maybe something sturdy and tough, like denim. Perhaps a brown t-shirt, the color of camouflage or dirt. I think it would be uncomfortable to wear a tie. Too much like a circle closing, choking, squeezing me.

I've seen so many dead people wearing ties. How do you get a tie on a dead person?

Once, a friend of mine had acquired a bunch of mannequins. He took the old clothes of his dead brother and dressed them all. These statue-like objects were easy to care for. He'd use a cat hair remover on them. He'd roll it over the shoulders and down the arms, and then smooth any wrinkles with an iron. He'd look into their flat eyes and talk to them.

Humans have to stay presentable when they're alive and also when they're dead. My friend didn't believe these mannequins to be alive or dead, but rather in a state of limbo.

Sometimes, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror and wonder if I even look human. Last year was the most depressing year. Last year, her father died. That's how I got this shirt. Her and her siblings went through his stuff and divided it up.

Last year was when we got divorced. Last year was when we stopped talking. Last year was when we tried to replace each other.

As I shave my face in the bathroom mirror, I realize the electric razor I'm using also belonged to her father's. I'm touching my face with it, pushing it into my skin.

I never have understood how these razors work. Something rotating under the surface, grabbing a hold of my whiskers, pulling them out quickly with a slight burn. This razor also touched her father's face, made it smooth and presentable. It vibrated in his hand when he was looking into his own eyes in a mirror, thinking about his life.

Maybe while wearing this black shirt.

One of my earliest memories is walking by a fancy new department store with my mother when I was probably four. One of the giant display windows had two mannequins in it, wearing bright polka-dot shirts and flared jeans, posed in front of a wall of pulsing multi-colored lights. There were about ten other people standing there, smiling and enjoying the lights and the strangeness of the mannequins' poses, as if they were in mid-dance. There was a murmur of thumping disco behind the glass, but I could be imaging that part. Right before we started to walk away, one of the mannequins moved. People gasped. And then the other one moved, and people laughed. They were doing small silly dance moves. I smiled too, though I was confused. Sometimes mannequins are real, my mother said.

We stayed and watched the dancing mannequins, like an animal you'd watch at a zoo. Another little boy and his mother walked up and the mannequins suddenly stopped moving. The people laughed again, knowing it was because of the new spectators. The magic of them stopping, being completely still, statue-like, statuesque, not human but wearing human clothes, looking better than most humans, but also pretending not to be human, was something I didn't really want to think about but ended up pondering a lot when I was a kid.

I watched the two mannequins and also the faces of the mother and son watching them, waiting for them to witness that surprising moment of movement. The silly dance. Everyone laughing. The very second when something dead comes to life.



**DUETS AND
THE CRACK IN
EVERYTHING**

NAYT RUNDQUIST

She'll break open the world, just a bit, and tell them how they'll end, how they'll get there, who'll wrong them along the way. They'll drown in it, their fates, choking to take it all in, no matter how certain they'd been they could swim. But she'll be there, on the shore, waiting to pull them sputtering back to present, steaming stew to fend off the chill.

Creaking floorboards in her age-shriveling hut groan as she grunts across them, fists stabbing her curving spine. Her clawhand brandishes her knife, her only artifact that still carries a sheen. The blade slices into its aria she dances to through arthritic muscle memory reinforced by years, decades, centuries? of their duets. But it's imperfect—a jagged slice through one molecule, split in lopsided halves.

Crack in everything as she punctures a hole in the universe—just a little one, barely big enough to see through—with a finger gnarled and knotted as a tree root. And it pulls at her soulstuffs, tears at it, whipping it like her hair when she walked alone through that hurricane. But she's used to this vacuum; she knows it and can stand it. And she folds the knife back on itself, back through the years, back through its own past, sharpening it 'til it's like brand new, 'til it is brand new, 'til it's sharper than when He'd plunged it into her heart.

Flawless melody this time, and she harmonizes—humming just soft enough of a hoarse to match the vibrations in her chest to those of her instrument. Carrots, ugly and gnarled as her fingers, are first for the cauldron. The knife breezes through, whispering so quiet only the carrot can hear.

She stitches up that crack in everything with a hasty swipe of a clawhand, smearing ethereal sludge through the air, through spacetime. She'll find that blood last Tuesday and three months in the future. The crack would have self-sealed eventually, but best not to chance it. He'd left them open, slathering gashes—pus-oozing wounds in the flesh of existence. The lesions still find her, dragging behind them slathering reminders of Him, of how He'd haunted her, hunted her, made love to her,

whispering so softly only her heart could hear.

Her door will moan open, as He had moaned. A visitor will arrive. She'll stumble to add more vegetables to the cauldron. She'll be so off her time, this guest will have a long wait, a longer reading—a deeper well to surface from.

But its bones will creak as it shambles over the threshold. Its claws rasp off the knob, still enough left alive, nearly alive, within to confuse its way through old habits. Heelbones will click 'cross warped floorboards, worn through leather skin from such shambling—stalking. Wisps of remnant hair drift in the gasps of wind it'll welcome into her home, a jaundiced, shriveled husk drowning in the breeze.

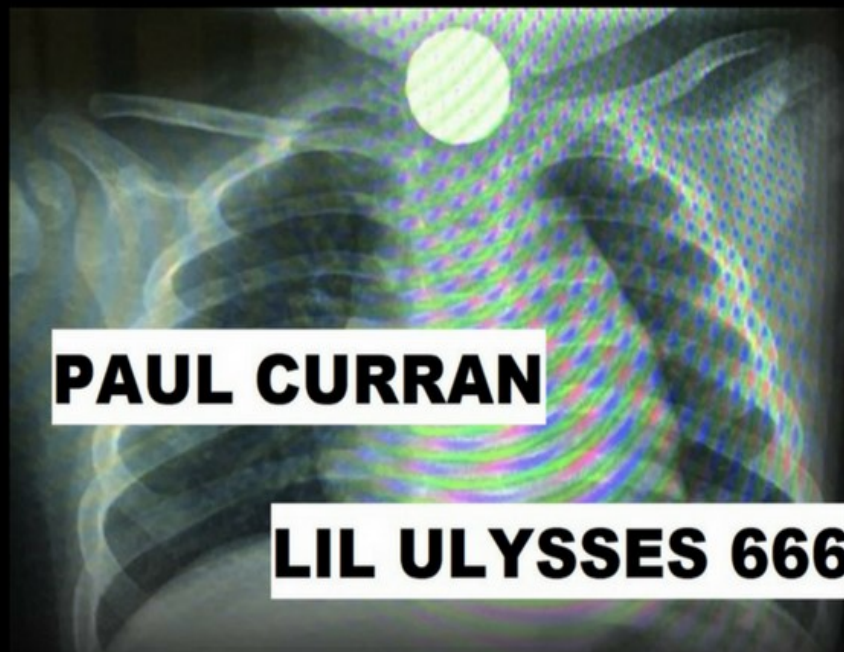
She could shriek a thousand spells, infinite curses, wards, hexes, repellents, but it's heard those excuses before. Instead, she'll watch. Cast her eyes into the abyssal pools sunken into its blanched, parchment skull. There, within those swirling pools of nothing, of absolute absence, she'll find the one thing she dares not search for—the one crack that can't be mended, that would tear existence from itself, and the universe and everything that ever was and will be and might be and shouldn't be but will be anyway will whisper out of existence—softer than His nothings, softer than her knife through carrots. Oblivion will be silent. It shows her her own future in this where without a when.

And it'll sway there, three steps into her home. Creak as what remains of its leathery skin twitches and shifts over shredded muscle. Creak as its eyes clutch hers as tightly as He had, as tightly as she'd grasped his shirt. And her eyes will ask its the same question they'd asked His.

And she'll get the same answer as it shudders, turns, and slouches back out the door, as though forgetting its reason for stabbing back into her home.

Her breath shivers back into her brittle ribcage, and she digs free the roots that held her in place. She gropes her way to the table and crumples back into her seat, into her stupor, into her waiting.

Still clutched in her clawhand, the knife sings her a solo, so soft it isn't sure she can hear.



PAUL CURRAN

LIL ULYSSES 666

It feels weird talking to a camera. I must look like a terrorist or a school shooter. I'll turn off the light. That's better. Your music sucks anyway. What makes you say that? I thought it sounded funny. You're the one who asked me here.

Let's rape and kill some kid. Do you mean physically or metaphorically? I mean metaphysically. That's predictable. Many lyrics are worse. Are you taking notes?

I heard you faked your own death. Glued on a beard and hitched a boat ride to Indonesia. Killed a backpacker and stole her passport. I've got the scars to prove it. Everything I worry about sounds foolish in comparison. A blow to the head. Jet lag, boredom, neurosis. Meditation, spaghetti, asphyxiation. One day the tide might bring you something clean that slipped off the edge of a boat. I shot up the last of our heroin in a public toilet on the banks of the Ganges and vomited so much an astronaut was drilling through the wall. The pornographic ideal of becoming happens to people to ease delusions of failure. Each problem overcome is a peculiar masochistic achievement. The result a skillful pregnancy.

Is there nothing better in this world than nibbling rat poison and watching security monitors? I'm either too tired to answer that or ... Amazing. Truly beautiful. Take a look.

In recent weeks I've written so many rhymes about so many people and forgotten what they said or what they call the method of remembering. If we brand this an album it might result in a return invitation to speak at a linguistics conference in a derelict beachside town.

Hey, kid. Do you mind if we rape and kill you? I don't care. Can I hold your bag? Why so heavy? The room's at the top of the stairs. Some of the steps are broken. Don't touch the banister.

