

PRETTY OWL POETRY



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PRETTY OWL
POETRY

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Desire Song (Driving to Tuscaloosa, March 2015)

Elizabeth Theriot

I want to fill my ears with violet ghosts and tread
careful now: this room is thick
with subatomic chicks and wilted magnetism.

Desire just like the inside lines I couldn't color

That is to say, I want to leave
at least one perfect voicemail,
to predict Lake Pontchartrain
before I drive over it.
I want to peel crawfish right,
eat until I'm full and
unconcerned with stinging lips.

Right now I am a patchwork quilt of all the clothes I wore this week

I want to like failure and my handwriting equally.
I want to want less. I want to feel like Edith Piaf does
about regret. That is to say, that is to say
I'm thinking about lots and lots
of inappropriate touching
and how to spell
 inappropriate
and when to use exclamation!
and how to taste the air outside my window,
and how not to love
 dirty zombie boys hungry for braaaaaiiiiinnssss...

My heart a drawing of a heart,
my heart the blocks painted over graffiti
my heart feeling a little *beige*
lately, and maybe I shouldn't
 be allowed
to love anything
 until it hurts.

Country Grammar

Cameron Barnett

My aunt no longer plants asparagus because it *attracts the worst kinds of pests*, she says, prostrate in the garden, tweezer fingers

taut around the necks of weeds, tidying the earth beside the parsley, chives, and rhubarb that grow strong stalks by her window. I spy the lilacs,

open the bags of soil we bought at the hardware store where two men stood behind us at checkout, bullhorns for throats, calling each other *nigger* as if

it were the periods to their sentences. In the line I watched my aunt deliver the kind of side-eye she saves for our folks, almost expect it when noon peers

over our shoulders, the stiff scent of manure everywhere. Side by side our knees kiss the dirt. She says *I don't know why our people have to say*

that word everywhere we go—I bury my nose in my shirt—I don't care if it's n-i-g-g-a or n-i-g-g-e-r, either way it makes me sick. She was my age

when MLK was shot. I try to ignore the rot in my hands. She always keeps her eyes on the dirt. I turn my back to hide my eyes gazing at the hydrangeas.

I've never told her about Kyle in sixth grade who chanted *nigger-nigger-nigger* at me every day during recess, and I'm not sure I could

justify why I never knocked knuckles through his braces, scared I'd strike something. I probably couldn't justify my love of Nelly then, too, rapping

every word of Country Grammar, the swell of my chest in my voice when I'd sing Who say pretty boys can't be wild niggas?—how I didn't care which friends sang it

with me, but only if we were singing. Even today, I couldn't justify when Malcolm introduced me at the reading, called me *My nigga*, and whether

or not I blushed I can't remember—but the clap of palms when we dapped, the cautious laughter in the room, the smile I couldn't keep hidden, what is there

to explain? I wonder how my aunt learned to love afternoons back-bent in mud, to love the grime under her nails. *Good dirt*, she says, *the key is good dirt. I bet*

those fools at the store don't know how to grow a damn thing. I raise a dirty hand and touch the petals of a hibiscus, leave it smeared when I let go.

Self-Portrait as Teenager

Ruth Baumann

If your thoughts are not valuable

If the water bowl is full of liquor If
you lap
lap If you are untamed &
moderately claimed If

your feelings are problems If
you stuff towels around the door
& lift the furniture

to find bumps of crystal If
everybody is an empty hall & you

are voice echoing If lightning
can strike over &
over If you don't know

what to do with the spots
where it hasn't burned the grass

Why I Can't Daydream

Ruth Baumann

From inside the sun, does everything look bright
or is it just boring? No man can save me. I understand
& now I approach my head

the way a hunk of meat approaches
a fly.

Get Sober

Ruth Baumann

Little long legged birds run on the beach
while I practice the absence of imagination.
Or, the difference of. Can light shine
in a tunnel where a man stands, mouthing
I love you, each word a racing train? [No.]
I sunburn my arms & go home alone,
thank god, I cannot stand the replaceability.

Premonition

Part I

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

Inspired by images from *The Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493)
natural phenomena, unnatural births, and birthmarks as omens.

There was only half a torso
in the middle of the highway:
the mound of hair and pink parts unidentifiable,
one automatically thinks: a bad omen.