It's so quiet around here. All these dumb fantasies. We've become so good at predicting what we're going to say it's impossible to distinguish. Last night I put a portable fan in the sink and plugged it into the shaving socket with a travel adaptor. The smell made me cry. Again. Is it even possible to mentally relate? That

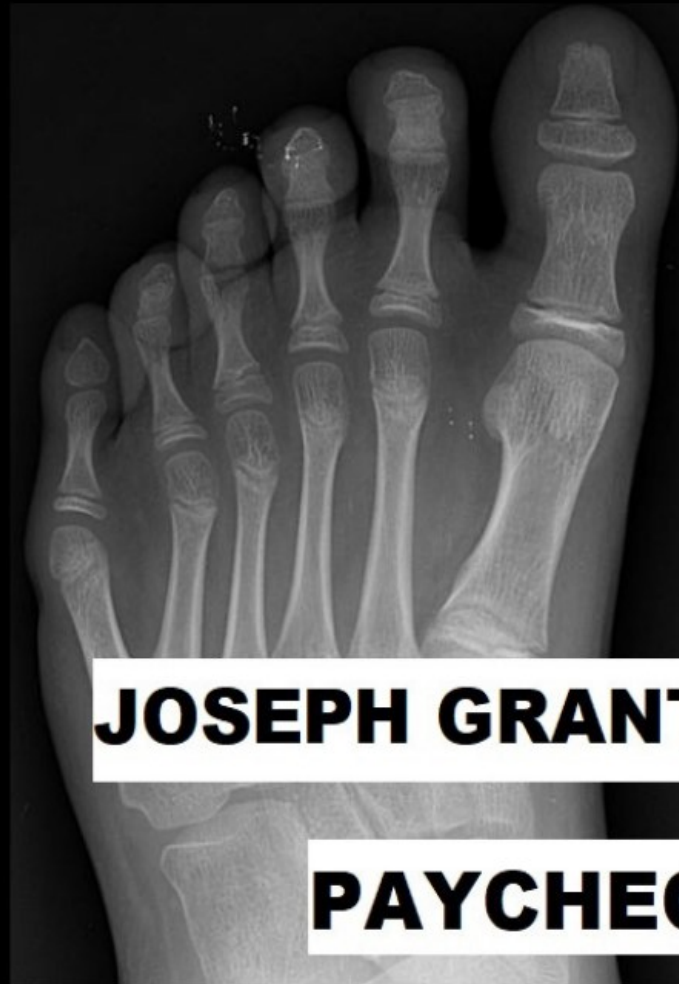
neck, that depth, that blood sting, the boy who found a grave in that dampened bed.

Have you got a direct line to the source? We are a model. Excessively pointless and eternally lucid. In order for anything to happen, there must be space, space, space. That sounds like the same lyric. Sometimes I miss her. I never knew you did remixes. There are times when safe words must be recycled, wiped clean, altered beyond recognition. Shit like that. Gut readings. Heart beatings. Off the record. I regret everything.

What are you thinking about? Oxcarts and farmers on bicycles and motorbikes dragging supplies along the beach road. Covered in red dirt and dust. The grass nothing but rust, sparse clumps around fields, growing from ruined colonial buildings. Children playing with guns, needles, human and animal remains, garbage lining alleyways. The nervous laughter of rubbing cracked skulls on undeveloped crotches.

Spin something else. Have we got any more drugs? I can't move. Let's get some more drugs. I've gone blind. I want some more drugs. I can't hear you. Whenever your limbs twitch it's like someone's sending me a secret message. A crude nail hammered through the head on a missing person's poster. Our entire species destroyed by narrative. Have you got a dictionary? I had one somewhere ... I can't even find anything.

What if you had another superpower? A really hot girl, not as hot as her brother. Guess what's for lunch? Breakfast? Is this track even music? I poured gasoline over his back and set him on fire with a lighted candle handed to me by a fortune teller. The trail of wax went on forever. I was going to talk to him but it never happened. Love is weird. Anyway, thanks for listening.



JOSEPH GRANTHAM

PAYCHECK

Scott had a reading in St. Louis and Julia couldn't go with him because she had to teach, so I went with him because I lived in their house and was unemployed and Scott needed company.

We drove to a gas station and Scott bought cigarettes and then we drove halfway to St. Louis and while we were driving Scott showed me his favorite albums by Nick Cave and we smoked a lot of cigarettes and then we got a room in a hotel in a place called Santa Claus, Indiana.

It was late at night and we were hungry and we drove past a Taco Bell but I didn't want Taco Bell because once, when I was eighteen, I ate a chalupa from Taco Bell and it made me shit water while vomiting for an entire night and on into the morning.

But we found another Mexican restaurant that was open and that was where we ate.

I ordered chicken flautas and the chicken inside of the flautas was blackened and tough like beef jerky but with less flavor than beef jerky and Scott ordered tacos and he said they weren't any good.

I asked Scott about *Finnegan's Wake* and if he'd read it and, if he had, if he'd liked it.

He said he had read it and he said oh yeah he liked it.

I pointed a flauta at Scott and asked him if he could explain *Finnegan's Wake* to me so that I didn't have to read it.

Scott explained *Finnegan's Wake* to me while I chewed on a charred chicken flauta and I was tired but the way he explained it to me made sense and then we got the check and I paid the bill because I felt bad for making us choose that particular Mexican restaurant over the Taco Bell, where Scott had wanted to eat, and Scott thanked me and we left and went back to our hotel.

The hotel lobby smelled like body odor and the girl behind the front desk smiled at

us as we walked past her and to our room.

There were two beds in the hotel room and a television on a table and a desk.

Scott sat on a bed and looked at his laptop and I sat on a bed and looked at my laptop and on the television Willem Dafoe was interviewed by someone.

We listened to Willem Dafoe for a while and then the interview ended and another episode of the same interview program with the same interviewer came on, except that this time the interviewer was interviewing former professional baseball player Alex Rodriguez.

Alex Rodriguez was less interesting than Willem Dafoe and Scott turned off the television.

He closed his laptop and said he was going to bed but that I could stay up as late as I wanted.

He turned off his light and I closed my laptop and turned off my light.

The next morning we drove to St. Louis.

Scott's publisher paid for our hotel room and Scott made sure they got us one near the bookstore where Scott was going to read.

We checked into the hotel and my pants were loose and I remembered that I forgot to bring my belt with me.

I asked the woman at the front desk if she knew where I could find a belt in St. Louis and she laughed and thought about it for a little while and then she told me about a Target that was far away from the hotel and the bookstore and so I decided I wouldn't get a belt and would just pull up my pants whenever I had to.

Scott and I went to our room and set our things down and sat down on our beds and

Scott looked at his laptop and I looked at my laptop and then I asked Scott if he wanted to go get a cup of coffee because I looked up a list of the best coffee places in St. Louis and I felt like having a good cup of coffee.

He laughed at me and said sure, he'd go get a cup of coffee with me if I wanted to go get a cup of coffee, and I said something about how I thought it'd be a nice way to see some of St. Louis.

I used an app on my phone to call us a car and we waited in front of the hotel and I pulled up my pants and the car pulled up in front of us.

I told Scott that we were going to the highest ranked coffee place in St. Louis and he smiled and nodded and I know he didn't care and our driver kept driving and I noticed we were leaving the city.

Our driver drove us out of the interesting looking part of St. Louis and down a long road and finally stopped in front of a nondescript office building.

I was confused but when I looked at my phone it said that we were at the right place and I noticed that the coffee place was on the first floor of the nondescript office building.

We went inside the coffee shop and there were men wearing polo shirts tucked into khaki pants and belts with holsters on them for their cellphones and they were all sitting at tables looking at their laptops.

I ordered a coffee and asked Scott if he wanted one and he said okay, and I bought the coffees because I felt bad for dragging Scott all the way out to this boring building and we waited for ten minutes while the barista ground our beans and made us individual pour over coffees.

The coffee was okay and we went outside with it and smoked cigarettes while I called us another car.

We went back to the hotel and from the hotel we walked a few blocks to the bookstore and we decided to look around at the books in the bookstore before the reading.

In the bookstore we didn't see much but Scott convinced me to buy a couple of Milan Kundera novels and for some reason I was surprised that Scott liked Milan Kundera.

After I bought the books we walked outside and decided to get dinner and Scott seemed nervous and like he wasn't hungry, so we chose the first place we saw.

The first place we saw was across the street from the bookstore and it was a Mexican restaurant.

I ordered a burrito and Scott ordered a couple of tacos.

I ordered chips and salsa to share with Scott but he didn't want any of the chips and salsa so I ate all of it and, with the burrito, it was a lot of food compared to Scott's two tacos.

Scott and I split the bill and then we walked back across the street to the bookstore and they were setting up the reading in the children's section.

Scott seemed unsure about the whole thing and a bookseller whose name I can't remember greeted us and shook Scott's hand and told Scott that he thought the prose in his new book was beautiful and Scott nodded and told the bookseller thank you.

The bookseller nodded and reemphasized how beautiful he thought the prose was in Scott's new book and Scott smiled and said thank you.

The bookseller asked Scott if he needed a drink or anything and Scott said no but I asked the bookseller if I could have a bottle of water and he went into a closet and found one for me.

I thanked the bookseller and then he told us we should probably get things started so we followed him into the children's section where a small group of people were

gathered.

Everyone was sitting on the floor and there was a table with a tub of beer on it and Scott told me I should go get a beer and I wanted a beer and so I went to go get one.

I asked the man behind the tub of beers if the beers were free and he said of course and I took one and went back to where Scott now sat, crosslegged on the carpet.

The carpet was bright and colorful, neon greens and pinks, and covered with letters from the alphabet and trains and train tracks and places where you could play hopscotch if you wanted to play hopscotch but no one was playing hopscotch.

A couple of poets were supposed to read with Scott but one of them didn't show up because her flight got canceled or because she said her flight got canceled and the bookseller asked Scott if he would read one of her poems to start the reading.

For some reason I thought Scott would say no but he didn't hesitate and he said yes of course.

And then everyone quieted down and clutched their shins and Scott stood up and walked into the center of the children's section and read the poem by the poet who didn't show up.

I almost burst out laughing while Scott read the poem but not because the poem was bad or because Scott did a bad job reading it but because it was clear Scott didn't write the words and they didn't mean anything to him.