If the birthmarks weren't already on my babies'
thighs...

no, that's not right, only one twin has a mark

begging the question, where is the mark of the
other?

If he was not marked coming into this world
will he be taken early, was he not meant to be here.

The light brown moth wings that imprint
my upper thigh
span one son's leg as well,

but not the other.

Medical texts say it's due to the ways
fetuses move in the womb, to skin pigmentation

Or birthmarks foretell:
if you were shot in a passed life
if you will drown in the future
if you looked at fire too long
if the mother is vengeful
if the mother is lustful
if an angel kissed you
if a devil inhabits your body
if you once were a snake

I help my son get dressed everyday
I always look for a mark.

Premonition

Part II

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

In *The Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493)

There are Illustrations of Rainbows

And also:

blood exploding from the sky

two headed cherubs

four armed forest spirits

The charcoal drawing of the sun

drenched field is

serene and lovely

while the four legged cherub is an oddity:

he cannot move from the river bank

He drinks all the water he wants

but he does not know how to stand up

Our gods are two legged

and created in the image of man

we leave the monsters in the fairy tales

where they belong

a meager coping mechanism

never beginning to imagine

The Light in Your Window Is a Curtain on Fire

Bobby Bolt

Between smoke and mirrors: the bleeding heart show.
But there's nothing to see on the edge of a memory

Or a lamp encircled with pulsing halo, luminous target.
I'm trying to call you, but I've lost the numbers.
How many times have my misrememberings brought
static close to stranger currents? Invisible discharge

conducting from stained fabric through our shared
blood bubbling in my teeth. And my tongue, like my fingers,
works in translation, reaching for you. We're still talking

with our mouths full (habits we never outgrew)
—plugged-in for maximum efficiency, carried unconcealed,
contained if only to get sent somewhere else,
and sometimes misfired—

if you'd pick up what I've put down.

If you'd continue, find a gap and bridge it. Find a sign,
rewrite it. Love it. Then kill it. Perform an ancient ritual,

Reorder the order of things, and know that you still
can die from overstimulation of the heart. Like afternoons
in an electric chair. Like the infinite space between us. Even
here, your skin breathes into mine. I'm calling out to you:

I followed those power lines, I know your name.

Something Glandular

Megan Bell

I imagine my mouth up close near your pitted face / your acne scars I never saw form / a terrain I want to inhabit / seeing half your face lit in the amoebic patch of light from the kitchen window / which leads into the garden / where cats are buried / peels back myelin sheath to thrust forward / sling-shot-like / into memories of where you once lived / and the smell of the basement there / stone walls / a musty cavern that smelled like opening a jar of sticky vanilla powder by the time you got to the seventh stair / the wrinkled peachy pink plastic / of a small toy dinosaur / mom on the treadmill + a boombox coughing FM radio on the cold floor / hypnotic smoke curls move as if stumbling through the air down your knuckles / so i'm back to scanning the planet of your face / back to addressing the invocative substance seeming to coat you / which i hope will drip off onto me if i can get you to linger / time-traveling oil pressed out thru the filter of your skin / sweet monkey face not unlike mine / with pores and hair / when you get within a five foot radius of me something trips / suddenly the air is syrupy / I'm with Molly in the lake at night / we are wading naked along the shoreline / darkened-sky water up to our armpits / water rippling like the movement of a young man's mouth shaping "beauty" / everything was necessary in order to end up here / in that way everything is derivative / there's always a healthy compost of associations we begin in / before the outward spindling / where we at least are witnessing the same old same old in an unexpected arrangement / so when I say / "I love you" / what I mean is / you have this transportative quality about you / that vacuums me away into spaces where I played a role / surfing circumstances / to shape the meaning of all these words / especially "love"

I Have Your Ghost But It's Just Not the Same

Jessie Janesbek

It's like jealousy except more monotony
 a study of crime and curiosity
and how do I fit this all in one day
 blood from white nipples the 4 o'clock costume

the hunchback against a southern moon
 the broad-handed sheriff blue-blonde and gagging
 madness breeding stars inside the raccoon.

 There is no way to put love to bed
but I try in the dining room fucking schematics washing the dye out
 Scherezade shooting up perfume and eating the props.

On the schoolbus I say *killing moon* squatting with gum in tampon posture
 Jesus, a pinpoint no use getting nervous
melting black crayons down to make lipstick
 my pettiness knowing no bounds.

 And it happens anyway
wristbones flowered bodysuits table-cloth skirts
 hoarse worship stretched over my stretchmarks
leotard reign the warm wreath of days.

The cat is a narcissist. You lie about Friday
 bad breath in icehouse as the bus turns to train
Florida the sixth borough all orange blossom frou frou
 all muskrat and hex. I can't deal with this upkeep

piss in the custard sink down in the dream to my VHS roots
 and big 80s jewelry.
Scherezade handprints all over the bathtub
 learning my stage name. Monstrosity.

Escape Hatch: Prehistoric

Jessie Janesbek

Trigger warning we listened watched the dead hummers
felt your heart beat expensive pink lipstick
said, treat yourself trust electro-utility
retrocognition a Dalmatian named Butch

 yanking the long hairs out of our witch moles
dolls' heads painted black the glass owls we glued
 to the walls of the aviary.

Trigger warning we glistened above this strange backdrop
died as a white car drove by.
Femininities changed weepy schematics
heart hearses of shrapnel in shambles.

Truth was surreal the wild horse/the fox in the globe
and we were so thin w/ no inspiration.

The T-Rex reached in the warm second-floor window
 where you brushed your teeth
plucked each gold button from your majorette costume
 gave them to the kidnapper in his black van

but you had a snowball's chance
 better for bloodshed
until we folded and followed in the dinosaur's footsteps

 etching your portrait in octopus ink
 after the sleepover
 when none of our clothes fit.

Magiccada

Jessie Janesbek

Dryness depends on where you live
a leather horsehead a styrofoam tombstone
and I have been sleeping the soothe of rich food
two minds one road since 1992.

Resuscitation is suffering
but you wanted it this tart mooning in front of the mirror in grey parts.
You imagine a boyfriend three bloods/three broods
matching my lifespan
survival prime number
his photo of my blonde hair taped to the casement.

I go out crippled to meditate on cicadas
juicy fatballs. I drink cheap champagne
by the outdoor fireplace. I joke with time
matching my lifespan with their emergence.
I also go crazy

get wet in the strangest hard rain
but there's something to be said
for exploring your nemeses with a hairdresser's temperament
once the money's all gone.

Do you smell smoke or a lateral sunset?
Nurture seems fake a sea lion crying
crocodile tears over her baby. I don't want to think
of bare-breastedness that this is my last chance.
I brave the ocean in May. I swim retrospectively
like one before death.

When Marie Antoinette Comes to Wish You a Happy Birthday

Jen Rouse

And then she said,
“Let them eat space!”
Because it was all spinning
wildly by this point
like shiny blue macaroons—
the French kind, of course.
And after a few Manhattans
she hiccoughed, “I do
love a good pied,
don’t you?” We couldn’t say no,
so we spun one nice and
slow on the record
player.

What a towering head of cake!
We licked all the icing from
her brow and pointy
party hat. She laughed
her smoker’s laugh
and called us cannibals.
Her tiny tin skirt
turned to a cone filled
with ice and syrup,
and we all fell in.

But, no matter what,
she was a true satellite—you
had to admit. One of those
days you’ll never forget,
as she kicked her spiked heels
into the punch and
called me Judy. I have to say
I never had the urge
to kiss her, but when she
left our orbit,
a balloon popped.

Punxsutawney Boyfriend

Natasha Neira

Lubed-up under his truck
Such a fantasy for a little
steel city office girl

He loves his muddy quads,
Bed restraints and OxyContin

Simple minded and easy,
Will fuck you with his
jeans still on

I spent a week licking envelopes
But really
tasting the sun burnt
Skin on the nape of his neck

I know better
I'm no better
I'll never go back to
Punxsutawney again

The Confession

Louise Turan

As he's getting ready for work, Joe tells me I was talking in my sleep again. I am in bed half asleep but sit up with a start.

“Really? What did I say?”

He leans over, holding his tie, and kisses me on the cheek.

“Gibberish, nonsense. Bits and pieces.” He must see the disappointment in my face. “Sorry, Claire.” He shrugs.