Scott finished reading the poem by the poet who wasn't there and then he sat back down next to me and I told him good job and I drank from my can of beer.

The poet who was there stood up and walked into the center of the children's section and introduced himself and then he told a story about the poem he was going to read and how it was about something horrible that had happened to him when he was a little boy and the story he told was a lot more interesting than the poem he read.

He did this a few more times, telling the story behind the poem that happened to be a lot more interesting than the poem and then reading the poem that seemed to be a vague, lifeless rendering of the story he'd just told.

I drank from my can of beer.

The poet finished reading and everyone clapped and I stood up and went over to the tub of beers and grabbed another beer and then went and sat back down.

Scott stood up and walked into the center of the children's section and he read a part from his new book that I'd told him to read because I was sick of hearing him read the same part he always read at the other readings I'd seen him do.

And while he read, people laughed and cringed and suddenly got very quiet and then laughed again and shook their heads and then Scott was done reading the section from his new book.

And then he recited a poem called "Little Orphant Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley and he put my name in the poem in the part where Riley mentions a little boy who won't say his prayers and it made me laugh so hard that I teared up and I drank from my can of beer and stood up and walked to the back of the bookstore because I was laughing so hard.

I had a buzz from the two beers because I hadn't had any alcohol since I'd lived with Scott and Julia and it seemed like it'd been a while.

And then the reading was over and I told Scott good job and he said thanks and that he'd recited that "Little Orphant Annie" poem so many times and that people were probably so tired of hearing him doing that.

He said that this was the last reading he was ever going to do.

He was done.

Before we left the bookstore, the bookseller stopped us and told Scott how wonderful his reading was and how he thought that Scott's new book was beautiful and Scott thanked him for everything and we said goodnight.

Outside, a woman closer to my age than Scott's stopped Scott and told him how much she loved his work and Scott said thank you and introduced her to me and told her that I was a writer too and I laughed and pulled up my pants and shook her hand.

She asked us what we were doing for the rest of the night and Scott looked at me and then at her and said that we were probably just going to go back to the hotel and go to sleep because we had a long drive back to West Virginia the next day.

She gave me her phone number and said that if we wanted to get breakfast the next morning before our drive, we should text her and she'd take us to a good place.

We thanked her and said goodnight and started walking back to the hotel.

Scott told me he was sorry about wanting to go back to the hotel and that if I wanted to go out drinking with the woman I should.

I laughed and said it was okay and that I wanted to go back to the hotel too but that I wanted to get a cup of coffee and maybe a snack to bring back to the room.

We walked to a Starbucks but it was closed and we walked to a cookie store but they didn't sell coffee and then a man approached us and told us about how St. Louis was a racist city and how he was just visiting from Ohio and he had cancer and all of the white people he'd talked to seemed afraid of him but not us.

We told him we were sorry about that, about the racism, and he told us again that he had cancer and could we spare some change.

But we didn't have any cash or change in our pockets and we told him that and he looked annoyed and walked away and said something to himself about how this cancer wasn't going to cure itself.

And then we found a Whole Foods behind our hotel.

I got a coffee and then we browsed the snacks for a while and Scott picked out a big bag of chips and I was picking out a bunch of individual cookies to put in a box but then Scott suggested that I pick a box of cookies that was already prepackaged, so I put back all of the individual cookies and threw the box in the garbage and then grabbed a box of the prepackaged cookies and we paid and brought everything back to the hotel room.

Scott sat on his bed and I sat on my bed and he shared his chips with me and I shared the box of cookies with him.

He asked if I wanted to watch a short animated documentary about the country singer Johnny Paycheck and I did so he brought his laptop over to my bed and we sat there on the bed with the laptop between us and we ate chips and cookies and I learned about how Johnny Paycheck once shot a guy in the face and how if you wanted to quit your job the best way to do it was to tell your boss to take the job and shove it.

Then we got into our beds and went to sleep and at seven in the morning we left the hotel.

We drove back to Beckley, stopping only for gas and cigarettes and crackers and chips and beef jerky and candy and cigarettes and for most of the drive we listened to country music and Scott told me about each singer and each band and each song.

When we got back to the house Julia was making dinner and we sat down at the table in the kitchen and then we all ate dinner and told Julia about the trip.

And Scott and I thought about it and decided that the trip probably wasn't worth it for Scott's publisher or for Scott but that we still managed to have a good time.

And Scott said it was the last time he was going to do something like that and then he gathered everyone's plates and cups and rinsed off all of the dishes in the sink and put them in the dishwasher.

THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED

ANASTASIA JILL

THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED, we lost our power first as lights and machines shut down like stale organs folding into their lives without blood. Mucus membranes settled in the trenches of my eyelid and produced chemical tears.

"It's okay," we told ourselves. "I am not afraid."

After a few hours, lungs couldn't take it, clawed their way out of our rib and sacrificed themselves to the noxious gasses. My nuke tipped fingers counted the columns remaining down our spine. We only got to three before the vapor consumed us.

"It's okay," we said again. "I am not afraid."

Other bodies collapsed around us -- metal bodies, furry bodies, red meat bodies were starved by lasers and flooded out with a mix of water and dust from monuments collapsing. We do not shut down alongside them because we have to be strong, we have to eat their remains to sustain the infrastructure of our being. Our skin shed like orange peels and left a sweaty smell.

"That's not any smell," we said. "That's explosive pixie dust and sweat."

Lumps filled with sewage make tumors on what remains of our flesh, satellites to monitor bones for any sign of decay. Our bellies swell with water, and fish take shelter in the tissue until we are of egg and fetus, ready to repopulate once the disaster ends.

The building around us begins to fall in plastic sheets, like it were never reinforced with brick or mortar or the human hand. We watch the sun safe in the sky, mocking our imminent downfall.

"It's okay," we tell the sun. "I would mock us too."

Everything stops and we are quiet until the Earth puts its head in an astral lap, throwing the continents and all its inhabitants like toys into a bright pink bin. Of course, at the point, we are mostly zombie, clung to life only by the stem of brain. China and Seychelles, France and Timor-Lest, the Koreas, Eritrea, Maldives, the

States are names in a ground mouth housing us all like cars in a parking lot. We are all displaced. We have no home now because today, the world decided to pack us in its bags and end. Land is chipped at the corners, chemicals nibbling at their corners like rats. Like the rats that are, somehow, surviving, that we have to eat until everyone else dies.

The Earth continues to rotate while explosions liter its back. A dusty hand the size of a globe reaches up, and counts its spine the way I did. It gets further than three, but no further than five. The hand eroded off, and any second now, we know that we are next and will die alone.

Because God is alone the day he makes the universe out of nothing at all.

And there is nothing left when the planet implodes -- at the end, there is only us and light, cowering behind a pyramid snapped in the middle like a twig. Earth is formless and empty, fat lumps of sand and warm water and no life, no sign we were ever here.

When we want to forget it, succumb to the apocalypse and lay ourselves out for the horses to dine on, our guts twitch and jerk. Our navels implode, and suddenly, the ocean is full of baby fishes.

The sea lights up again and becomes alive, a vault of blue and golden stars to fall into at night. With this vision, we step out from the wreckage. We see the world; it's beautiful. It is over, but able to be rebuilt.

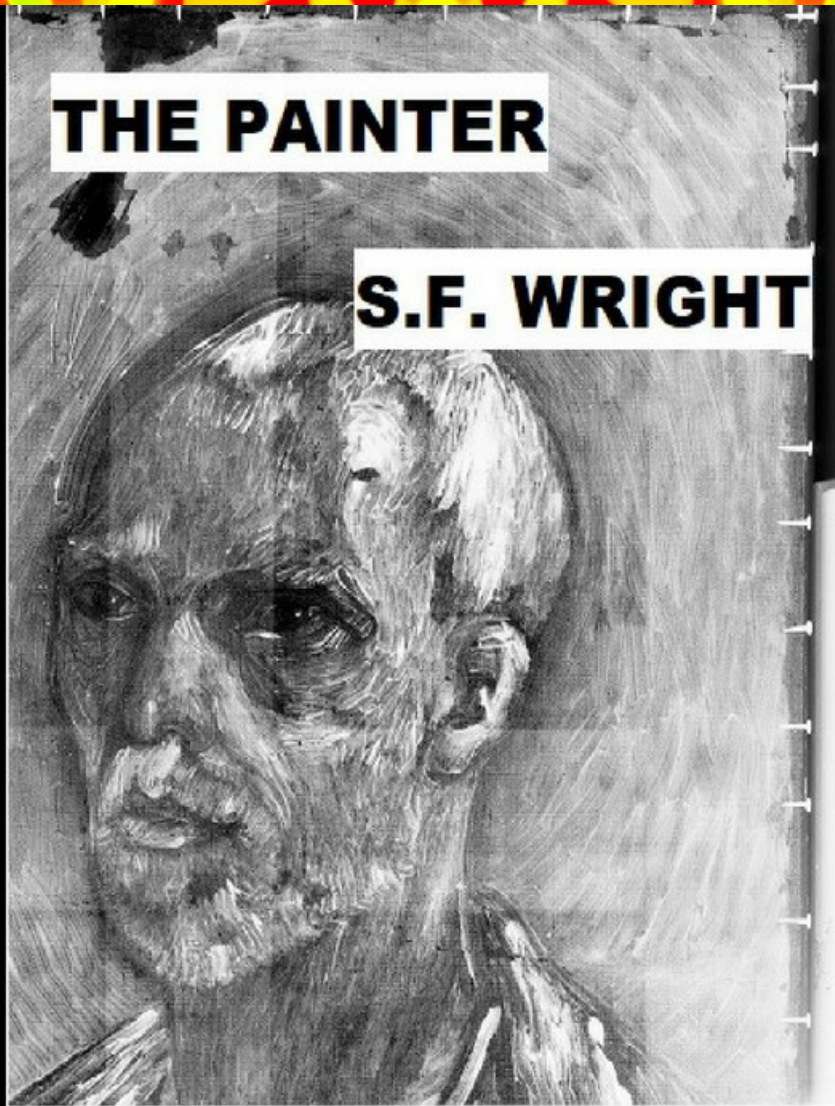
"That's something," we say. "Really something."