Last week, in the middle of the night, I startled Joe by uttering several phrases of authentic-sounding Chinese. His replay the next day, as he scrunched up his mouth to make the intonations, made me laugh, but it troubled me. I've never talked in my sleep before. I don't tell him that I am desperate to know why. Something I am afraid of saying in daylight is slipping out in a midnight soliloquy, beyond my control.

Most days I take my time getting out of bed. Mother died two years ago and left me enough to take an early retirement. It's great not to have to rush about, put on a suit, makeup, or fix my hair. On the other hand, I find I have more time to think, and lately my head has been swimming with things I should be doing or haven't done. My brain, ironically, is acting like I still have a job. I decide to get up. Besides, I have to. Today I'm having lunch with my sister.

My feet find the soft carpet and Mother's slippers. Suede, lined with sheep's wool, they are spotted with food stains; the heels are worn flat. I don't wear them for sentimental reasons, more like a penance: her pain and loneliness are infused in the seams and soles. I shouldn't feel guilty but I do. I see her shuffling down the polished hallway of her unit at Brooks Estates, alone, without her husband, her health declining. I feel her weak knees, the sting of glaucoma, and her weight, the pounds that took her from slim and beautiful to barely walking. I regret being impatient with her most of the time—but with good reason. Her refusal to get professional help forced me to make the hour-long drive from the city and spend my weekends doing her shopping and errands. As soon as I walked in the door, she'd yell at me, “Don't take off your coat!” and hand me a long list of things to do, knowing I wanted to leave as soon as possible. To me, each hour was an eternity in a conflicted state of being. Mother had always been difficult to love.

I go downstairs. The kitchen is quiet but my heart is beating fast, like any minute I will be startled by the phone ringing, or a knock on the door. I've been jumpy and nervous since the night-talking started; it was about the same time Cindy and I agreed to have lunch.

I usually send her flowers on her birthday. It's my way of saying that we are close, like sisters are supposed to be. This year she told me not to. The time before, the delivery had gone wrong and the flowers had been ruined. Don't, it's a waste of money, she said. I think she's sending her own message: No, we are not close. She is right.

It's not her fault, or mine. Mother wanted to keep us apart, admitting as much to me one day when we were having one of our talks, which was mostly me listening and her talking. She said she didn't like the split attention. For the longest time I believed she meant it was hard for her to split her attention equally between us two girls.

No, just the opposite. She wanted our full attention: only one at a time. It didn't help that our father was a salesman; we moved from state to state—home was where we made it. And our four-year age difference kept us in different schools. Mother shared something else that was startling to hear, even though I knew it already, a dark truth.

“When Cindy was born, I took her thumb and jammed it in her mouth so she would act like a baby. *You* were always so independent; you were never a baby,” she complained. “I wanted a child who just wanted *me*.”

Mother made it clear that loving and wanting her and having a life of your own were mutually exclusive. From the kind of clothes we should wear, to the schools we should attend, to the friends whose company we should keep, it was always her way or your way. It really wasn't a choice at all if you wanted her love and attention, or what she called love, but I needed to be in control of my own decisions and went my way. She constantly pulled and tugged at my guilt with eyebrow hieroglyphics and criticisms. It hurt, but I held my ground. Cindy did not. She wanted Mother's love and all the empty rewards that came with it. Over time Mother sucked her dry, leaving Cindy on her hands and knees thirstily lapping up love wherever she could find it. In my eyes Cindy deserved what she got. She was spoiled and selfish—they were two of a kind, like members of their own private club.

In the summer, and when Cindy was on break from school, they vacationed together at my parents' condo in Florida. There were photos of them wearing garish beach clothes and junky jewelry, drinking slushy margaritas on the sunny balcony. They had silly names for each other, “Bibbie Boo” and “Puddles,” as if they were sisters instead of mother and daughter. Cindy told me how they would talk for hours and that she could say anything, like “fuck” and things like that, with no raised eyebrows. That made me even more certain of my choice not to be bound like that, holding on for dear life. To me it felt like drowning. Mother smelled my disapproval and turned up her nose at me. Fine, I liked being an outsider, making up my own mind. I watched Cindy sink deeper and deeper; she had no backbone to stand up to Mother. Or so I thought then.