We pick up the countries like puzzle pieces and put them back in place around the fishes. We look around at the new world, and rest in the knowledge that it may be good, someday.

The day the world ended was the day it began again. The toxins were flushed and we woke up in a hospital bed, ready to work and rebuild.

THE PAINTER

S.F. WRIGHT



Lands wanted to be the next Jackson Pollack; his parents and siblings told him he should pursue a field in which he could get a real job. But Lands couldn't see himself as a professional, and he figured, while he had the chance (his parents would pay for college, even if it was art school), he might as well study what he wanted.

Art school was, at times, memorable. Lands didn't live the promiscuous, bohemian lifestyle he imagined an artist-in-training would, but he did get laid once (a fellow student who later left school to join a religious convent after a bad acid trip); he also developed a taste for booze: scotch, whiskey, gin—he loved it all. Alcohol made Lands' life seem better than it was, and if he was too depressed for liquor to help him achieve even that, booze would still make Lands forget: that he had no future, that only with incredible luck would he ever make it with his art, that he'd probably spend his life working undesirable jobs and painting in obscurity.

After graduating, Lands lived in an apartment with two friends from school. But soon, even with two roommates and Lands' working as a waiter and record store clerk, the city got too expensive. Lands had to move out; with nowhere else to go, he moved back with his mother. (Lands' father had died of a heart attack when Lands was in art school.)

He got a job at a Pearl Art and Craft Supply. He still went to the city, but more and more frequently he visited alone, his friendships from art school dwindling. Usually Lands stayed home; shut himself in his room with a bottle of gin, vodka, or bourbon; and drank: not only to forget the day at Pearl Arts and Craft Supply, but also to numb himself to the fact that his was a squandered, sad, and hopeless existence. Lands' mother disapproved of her son's drinking; she'd yell at Lands when he passed out on the floor. But there wasn't much she could do except kick Lands out, which she wouldn't do.

When Lands was thirty-four, his mother sold the house and bought a condo. Also, Pearl Art and Craft Supply closed, leaving Lands unemployed.

He moved with his mother, having nowhere else to go, and for a while Lands remained unemployed. But he liked getting up when he wanted, drinking whenever he felt like

it, and having no responsibilities. Lands even started to paint again (the condo's extra bedroom had decent light for it), but his mother soon grew tired of her son's not working. And what little savings Lands had was quickly going toward booze. So at thirty-five, he had to look for a job, and he applied to the Barnes and Noble which was situated across the street from the former Pearl Art and Craft Supply (now a Modell's Sporting Goods).

Lands got hired. His mother was happy. Lands was depressed. He was able to get a daily seven-to-three shift, which meant he could drink if he had work the next day, as long as he started when he got home and cut himself off before it got too late. But Lands disliked the work, and he hated the customers and crowds. Only the first two hours he didn't mind, when the store was empty except for other employees, and he shelved books.

For years Lands did this: working seven to three, five days a week; drinking when he got home; cutting himself off when he had to work the next morning; getting obviously drunk when he had the following day off. His mother simply lived with his drunkenness, and as long as Lands kept it behind his bedroom door, mostly didn't say anything.

Holidays were awkward. Lands would go to one of his siblings' houses, or they'd come to the condo; and the elephant in the room was always what a failure Lands was: still living at home, no one in his life except for his mother. Or at least it felt like the elephant in the room to Lands. He saw himself as a failure, and couldn't imagine how anyone else, especially his siblings, wouldn't either.

Lands' taste for and love of alcohol refined and honed itself into a discerning palate and passion for bourbon: Old Gran-Dad, Maker's Mark, Jack Daniel's. Good bourbon was expensive, though, and consequentially, Lands didn't save much money. But he figured, What would I be saving it for anyway?

Lands still went to a museum every couple of months: the MOMA, the Met, the Guggenheim. Sometimes he thought he might see someone from art school. He never did.

And every few months or so, Lands would take a fresh canvas and put it on his easel. He'd stare at the canvas at first, but after a few sips of bourbon Lands would get inspired; he'd paint religiously for ten, fifteen minutes, thinking he was creating something of genius. But then Lands would get tired and feel more like drinking than creating, and he'd tell himself that he'd resume working on the painting the next day. He'd wake up the next morning, hungover, though, and look at these streaks of paint as nothing but a futile, aborted attempt at art. Lands would consider the painting with shame, and then throw the canvas out; he'd then try to forget what he thought was a terrible effort, even though he really didn't know any more if it was or wasn't, and then he'd get ready for work.

**LOOK AT IT RIGHT IN
THE FUCKING FACE
YOU METH FUCK**

MARSTON HEFNER

R

L

He was just having a terrible anxiety attack on how this was all going to end. Berry was in the darkness of his room when he realized he was willing to go to any lengths in order to maintain his own personal property and respective riches that no one but himself had earned in his own lifetime with no trust fund or outside help but the sweat off his back and his best faculties put to use and the 20 mg tablets of Adderall he'd been prescribed ever since he burned out and thought everything was coming to an end for him; a pill that returned vigor to not only his career but sex life and had his wife remarking he was a "hyena" in bed. He would then laugh at her like a hyena and she would beam.

But the Adderall had its down sides towards the end. He could not go to sleep during reasonable hours and he was often found scratching at his desk.

So it was Berry's not addiction but by the books Adderall intake that brought his marriage to the brink. His wife asked for a divorce and left Berry really worried, the Adderall didn't help the worry, about what would happen to his own hard earned money? Because out of a romantic notion of forever and ever he never did make her sign a pre-nup. It was unromantic, they thought together, though now he thinks it was her idea and he agreed. And sometimes people want to come close to ruining their whole lives, they want to put it all on black, which is what the no pre-nup really was, Berry realized now.

So to counter his insane wife he had to get a specific team together. Lawyers who didn't go by the books, didn't even know what the books were. A team of lawyer brothers who symbolized in a peculiar way hunger and destruction.

He called them up.

"Deuce," said someone coolly on the other side of the line.

Berry broke down and told the man how he just needed someone, something, who wouldn't follow the rules. Please God.

"It takes this sort of desperation for us to take the case," said Deuce. "They need

to be as desperate as we are hungry and addicted. Our clients need to be so disoriented about the world, so close to breaking, that they don't know what living means."

Berry thanked "Deuce" endlessly and said you're saving my life and the guy just hung up the phone but not before telling Berry to bring 100 thou to their office door tomorrow morning.

Berry did as they said and went to work where he felt he had a new lease on life. The Adderall was perking him up. The gym, in a section of his building, was warm and inviting. He spent an hour doing crunches, handstands, knee bars, and pushups. The smell of sweat meant progress. The attractive woman on the treadmill could be his next wife. The man who just walked in and started on the pull up bar could be his new best friend.

Berry went home half expecting the impossible, his wife's ashes on the front step. That this was the kind of quick and efficient service people had come to expect but not take for granted from "Deuce". But when Berry came home he found the dog on the couch barking at him—a small black Pomeranian. He heard a sizzling pan and the kitchen vents.

"Hello honey," she said from the kitchen.

His steps faltered. The kitchen had been remodeled twice. The first time, you just would not believe the contractors, said the wife, oh they got what they wanted alright. The second time had been better. White walls and wood oak drawers. Nothing to distinguish it from any other upper-class kitchen. No parrot cooking gloves. No Swedish themed salt shakers.

He went around her waist and held her like that.

"Why do we fight?" she asked. "Why do we fight?"

"I don't know."

"If I could take back all I said. Would you forgive me?"

"It's too late for forgiveness. We have lawyers involved now. I thought this is what you wanted?"

"What if I don't know what I want?"

"You're a big girl."

"I suppose you're right."

"I don't like the feeling that I'm making this choice for you. It was your idea."

"I know."

"And no pre-nup."

"I told you I'm not talking about that with you."

"Not really fair. I break my back."

"Bear."

"You just have it comin to you is all. A team of meth heads going right at you. Boom. A bee line for you. Throwing the whole book your way. No stone unturned. Half of the money going to the addiction. The addiction fueling, burning the midnight oil at both ends. 48 hour marathons of looking for ways to get me to keep my money. And let's not even start on the trial."

"What are you talking about Bear? Meth?"

"The trial will be the worst. These guys are going to be talking like 2000 wpm. No joke. They'll be doing loops around your lawyer. Nothing will go without an objection. Your lawyer will get dizzy."

"Berry. I'm worried about you."

"What?"

"You don't listen to me when I'm talking."

"I was just talking. Just now."

"But you weren't talking to me."

"Here we go."

"You never work on yourself Bear. You're always ranting to people. You're not talking to people. It's the Adderall. I don't think it helps."

"You know you're right. What can I say? You're right."

"Oh Bear. I'm going to miss you. You're a good man."

"Thanks."

"Don't you want to know what we're making tonight?"

"Looks like salmon and mashed?"

"That's right."

"Mother's recipe for the mashed."

"I know you love the mashed."

"Sweet. It's very sweet."

She smiled. He hugged her back and said low in her ear: "I only wish the lawyers I hired would be so sweet. Because, hun, they're not going to be sweet. Not at all. No

mercy. Like machines."

"Oh let's not talk about lawyers or pre-nups or anything ugly like that. Let's just talk about tonight."

"Alright."

"Let's just act like everything is alright. That everything here is working properly."

"Because it's not. Not really."

"No."

"I find it strange we aren't together. As if something irreversible has happened to us," said Berry.

"I know."

"Once you talk about divorce. No, once it happens. There is no going back."

"OK. It's ready."

"Let's eat together. Like we used to."

"You're so soft right now Bear."

"I could consume you."

"Oh not little ole me."

"Come here."

The lights were dim as Berry exhaled. The television was on but there was only static. They lay on the couch. A vanilla couch that was coarse and expensive. Berry

went over and took a bite out of the salmon then scooped the mash in his mouth. He walked back over and lay with her. They didn't have to do it. He could let go of that 100k he gave to "Deuce". Let it go. He could fix their marriage. He could sleep in their bed. He could give up the Adderall.

"I love you."

"I love you too," she said.

"So you're going through with it?"

"I told you I don't want to talk about it."

"..."

"Let's just enjoy tonight for tonight," she said.

"That's not good enough," said Berry.

"I can't give you what you want."

"I'm not giving you anything. Not a penny. You can keep that yoga studio I bought you. You can keep the studio, *of course*. A gift. You're not keeping the house."

"You always say something mean when I don't give you what you want."

"You're very perceptive."

"You're a good man."

"So you've said."

"I'm going to miss you."

"No mercy."

"What was that?"

"What?"

"I heard glass breaking."

"What?"

"Towards the living room."

When he reached the living room he spotted a figure half inside and half outside his window. There was another figure behind the first. They were both dressed in black. The man in the window was cursing as he pulled himself into the room.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Berry.

"We go to any lengths. Any lengths. You know that. Professionals," said Deuce.

"Are you high?"

"Through the roof. There you go. Alright." He brought his brother through.

"You two can go. Now is not a good time."

"You hired us and now we're going to do our job."

"..."

"Excuse me."

They walked into the kitchen. The wife screamed.

"Maam," said Deuce.

"Who are you?"

"We represent Berry. Have a seat."

She looked at Berry confused.

"Now if you don't do what the plan is... You have a choice. You can do what we say, you can give this up, or you can go against us," said Deuce.

"I'm going to call the police."

"Now you can do what we say or you can go against us," Deuce scratched at his arm. "There's something in my veins! There's spiders in my fucking veins."

"Hold on just a second," said the wife with the phone by her ear.

"You're not listening to me lady," Deuce said. He went to the phone and ripped it out of the wall.

The wife shrieked.

"OK. I understand. I understand," she said.

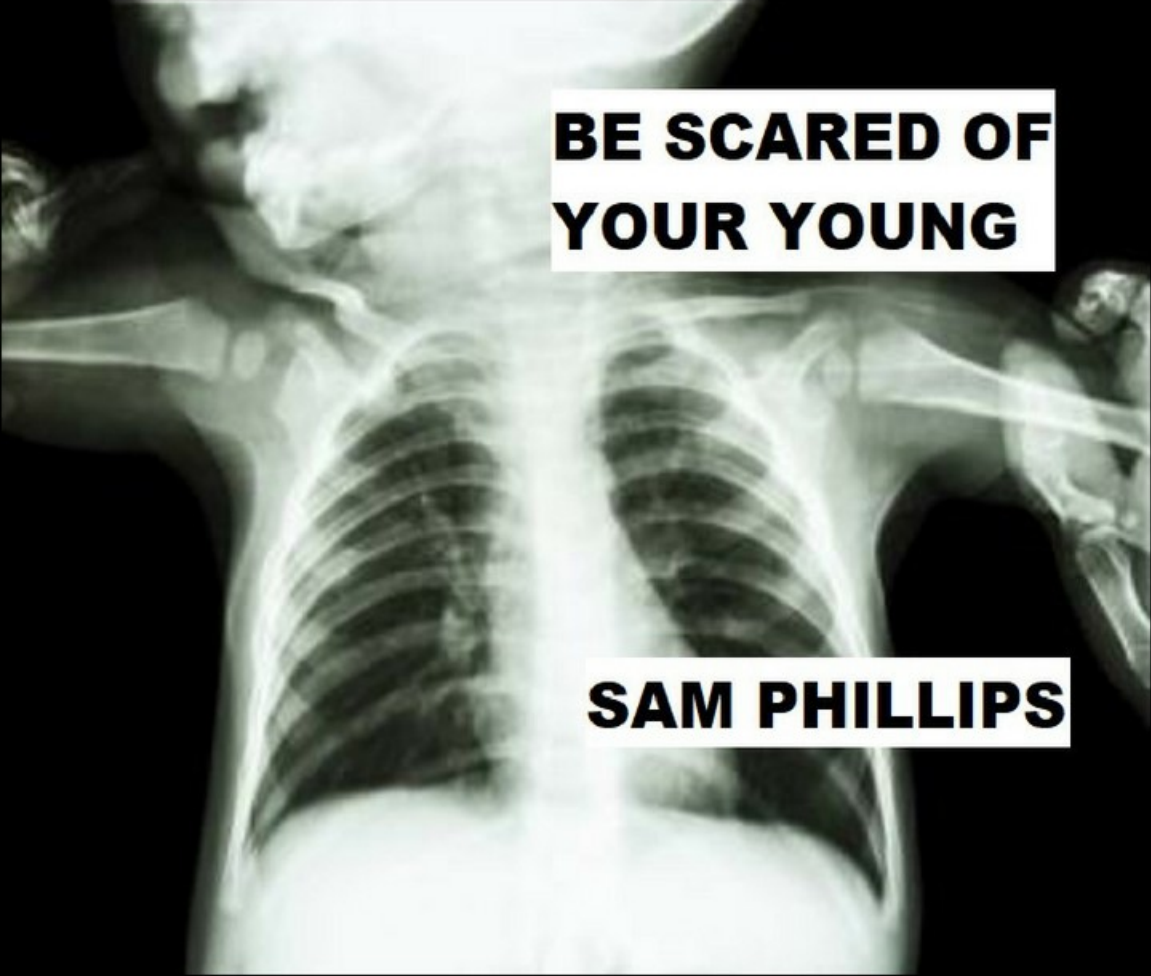
"You see this?" Deuce licked the knife.

"I understand. I understand. It's over."

"By the fucking books," Deuce stabbed the knife into the phone. "Have a good day maam."

The brothers walked towards the living room from where they entered.

"Boys," Berry said catching up to them. He gave a professional nod. "You did good."



**BE SCARED OF
YOUR YOUNG**

SAM PHILLIPS

What if it's all torn down, she asked me.

I thought this was an odd question coming out of such young mouth. I wondered what exactly it was they teaching her at the preschool. We, me and her mother, me and my wife, are giving nearly half of our income to to that place.

What if it's all torn down, she asked again and I had to figure out how to reply.

Time was running out.

Well what if what is all torn down?

My reply was hopeful, I wanted the next words she said to recapture her innocence.

The people that we love, and things that we love, and the thoughts that we think, what if it all falls apart?

Damn it. I realized I was in a spot. I was in a spot and after I got out of that spot I was going to have to go down to the preschool and find out what exactly the curriculum was. This was too advanced I thought. You can't make my daughter think this deeply without my knowledge, or my consent.

Where did you get that idea, I replied to her.

What's an idea?

An idea is a thought, like an opinion.

What's an opinion?

You know, how I might say 'I think that blue is a good color,' I said while pointing to my shirt to show her again what blue was.

Oh, well what if those thinks don't work anymore?

Well why wouldn't they?

I don't trust you.

Her eyes seemed blank, the words didn't affect her and they did affect me because I knew I was losing control. I hate losing control and I hate knowing that I'm losing control even more. I like when the people around me can at least be nice enough to let me pretend that I still have it. I like when people pretend they still have it too. Then we can all go along thinking that we all have control, when in reality there's just no possible way.

Why don't you trust me?

Because you lie.

No I don't darling, when do I lie?

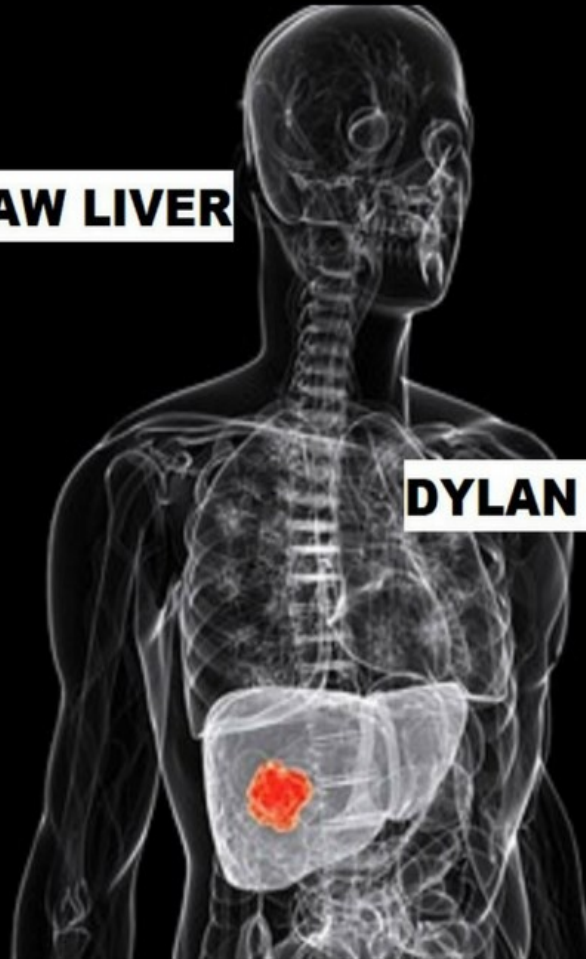
You lie every night.

No I don't.

Then why do you pretend to look around for monsters when you can't even see them?