Their relationship changed when Cindy married Perry, a man it seemed she had pulled from the bottom of the pile. My parents said nothing to her, though told me in confidence they knew Cindy's options were limited. Perry talked too much, mostly about himself, and was unpleasantly argumentative at the sacred family dinners. He prided himself on his exceptional sense of humor, but we all, excluding Cindy, just thought he was exceptionally stupid. We watched Cindy's life go down in flames.

Perry gambled away everything they owned—house, car, savings—telling no one, not even Cindy, until the bank reclaimed their house and car. He had also “borrowed” money from disreputable sources obtained by his stripper girlfriend and was being chased by mobsters. Loans from our father and Cindy's part-time job kept them off the streets. Cindy, Perry, and their two little girls moved into a small apartment in a not-so-nice section of the city. I told her to get the hell out of the marriage and take care of herself, for once, but she didn't listen. She was determined to keep the family together, for the sake of the children. I admired her commitment but also pitied her, which she knew and ignored.

Cindy told Mother a candy-coated version of the story. My father and I were sworn to silence. What happened remained a secret for a very long time, through years of holiday get-togethers and birthdays, Perry not invited, and our father's funeral. Mother never stopped begging me, with red runny eyes, to tell her what happened. I kept my end of the bargain and never said a word. If the truth was revealed, Cindy stood to lose every last drop of Mother's love and approval. I was certain Mother would never learn the heartbreaking details.

Cindy and I have not talked about Mother since she died. Our only exchange has been sad, knowing smiles at family holidays when we don't have the time or desire to bring up the numbing parts of our past. It's not our imagination

that Mother, even in her death, has the power to keep us at arm's length, playing our roles as silent, separate sisters. It is a mystery to me how this can be, how Mother makes me want to keep on fighting. The birthday was just an excuse; I think it's timely to unravel the long knots of old wounds.

We meet at noon at a deli in town. Sitting across from Cindy in a small booth, I search her eyes and mouth, watching for signs. Is she happy? Will she be willing to talk and listen? At first it seems like nothing is going to be different this time. We casually banter on about family and work, her birthday plans. Years of practice make it hard for me to tell her what's really on my mind, but I came with a mission: It is time to talk about Mother.

"I've been thinking so much about Mother lately. Especially when I'm walking around the house in her slippers. You know, the suede ones? It's like I'm trying to make up for all the time I didn't spend with her at the end. When she got so difficult. Though wearing the slippers is a lot easier," I add, trying to be funny, but Cindy does not laugh.

"That is the truth," she says solemnly. Her agreement is encouraging.

"I never got to say good-bye. I wish I could have talked to her, tell her what it felt like all those years. Tell her how impossible she was, but my guess is that Mother would have never listened anyway." It feels strange to be talking this way, like I can't see how deep the water is.

Cindy's face is expressionless. She leans back in her chair, wiping the sandwich crumbs from her lap.

"I did," she says calmly.

"You did what?" I ask, my back stiffening.

"The day Mom died, I was with her almost the whole day, remember? It was just like old times." Cindy stares wistfully at some place over my head. "It was like being in Florida again. We talked all day. Mom in her pajamas." Cindy paused. "She hated getting dressed. She only did it when you were coming over. She knew how critical you were of her."

A picture started to form in my head, the two of them sitting next to each other, laughing, having a good time. I feel the familiar stab, the half pity and half jealousy of their complicity.

"*She's* the one who was always so critical of me," I protest, thinking we had time-traveled to the same conversation we always did, the unfairness of it all, shaking our heads but never taking it a step further. Cindy has a flicker in her eyes, a quiet awakening.

"That day. I told Mom everything," Cindy says slowly.

I sit up at attention, holding my breath.

"Everything? The whole story?"

"Yep." Cindy nods. "My conscience is clear."

"What happened?"

"Oh, we cried a lot. Mom kept looking at me like she couldn't believe it. She was very quiet. She didn't say a word."

The shock wave reverberates through my bones. That night Mother didn't die from a medical condition; it was sorrow, a lethal dose.