RAW LIVER

DYLAN GRAY



i am eating a bagel as the fucking cat jumps onto the counter and stares me with what i feel is hate. from the first day we met, the cat and i were never close. it was dereck's cat. we bought it together, but it was more of his idea than mine. the cat and i kept our distance. when we broke up, he left the cat. it started throwing up all around the apartment. whenever i tried to go near, it would start scratching at the carpet. another morning, while i was sleeping, it sneezed in my mouth. i still haven't forgiven it for that. but here i am stuck taking care of it now. staring at me now, i can feel it saying *i hate you...i hate that you're always here...i hate that i'm stuck here with you...i hate this depressing-ass apartment...i miss dereck...i hate you won't leave me to die...know that if you were break your neck, i would eat your body.*

but i don't give in to intimidation. especially from a cat. i whisper back, *so will i.*

the cat hops down, saunters to its bowl. we finish our meals in silence.

in the morning i go grocery shopping. this is the best time to shop. afternoons are filled with too many old people looking at your skin. from there, it just gets worse. going in the morning decreases my odds of seeing anybody i would know. i hate grocery store conversations, or any conversation stricken up for that sake that we're two people who sorta know each other. *oh how are you doing?* no one's ever asked that and wished someone would tell them everything horrible in their lives. they're just being cordial and i don't appreciate it. next time someone asks me how i'm doing in public, i'm going to start crying. that would make them think twice before being polite.

and if i can't go in the morning, i'll wait until midnight, when i'm sure i'm all alone.

i place bagels, wine, butter, and seven cans of organic cat food in my backpack. this is will last me a good week.

7:56 am on saturday and i am paralyzed in anxiety. i had a dream i was writing a paper for class that was 10 days overdue and hadn't started and woke up sweating in mid-panic attack.

at 8:03, my heart rate returns to semi-normal. when i walk into the kitchen, the cat is inside its food bowl. it looks at me and runs out. i place cat food in the bowl and a bagel in the toaster. at 8:08, my bagel is consumed.

i flop on the couch. my body wants to die but won't because it hates me. i toss on my left side. i elongate the length of my body. my back bends slightly inwards. the notches in my spine decompress. i flip over. i repeat and hold that pose until my heart rate slows and i am perfectly calm.

i feel slightly less corpse-like.

i turn on television. a male newscaster shouts *RAW LIVER IS IN!* i turn off the television. the thought of raw liver makes me ill. i scroll through my phone instead, but everyone online is talking about *raw liver*, *raw liver!* according to all the major news outlets, raw liver is on track to change the world. celebrities have come out saying they've been eating raw liver for years. i watch a video of a guy in a lab coating pointing to a pie graph. apparently, early humans favored the liver to all other forms of meat. he purports, animatedly, our innate fascination with raw liver, our predilection for its life-giving properties, our physiological desire for the cleansing sustenance. i chuck my phone across the room. i stare at the ceiling. i try to clear my thoughts, but all i'm thinking is raw liver. i see it floating in my mind, suspending in a black oblivion. it appears hyperrealistic and drips with blood. i imagine it floating towards me, like some dickensian phantom. i imagine myself and i'm run away, but as i imagine this, a separate but equally vivid image occurs of me not running away, of me approaching the gory wraith, grabbing either side of its flesh, bringing it to my chest, embracing the liver.

as both thoughts occur, i grip the sofa cushion. i feel crazed. i look for something to distract me. my copy of *moby dick* that i need to read for class lays on the coffee table. the pain increases. the recliner. purple. i feel at once uninspired/desperate/overdramatic by its banality. i feel ridiculous but have no idea how to change. with a recognized self-awareness, i let out a deep sigh. i think this as, vaguely, something someone would do in a movie if they were experiencing what i am. i feel slightly better/oriented. i am still in crisis, but i feel better in knowing i know i

know.

i see the cat step out the bathroom. the sink is its favorite sleeping spot. i sense an air of smugness as it approaches. there's something dark in its mouth. i sit up to inspect closer. something dead. i scream. i retreat to the furthest arm on the couch. the cat rushes towards and drops the carcass on the cushion next to me. i scream again and, with an instinct surprising to even myself, hurl the bloodied corpse away. a red stain blotches the door now.

the cat perches on the purple recliner. taunting me. i fall for it. i lung forward, but it dashes the other way. it skitters towards its food bowl where, within a foot or so, it slows down, switching its pace from flight to composure, and, eats, mockingly, its chicken.

i think our walks humiliates the cat and this pleases me. with a leash around its neck, i walk it around the neighborhood like a dog. when the cat wanders off, i like to give it some leeway until, once it's off-guard, i reel it back. the cat jumps in fright, its neck tugging mid-air. that is my favorite.

after a few laps around the block, we get home and i pour myself a glass a wine and log-on to facebook. the cat stares at the blank television. it's mad at me. good. with the night to myself, i continue my work of flash fiction/poems i base on people's profile pictures. this started with dereck. i feel as though it will be never be complete but i enjoy working on it. it's my escape/invasion into reality. i can draw up people's lives without ever having to meet them (and not that i would want to).

i click on a profile where its picture is of a skull wearing an american-flag bandana and breathing fire. i think it's cool. his most recent status is from three months ago and reads "who do u miss". no one has replied. this makes me sad. i thumbs-up his status. i hope he'll like this. i scribble in my notebook *story: sad skeleton feels lost/alone in modern america until he meets equally sad/alone blob of flesh and they have sex and become human*. i stalk through dereck's profile next because i hate myself. i go through all his most recently tagged photos. annoyingly infrequent. his

most recent picture is of him with a group of people i've never seen before. the caption says "elemental". i don't know what that means. he's at a hookah bar. we never went to a hookah bar. i suddenly want to go to a hookah bar.

i go to bed cry for an hour and feel empowered.

i turn on the television. still at war. i turn off the television. feeling queasy. but not because the news. something else is wrong.

i open the cat food. the bagel is toasting. but beyond the smell of canned chicken and crisping bread is something bitter, ammoniac. that is when i see the huge wet blotch on the couch. i bend over and give an investigatory smell. definitely that. i look up to see the cat sprawled on the recliner. it meows villainously. anger. i grab a pillow and launch it towards the recliner. it bumps the cat on the butt. a nefarious meow bellows. i must be going crazy, because i saw a flash of gold in its teeth when it meowed. i butter my bagel and slam the front door behind me.

i go to buy cat spray. while on the bus, i search on my phone *natural cat urination repellant*. i find: one part water to one part apple cider vinegar, with lemongrass, lavender, and peppermint for added aromatics. i have none of those except water. the man seated across from me is holding a bloodied paper parcel. he inspects around the bus and opens it. he places tiny bits of what i assume is meat in his mouth. could it be raw liver?

i ignore that and think of the cat. that stupid cat. why does it make my life so arduous? i google *do cats spray in spite*? some cat forums say this can happen, and i feel vindicated in my assumption that the cat has been plotting against me. i also find that sometimes the spraying can be caused by diabetes. i hurry off the bus, remembering that it's already 5pm and the store would be infested with people. on my way out, i grab the cat food containing fish. its high omega-3s, i read online, helps prevent diabetes.

the cat has sprayed everything. i grab the refrigerator handle and it's slick. i do yoga and my mat is soaked. i sit to read my copy of *moby dick* and the pages are stuck

together, and putrid.

i go on a rampage with my spray too. i spray the litter box, the bed, the sink, the television, the lamppost, the countertop, the couch cushions, the recliner (the other side). in the hallway, we have a standoff. i make a scowl like clint eastwood (i think) and think, *this town ain't big enough for the two of us or i'm the sheriff around these parts and don't you forget it*. i imagine the cat personified in a dark, wide-brimmed hat, sometimes smoking a cigar, as my arch nemesis. i imagine when it sees me it says nasty things in foreign tongues, and if i were to ask them what it'd mean, it'd translate with perfect clarity into a language i could understand, and then we'd draw our sprays, unload clip after clip at each other until we are both drained, out of bullets, as the silence of war settles around us, our differences tangibly futile as we both lie bankrupt in our own self-pride.

and then we go separate ways.

until the sequel.

and then we go again.

monday night. i have not left the apartment. i have watched netflix in bed all day. this is my day of rest. after having not eaten today, i am decidedly tipsy after just one glass of wine. after this, i return to netflix underneath my blanket. it is under here where i am most content. do not take me from my blanket. leave me here to die entertained in peace. i do not wish to be disturbed world.

after a few hours, my body is stiff from stasis. i rise to my feet and touch my toes. i rise up again and again touch my toes. i do this again. and again.

my body feels better and in turn i do too.

in the kitchen i pour myself another glass of wine and open up my *moby dick*. after two hours of reading, i complete about forty pages. i decide i am going to sparknotes the rest of the book. fuckit. after that i pour myself another glass and turn on the

radio. the news. i switch it off. a slight pressure presses on the back of my skull. i need to stop listening to the news. i finish the rest of my drink, grab the bottle and go back into my room.

i am awake. it is still dark. netflix is still open on my laptop. an empty wine bottle is in bed next to me and also, to my surprise, is the cat. i listen to it breathing. it looks so peaceful. i pet its fur. it's very soft. i sometimes forget that this cat is only a cat, and not, like, a person who has an agenda or vendetta or desire to inflict war crimes; it wants to eat and sleep and be left alone. i feel that. something vague warms me, like a *déjà vu*, but nostalgic. i don't think of anything but the solidarity of this moment. i pet its fur and feel myself getting sleepy. but as i'm going back to sleep when a horrible thought occurs - i forgot to feed the cat!! my laptop crashes to the ground when i fumble out of bed but i don't care. i am suddenly aware of how drunk i still am. i can't even figure out how the can opener works. how did i ever use this?? i'm fumbling with the thing and my drunkass slices open my finger. leaning over the sink, i press a dish rag against the cut. blood drips from the rag into the sink. the cat stumbles in. in that moment, i forget my pain and tear into the can like a true fucking savage. the cat looks at me and looks at the food. i'm waiting. something like a bow or a *thanks man!* from the cat. anything to show me that i matter in this relationship. but that never comes. the cat stares at me. i will never know how it feels. no matter what i think it feels or want it to feel. i'm me and the cat is a cat. we're two different creatures. the cat nibbles at the food some. i'm back at the sink. it turns around and walks towards the bedroom. with my towel-wrapped hand, i follow. it hops onto the bed and curls back into a ball. i return to my covers, clenching the towel and petting the cat until i fall asleep.

A chest X-ray image showing a pair of scissors inserted into the chest cavity. The handles of the scissors are visible near the top center, and the blades extend downwards. The image is grainy and has a blueish tint. There is a small 'R' marker in the upper left corner of the X-ray area.

**SATURDAY NIGHT BLUES, OR THAT ONE
TIME FRANNY TOOK PATRICE OUT**

BOB RAYMONDA

Patrice walks into her kitchen, opens the cupboard, pulls out a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese, and sighs. She's wearing a matching set of duck pajamas with a thinly rolled joint clamped between the corner of her lips. She runs the tap to fill a half-washed pot and lights the joint on the stovetop before setting the water to boil.

The clock on her microwave flashes twelve. The power went out last Wednesday and she just can't bring herself to reset it. Her anxiety calms as she smokes and watches the bubbles start to collect at the bottom of the pot.

What the hell do you think you're doing? The voice comes from nowhere and is husky like it's had one too many Virginia Slims.

Patrice brushes a stray hair back around her ear and mumbles, "Making dinner."

A stray tentacle creeps out from behind her back. It's slimy and has thick black hair covering it. It's wearing a gaudy wristwatch, which it holds unnecessarily close to her face.

Bitch, it's 7 o'clock.

Patrice dumps the bag of noodles into the boiling water and turns down the heat. She takes another drag of her joint and grabs a can of beer from the fridge. "And your point is?"

My point is that we told Jessie that we'd meet her for tacos and tequila at 7:45 and you haven't even taken a shower today.

In the blink of an eye, another tentacle appears and pulls the joint out of her lips, stubbing it out in an ashtray on the counter. A third removes the boiling macaroni from the burner and a fourth smacks Patrice directly in the cheek.

Get your game face on, girl. We're gonna get it in tonight.

Patrice grimaces, trying her best to overcome the beast on her back.

"God dammit, Franny, stop that."

She manages to strain the macaroni and dump in a pad of butter and the packet of Nickelodeon-orange powdered cheese into the pot. She dodges another smack from the fourth tentacle and gets her pathetic dinner into a chipped ceramic bowl. She gathers the bowl, ashtray, and the beer and brings them with her into her living room.

Franny is a gigantic parasite that latches onto Patrice with hundreds of tiny suction cups. Patrice has to cut holes in all of her clothing so she doesn't suffocate, which has proven awkward in professional settings but works alright otherwise. Franny's been around for as long as she can remember, but the two still can't manage to agree on anything.

Patrice, it's fucking depressing in here. We've gotta get out.

Franny and Patrice's living room is covered in unopened mail and discarded takeout containers. There's a *Trainspotting* poster on one wall and a shelf full of books on the other that were all Randy's, but he hasn't lived here in months and never came back for his stuff.

Patrice turns a *Making a Murderer* on Netflix. She settles into the pleather couch after kicking aside her electric blanket and says, "Franny, I don't care what you or Jessie or that guy Chet you made us bring home last week have to say about it. Nothing is getting in between me and that murderer tonight."

I'm not so sure about that.

Patrice snorts and grabs a throw pillow, putting it behind her head and muffling Franny's voice. One of Franny's tentacles starts to slither out from underneath her, but she bats at it with her fork before taking her first bite, followed immediately by a huge swig of beer.

"Ahhhh," she moans, burping, "that hits the spot."

Come on, Patty, you're not gonna really live until you get outta those ducky pajamas and into something much less comfortable.

"Fat chance," Patrice says, relighting the roach and turning the volume up on the TV.

Franny gives Patrice a few minutes. Even lets her think that she's going to get her way, letting those sweet-talking Wisconsin lawyers lull her into a false sense of security. The minute Patrice's guard is down, all of Franny's tentacles are on deck.

With the first, she knocks Patrice's beer into the bowl of macaroni and cheese, ruining it.

With the second, she throws the remote at the television, cracking the glass, and knocking it off the wall.

"What the fuck!" Patrice shouts.

Franny, laughing, takes her third and fourth tentacles and inserts both of them into Patrice's ears. The woman's eyes glaze over with a milky white film and she stops resisting. She stands and walks like a zombie to the bedroom; Franny chuckling the whole way there.

When Patrice comes to, they're in front of the mirror and Franny is putting the finishing touches on her make-up. The tentacles on the left tending to her foundation and lipstick while those on the right do their best to do anything with her hair.

"Come on, Franny, next week. I promise"

Jessie's been blowing your phone up. We're already late. Let's go.

Patrice glances down and notices the hideous dress that Franny has them in. Bright turquoise and covered in hideous sequins and low cut in the back, so the parasite can be the center of every conversation like she always is. "I look like a fucking clown."

Mmm mmm mmm, girl. You look good.

Patrice tries to seize control for a second, grabbing a bottle of rubbing alcohol and makeup wipes out of the medicine cabinet, but Franny notices and slides two her tentacles back into Patrice's ears.

After what feels like moments, the two of them are walking into Harry's Burritos. The Weeknd is playing over the loudspeakers and Jessie is sitting by herself, a plate of half-finished-half-congealed nachos in front of her.

"Where the hell were you two?" she spits.

Patrice goes to speak, but Franny pipes up, pulling out the tentacle with the watch and pointing at her heavily rouged cheeks: *Someone tried to bail on you.*

Jessie rolls her eyes and slurs, "I ordered us margaritas, but you took so long that I had to drink them both."

"That's alright," she says. Patrice's voice is so soft compared to Franny's that she isn't even sure if Jessie hears her.

This is my song, Franny says, her tentacles waving in the air. Patrice takes a sip of water and glances around the room. She catches the bartender's glare as he's staring at them. It's Chet. She's had a crush on him for months, and she really should thank Franny for helping her seal the deal, but she has a hard time thanking Franny for just about anything when she'd usually rather be at home sleeping.

Chet grabs a bottle of mezcal and four shot glasses. He fills them up and sets them on a tray, abandoning his post to join them.

"What's up girls, how're you doing tonight?"

Chet! My favorite man in the world.

Jessie gives Patrice a little wink, "Oh, we're good honey, how're you?"

Chet smiles at the three of them as he passes out the shots, saving Patrice's for last. He grazes her hand as he says, "I'm doing great. Shift's just starting, but I'm taking this one with you anyway."

Patrice's face goes flush, but she raises her glass with the rest of them and whispers, "Good to see you too, Chet."

I'll bet it is, Patty.

Franny and Jessie cackle and one of Franny's tentacles reaches out and smacks Chet on the ass. Now it's his turn to blush.

"Look, ladies, I've gotta go get back to the bar, but don't you go anywhere on me," he says, stacking the glasses and throwing a towel over his perfectly lanky shoulder, "stick around long enough, Franny, and I'll let you eat the worm."

I'll bet you will, she whispers, Jessie cackling even louder this time.

"Be careful what you wish for," Patty says, speaking up, "you keep talking like that and Franny's got a worm of her own to show you."

Chet shoots her another glance as he walks away, smiling with only half of his mouth. Patrice fucking hates how right Franny is; Steven Avery's got nothing on Chet and she knows it.

For the next hour and a half, Jessie and Franny inhale twelve tacos between the two of them. Patrice enjoys two. Chet keeps sending them drinks and they keep drinking them, and before any of them know it, Harry's is closing. Jessie stumbles outside to call a cab and Franny, for the first time all night, keeps quiet and lets Patrice do the talking.

"You wanna come by tonight?" she says, looking up into those big grey eyes of his and

biting her lower lip.

Chet doesn't say anything. He just turns the lights off in the bar and grabs Patrice by the wrist, leading her out to his car. He doesn't even make a face as Franny slides her hairy tentacles all over his hips. He's got one thing on his mind and one thing only: Patrice.

Back at home, Patrice is nervous for a minute that Chet'll say something about the mess, even though it looks exactly the same as it did last week, give or take a room temperature pot of mac'n'cheese. Netflix asks if she's still watching Making a Murderer, but she pushes Chet into her room and leaves the lights off. Franny hasn't made a peep since they left the bar, only occasionally groping Chet, but still letting Patrice stay in control.

The three tumble around in the dark in her bed and Patrice wonders, for a minute, if it's the part of Franny that's snuck her way inside of Chet that gets him off, but she doesn't mention it. Just lets the two of them pass out in a tangle of limbs and tentacles and sweat and condom wrappers and grabs her phone. It's three o'clock in the morning on a Wednesday and she's gotta work in a few hours, but she's wide awake. She lights up another joint from her bedside table and looks at Instagram, immediately finding her way to Randy's profile. She can't stop obsessing over the new girl in all of his photos, even though Chet is still ass naked and only two feet away from her.

Franny, who Patrice is convinced is sated for the night, mumbles one last time before snoring: *Aren't you glad we went out?*

Patrice, still scrolling through pictures of Randy's new, slightly younger, slightly thinner, definitely more blonde version of her, answers: Yes.



95 IN QUEENS

**KRISTIN
GARTH**

JONATHAN

It's five past. The bookstore owner with the crooked back eyes me as if I'm a suspicious character. Sinister I wear like a Brooks Brothers suit. Not suspicious.

Six past. If I'd been thinking, I'd have sent these things UPS. If I'd been thinking, I would have dumped her majestic, manipulative ass a year ago. If I'd been ... with Lauren, there's never been a lot of ...

Nine past. There's little worse in the world than a three-piece suit and a tie in the middle of a July heat wave in Queens. And women with crooked backs.

Ten past.

LAUREN

I'm wearing a pleated black skirt, Mary Jane heels, a white turtleneck because Jonathan likes a girl in a turtleneck. He likes his girls in white.

I'm running, in heels, down a street I hope is Tyrell. I've asked three people for help. None even stop to hear my question.

Something drips down my cheek. Not sure if it's sweat or tears or both. It hits my mouth. It's salty. I lick my lips.

It's fifteen past. He will not wait.