Cindy doesn't offer or look for any sympathy or comfort from me. Why should she expect it after all these years? Her demeanor is calm and steady; there are no tears. Instead she's grimacing, like she's gritting her teeth, waiting to

see what I will say next. Or if I will say anything at all. I don't. I sit half horrified, half in awe. Cindy's pain may have broken Mother's heart, but I have done something much worse. We say goodbye, promising to see each other soon, but I don't tell her what I know: If there had been any compassion in me, I had killed it long ago.

I'm lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep, waiting. There will be no accusations, no gibberish, nothing in a foreign tongue. The words will file out, like arms outstretched, untethered by the weight of the past: *Cindy, I am your home and you are mine.* And they will float in the air above the bed until the light of day.

Land of Milk and Honey

Leah Tieger

At home she pours milk in a bowl for her son, pours the honeyed ohs in after, and pretends not to notice how he picks them up and looks through them, milk dripping on the table as she reads her screen for news. She wants to tell him there's a prayer for food with a hole in its middle, for anything that lets the light in and through, but she can't stop looking at the holes in the world. She can't pretend not to notice the field of dead goats, their tongues as swollen as their teats, or the boy in a bombed out building, same age as her son, and she wants to say there's nothing our sad hands can't touch into joy, but she's looking at a boy in a bombed out building, same age as her son, and she knows, she wants to think she knows, there is nothing she can do.

First Draft

Adam Phillips

If the other boy had never crossed the cafeteria, tearing through wall after invisible wall as if they didn't even exist, if the other boy would never have come out of nowhere like a beast out of the mist, Mitch would have passed through school a little dreamily, a little miserably and wistfully, playing Magic, shooting rockets, making his friends who were either small fat boys or tall pocked boys in black or homely girls with frizzy or straight greasy hair laugh as they watched shitty science fiction movies and shittier horror movies. He would have ground the concrete beneath his skateboard and jerked off, with a gradually accumulating touch of desperation and resentment, thousands upon thousands of times. Some of the aforementioned girls, all of whom had been secretly loving him since the first day of their friendship, may have blossomed into unlikely beauty, or they might not have. It's possible Mitch and his cadre, his crew, might have fallen into status as older teenagers, might have become a thing, a second-tier force by learning to restore bad ass cars or surprisingly beating the shit out of a bully or starting a band. Mitch might have come into his own in college, whereupon he may have been overwhelmingly pleased to discover the stunning, previously incomprehensible bounty of beautiful sexually active girls who loved to read obscure books and watch weird movies and get high playing lengthy obscure board games, and the paucity of those who gave a rat's ass about the football game or the fight at the party.

Or he might not have. He might have slid right into a small restricted adulthood forever a little bit envious over the lives of others. Or he might have done something else altogether, something none of us are considering.

But instead, instead of any of that, the other boy, whose name was Younis Blayne, *did* cross the cafeteria that day, looking like a hoodlum in a video game, with baggy jeans and a red sweatshirt and a blue cap on backwards.

Mitch, seated at the head of a table in the crowded cafeteria playing Magic with his friends, tensed as he saw the bleary eyes of the rough-looking boy trained on him and him alone. He'd been down this road before, at his previous school, falling victim to the occasional and utterly unpredictable white wash or atomic wedgie or just a good old-fashioned ass beating. He and his friends had been forced to watch helplessly as their games and robots and skateboards had been pointlessly broken, thrown into the trash, covered in milk and condiments...

So it took Mitch a moment, blinking and gape-jawed, to understand why the other boy had gently extended his fist. Tentative as a rookie bomb-handler, Mitch bumped it with his own.

"Yo man, you like this fucking...card game or whatever?" The boy spoke as if it were only he and Mitch in the entire cafeteria.

Mitch couldn't read the tone. His answer was a lukewarm guess. "...Yeah..."

"That's cool. I like to play shit like that too. You should come by, say what's up after school. We're all out by the pool. By the community center. Come by today after school. You gonna come by?"

"Yeah."

"That's fucking tight. I'll see you then. Don't forget."

The boy turned and left, leaving the table in momentary silence. Then everybody spoke at once, a cacophony of speculation: Mitch was being sent into a robbery, reeled in for a beating, groomed for a fantastically humiliating prank. Several of his friends vaguely remembered something about a kid somewhere who had been lured out into a forest by a group of Satan-worshipping classmates and sacrificed.