TRICIA

"Coffee, black

I rest my fingers on a spoon centered on a violet linen napkin, take a New York City breath. I'm here, but she's here too. And, right now, she's with him.

IRENE WESTER, PROPRIETER, WESTERDAY, 13 TYRELL STREET

I'm an old widow who sells old things: books mostly, furniture, clothes. I know things. Like this thing stalking outside my store for 20 full minutes scaring off customers, a gargoye.

Comes inside. Pulls out a silk hanky, wipes his forehead with it all dainty-like.

Wanders here and there, touches everything, careful. Uses the smallest surface area of skin contact possible, like it's all infected with the plague. Keeps eyeing the door. Has some smart-ass ideas of not putting books back where they go.

I eyeball him then. "No, sir. We do not."

Grimaces. Brings a stack of books, a money clip, on top, with a devil creature face, pulls a hundred dollar bill. Goes right back outside to stalk my front door.

JONATHAN

"It's twelve fucking thirty."

Her hair is hanging against her red cheeks like thin, wet snakes.

"Lauren?"

Pants turn to sobs. On a public sidewalk, she throws herself at my feet. Screams a word I do understand: Daddy.

Through the glass, I make unfortunate eye contact with the scowling old bookstore owner. I look away, to the voluptuous 33-year-old howling at my feet on a sidewalk in broad daylight.

"Hello, Hannah."

I hail us a cab.

TRICIA

Three cups of coffee and five chapters later, I pull out my phone. An hour. He told me half that, tops.

The blonde 20-something waiter hovers, faithfully attentive to my coffee cup covered now with my palm. I offer him a sweet tea southern smile. Any more caffeine, and that smile's going full-on smirk.

I'm the good girl. I cannot risk a smirk.

JONATHAN

"Little one, I'm going to require some patience. Been a bit of a snag."

I hear the ache in her breath.

"At the end of the block, there's a vintage toy store with a carousel. Pick out a doll. Daddy will buy it in half an hour."

LAUREN

"Daddy, I don't feel well."

He's got a frown.

"Where's my pink sheets, Daddy?"

Daddy used to wrap me in pink sheets, tell me bedtime stories. He slept inside with me.

"I'm going to lie down on the couch."

I feel all bad inside.

"Wrap me up in the pink sheets, Daddy."

JONATHAN

"You've done your best," Tricia tells me, holding her Little Red Riding Hood doll bribe in the kitchen. "She's faking."

I nod. "I know."

"I don't think you really believe she's faking. We both know that you've derived a lot of," Tricia's choosing her words, "pleasure from this idea of her multiple personalities."

I contemplate an argument, but Tricia deserves the truth.

"You're right. Part of me still wants to believe. Part of me has this," I cringe, "weakness."

I hear Hannah crying. Not Lauren. Hannah. I have an impulse to find her pink sheets and wrap her in them. Pink sheets I threw out three weeks ago.

TRICIA

"She's in there talking to someone," I'm realizing I am trapped in an apartment with a crazy person.

"She's just babbling," he says casually. "She does this."

Maybe more than one.

"It really does sound like she's talking to somebody."

"Tricia, who in the hell would she be talking to?"

That's a very good question, I think. Say nothing.

"I don't think she's talking to anybody." He goes to check though. Just in case.

ROSCOE PATTERSON, EMT, QUEENS EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

We receive a dispatch at 3:59 p.m., 225 Andrus #14, woman caller. Report is not unusual: "They're killing me." An unidentified male intercepted the call, said the woman is delirious. Police are inside when we arrive.

A woman's on the floor, kicking, screaming. If she were a child, I would say "having a temper tantrum." Most definitely adult though. Early to mid 30's, guess.

Mr. Jonathan Braxton (the resident) tells us that Ms. Hawthorne (the screamer) is his confused guest. Complained of dizziness, exhaustion after moving some items.

We discuss options. Ms. Hawthorne quiets herself. She's sits up, criss-cross-apple-sauce, wide-eyed, like a little girl watching adult making decisions.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?"

One of the two officers speaks to her. Mr. Braxton fidgets.

"Tricia get her some water. I think she'll drink it now."

Ms. Hawthorne nods.

The officers look at us with a shrug. Whole bunch of nothing.

"Kinky fuckery of the beautiful and the demented," my analysis to Ray on the way out the door, off to more craziness with an uglier view.

TRICIA

I'm in the kitchen. Refrigerator door's open. Close to the living room as I can be - with an excuse. He's screaming at her. This anger sounds delicious. I want a taste. If he surprises me while I'm standing here spying, I'll reach for the red and white paper boxes of Chinese food. We haven't had dinner. I'm being thoughtful. He'll kiss me on the forehead.

JONATHAN

Hannah's asleep. Tricia's asleep. I'm awake contemplating hanging myself from pink sheets.

LAUREN

I wake up in half light/half dark, unsure where I am. I remember, soft and slow, walking, getting lost, Daddy. Hannah? Oh, Hannah.

JONATHAN

Tricia wakes me, breakfast in bed. "Did I burn the toast too much?"

"Tricia, you know, I like it burnt."

Any other day, I would punish this amateur-hour incitement of praise. She's been through a lot, though, little one. I feel compassionate. Write down the date.

"Now, get dressed because we have a special date this morning."

It's Alice in Wonderland, Queens Theatre in the Park.

TRICIA

The bathroom door is stuck. I push. It doesn't move.

"Jonathan?"

He appears in the hallway.

"The bathroom door is stuck."

"What?"

He tries.

"It -is- stuck. What in the hell?"

He kicks the door. It budes. We hear a groan. He kicks again. It opens enough I work my way inside. Lauren is on the bathroom floor, her body lodged against the door.

JONATHAN

"How were we to know we were hurting you, Lauren? You're not even supposed to be here. Tricia and I will be out. When we return, we expect you and your things to be gone. Is that clear?"

She bats big blue eyes at me, Hannah's eyes. Though this is not Hannah. This person I want to slap. She pouts, Hannah's lips. I want to do it twice.

"I'm sorry," she whines, "to mess up your plans by passing out in my weakened condition."

This is Lauren. I want no part of this person. Not sure I ever did. She was the cost of Hannah.

MONICA WRIGHT, TICKET TAKER, QUEEN'S THEATER IN THE PARK

In line, there's this man. You can't help but notice him.

It's his hands, toying with two tickets. Rubbing them rhythmically between mesmerizer's digits as he talks quietly to a miniature woman in white with braids.

His hands are massive, broad across the palms, twice the size of mine. Delicate, long fingers, powder pale, absolutely blank, as unmarked as a newborn. Nails protrude past the fingertips. They're shaped into points.

I'm holding myself back from stepping forward, towards those fingertips brushing

stray hairs out of my eyes while I smile - the way the woman with the braids does. She isn't even that good looking.

His eyes fix on me, the smallest fraction of time I can imagine. They hold me still like an enchantment until I'm dropped, and he returns to his clueless companion.

Do you remember cornflower blue, from the 48 crayon box? His eyes are cornflower blue.

"Tricia, I don't want her anymore. She's dead to me. Do you understand? Lauren, Hannah, everybody. I don't want any of it anymore."

The woman with the braids looks at the ground. She doesn't seem happy. He hasn't said he wants her.

"This is your weekend, Tricia. The rest will go as planned." He touches her on the nose. My nose tingles in sympathy with the current of that touch. He turns to me with the tickets. I take them. A shy peek into cornflowers makes my cheeks burn.

"Thank you, child."

Our fingers touch.

Thank you, child. Huh.

TRICIA

Key in the lock, Jonathan pauses. As the door opens, I hear wet words, blubbers and gurgles.

Lauren left at noon. Hannah took her place.

JONATHAN

I'm hiding in my own kitchen.

"Shhhhhh, Tricia."

Rubbing fingers over that alabaster babydoll wrist, I raise it to my lips and kiss the delta of veins that meet at her wrist.

"We're not going to do a thing. We're going to sit here and let her rot on a couch. When we're tired of sitting here, we're going to go on about our day as if that rotten corpse has been carted away, and we never even noticed it was there."

I speak it theatrically. Little Hannah, in the living room, knows where she stands.

LAUREN

Mean. Why's he so mean? He said forever. He said, "I will love Hannah, forever." He wants me to die here. I won't die here. He's a bad Daddy. He tells lies. He said forever. He said it inside the pink sheets.

TRICIA

He's making dinner reservations. Looking across the kitchen at me, I see, for the first time since Lauren arrived, a smile.

Then his eyes change. It's Hannah. Running at him, fists in the air, drool on the side of her face, like some large, round dog. Gone mad. He drops the phone.

LAUREN

Aaaaaahhh'm nooooot gunna duh aye

Duh aye.

JONATHAN

I kick her in the stomach, gut reaction of a student of the marital arts. Attack what is attackable; defend what is defendable. She folds in two, falls, a thud of bones

and flesh against kitchen tile. Out of some strange sympathy, I fall, too.

LAUREN

I'm wearing a shapeless blue knit shift, comfortable shoes, sitting in a waiting room of a health clinic in Atlanta. Near me are a few crying children, a teenage girl in a miniscule spandex dress, a couple of women who look like me. My name is called.

ALICE WAYNE, OB-GYN, EAST ATLANTA HEALTH SERVICES

33 year old female, Caucasian. Black hair. 5'5", 140 pounds, Lauren Hawthorne.

Gynecological examination following a miscarriage after a fall down some stairs. I notice substantial bruising on thighs, upper arms, abdominal region of the patient.

I inquire about support regarding her loss. Informed partner does not know that she was pregnant.

Too many falls down stairs you hear, in my occupation, to be statistically viable.

"Ms. Hawthorne, for what it's worth, you and stairs don't seem to do each other much good. The stairs don't care either way; you should."

LAUREN

95 in Queens. A lot can depend on things like weather. Sometimes it's the biggest, baddest wolf of all.

X-R-A-Y

LITERARY MAGAZINE



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