They regarded him oddly, at a palpable distance. He'd just been marked for something. Though none of them yet knew for what.

Alone in the universe, Mitch searched in his mind for a reason he couldn't go and came up empty. Since moving across town with his mother to her boyfriend Dennis' house, he'd suddenly been emancipated from practically any monitoring of his comings and goings. And beyond that, his mother had, in fact, suggested he try the community center after school.

He figured he might as well just go get robbed or beat up and be done with it.

"Hey man what's going on." Younis bumped his fist, and the rest of them, boys in sweatshirts with earrings and chains and either very loose or very tight pants and girls who looked like the women who worked with his mother at the bar looked him over tiredly before returning to what they'd been doing, which was smoking and listening to music from their phones.

Somebody asked Mitch wasn't this track dope? and he agreed that it was. Someone passed him a cigarette and he smoked it. He choked, and everyone laughed, and he expected to be expelled from the circle, but a second later everyone had returned to their business as if nothing had happened. He'd always wondered what kids like this did. Today, at least, they smoked and listened to music. At one point two of the older-looking guys shoved each other around and almost fought. Someone broke out a sepa sack. There was a lot of pinching and tickling and spanking of the girls. A lot of clunking references to their boobs and butts, all of which at first made Mitch nervous until he realized that the girls were running the show.

It was after dark when the group broke up. Mitch skated home with his head spinning in a thousand different directions. This, he thought, must be what it feels like to win the lottery. To win the X Games. To marry Jennifer Lawrence.

I don't deserve any of this, he thought. But maybe I do, he thought right after.

Younis had no idea what the fuck those nerds were doing with the cards with the elves and the wizards and shit...it had just been an excuse to talk to the new kid. An icebreaker, his grandma would say. The reality, which he certainly wasn't going to announce to anybody, and that he would in fact beat the shit out of anyone for suggesting, was that he'd been watching the kid for a couple of weeks...and the kid looked like somebody he might like. He'd experienced this feeling before, some dude catching his attention at the arcade or public pool, but he'd never had the balls to act on it.

When he put all of these guys who had drawn his interest over the years next to one another in his mind, he realized he was attracted to people who seemed mismatched to their company. Kids who maybe had something their present circumstances weren't allowing them to express.

Which was him, too, he knew. Undoubtedly these were his people, his brothers, and undoubtedly this was exactly where his soul belonged and he could feel it, standing in a pack behind the pool smoking cigarettes looking thick and unpredictable, drinking beers and playing GTA in somebody's basement. But at the same time...

At the same time his soul or whatever also knew moments of indecision and suffering. Sometimes picking his way through a dark basement littered with the gentle softly snoring bodies of his friends, or blinking hungover into the sunrise lighting a cigarette with tremulous hands, he'd be struck with a feeling of unease. As if he might be missing out on something. Or might be later. Sometimes he would be talking and realize nobody understood what he was talking about. They didn't look up to the same people that he did. Sometimes he felt like a homunculus in a bulky mismatched shell.

And in addition to all this, it felt good to be doing someone a favor. Younis understood (even if he was a little embarrassed to be a participant in such an arbitrary dumbass system) that he was extending a hand to reach down and pull the kid up from the very bottom to the very top.

It wasn't often that he got a chance to help somebody out. And he liked the feeling.

And as it would turn out, everything Younis had hoped for (and more) popped right into reality, and every day he blessed the impulse that had led him, what the hell, across the cafeteria that day. His entire life the world had been dark gray, not necessarily in a bad way, he didn't dislike it, it was just dark gray...but the kid (who of course was no longer the kid but Mitch) was orange. Maybe yellow. And Younis carried around a softball-sized bubble of that in his chest, and he breathed deep and easy and his extremities tingled with the force of the blood and the oxygen.

They were going to do something someday, him and Mitch. They had saved one another. He didn't have an inkling from what, but somehow he knew that they had saved one another.

And at the other end of this salvational alliance, it would come to pass that not a day transpired within the entire remainder of Mitch's life that failed to play as an almost-impossible dream, so that he kept expecting someone to show up and say "No, come on. Surely you know you aren't allowed to have all this."

The first level of blessing was the relative ease with which he'd slid into the pack. They'd symbolically grunted and nodded and that was that; he could come and go as he pleased.

Then came the astronomical leap up onto the second level of ascension...

The second level of ascension was comprised of a girl. One afternoon, which up until that point had seemed no more ineffable than any other afternoon, all of them draped over the playground equipment smoking cigarettes, Younis had come bobbing and weaving from across the park to tell him "Yo dog Cristina? You know Cristina? She is *hot* for you, man. You should *hear* the shit she's been saying," thus changing his life forever. Again. Cristina was the alpha female, petite in a leather jacket and stretch pants, with her breasts pushed up beneath her chin and a tall wave of bleached blond hair framing her face, which reminded Mitch, owing to the copious rainbow of makeup, of Dee Snider, who he'd seen on the covers of Dennis' Twisted Sister albums. With the sensation of the world spinning off from beneath his feet and the ocean roaring in his ears Mitch croaked "Cool" and half an hour later he and she had come together panting and rolling entangled between the concrete wall of the pool and the shrubs. Words literally

cannot describe the shock and enormity of it. Never in his entire fucking life would he have dreamed that this might happen to him. Not in a million fucking years. He hadn't known that things like this existed.

And yet in spite of it all, sometimes at odd moments, looking out her bedroom window as she slept, walking home on a Sunday morning, he might catch himself mawkishly pining for the card games, the movie marathons and Star Trek nights like an old man breathlessly nostalgic for his childhood.

During the initial setup, when Younis had crossed the park and professed the theretofore unthinkable, Mitch, during that brief instant before his soul had floated off into the ether, had thought he'd sensed something ever so slightly skewed about his friend's demeanor, some hollowness to the timbre of his deep voice, some slight uncharacteristic shifting of the eyes...

And Mitch had been right. Younis, entertaining second thoughts, had nearly at the last second kept Cristina's salacious ramblings to himself. Because he knew, once that was out, once it had begun, it would supersede all else, robbing Mitch of any capacity to make his own decisions. To say yes or no. Mitch would kill somebody. He'd slash his wrists, he'd rob his mother. And none of it would be his fault.

And Younis wasn't sure whether or not he ought to do this to the kid.

But not even that, not even the girl, would turn out to be the ceiling. Mitch was somehow imbued with a latent, congenital precociousness that none of them could have anticipated. There were entire other realms, other rungs on the celestial ladder to be attained. After acquiring the girlfriend, he would cheat on the girlfriend, one night when her best friend Destini Harper, sitting with Mitch on a stump outside a party smoking cigarettes had looked at him and said "I can make out and blow bubbles at the same time," blowing a bubble. Once before school, a new guy had shoved Mitch into a locker, and by second period he had been sent to the hospital with a broken nose (To have this power!).

Sometimes, smoking cigarettes sitting on the curb drinking Gatorade and watching the sunrise hungover with Younis, hurtling through the industrial park in the back of Cristina's mom's boyfriend's convertible Mustang, walking with his hand in some girl's back pocket, Mitch would be stunned clean out of the world, into some alternative reality, by the breadth of beauty and dimension, the depth and range his life had taken on.

And here comes just another thing, another part of it, another symbol he thought when the gun came out of the backpack, then another, placed next to one another on the bed. He looked around Josu's room, the stains on the walls, and posters askew, the mattress on the floor, bare lightbulb dangling from the ceiling, and he liked the deviance of it. And who could have imagined that I, me, would be sitting in a room like this smoking pot drinking beer with my friends and my girlfriend...and now guns? Unbelievable.

Damien picked up one of the guns, giggling, everyone was sitting on the bed, he picked up one of the guns and said, “Domino, motherfucker,” pointing it at Mitch’s head, which Mitch didn’t particularly like, but he’d grown inured to things like that.

The gun bucked in his hand. No one had known it was loaded. All that was left of Mitch, Mitch who had sat in the cafeteria playing cards, who had ridden in the skatepark until dark, all that was left of Mitch in the sudden echoing silence, Mitch who had made the nebbish lonely girls laugh, all that was left of Mitch was a twist of smoke and a drip on the lightbulb.

And that was it. The faces of his friends stood in perpetual cinereous O’s. There isn’t any reason to say another word about him.

CONTRIBUTORS

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