

ISSUE FORTY-TWO

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THE KEEPERS

LUKE SILVER

Carla and I draw our blood in the auditorium. They collect our specimens in Dixie cups and send them to a laboratory. *Do it! Do it!* they urge us. We disrobe and I masturbate onto their microscope slides. My performance improves when I look at Carla's breasts. My performance diminishes when I look at Carla's helmet. Carla's helmet is always turning black. I do not know what face is under Carla's helmet. It is supposed to be from Nicaragua. Carla does not know what face is under my helmet. It is from the United States.

At night we sleep in separate dormitories and, sometimes, I hear her whimpering through the walls. *Hector. Hector.* I wish Carla would stop. I wish Carla would let me sleep. I wish Carla would take our responsibilities more seriously.

Sometimes, she communicates to me that her heart is broken. When she does this, I communicate to her that Hector is dead. Still, when they demand we lie together, her breasts feel cold like there is no organ beating beneath them. When they demand we lie together, her helmet is always turning black.

Most weeks I give Carla a rating of *fair* on the peer evaluation form. Under additional comments, I often write "lacking energy and enthusiasm." I do not know what grade Carla gives me. It does not matter. They have no replacements for us.

On Tuesdays, Carla self-administers a pregnancy test. So far all the tests have come back negative. Carla communicates that she feels lucky this is the case. I communicate that she must soon adopt a positive outlook. We have an important function in the preservation of the human race. Still, every time Carla squats and pees on the thermometer, her helmet turns black. Carla's helmet is always turning black.

I sometimes share Carla's morbid sentiments. Their tests on our bodily fluids have not produced any tangible results. I know this because we stay in their compound. I know this because they continue to ask for samples. I know this because they stock my dormitory with Lemon-Ice flavored Gatorade, and say, *Drink up! We need you to replenish your electrolytes.*

I do not communicate my unease with Carla. I do not express my belief that medical breakthroughs will never be reached. Doing so will disturb her and likely turn her helmet black. It seems impolite to expose her to more worry. Her helmet is already always turning black.

Recently they have begun examining Carla's hormones. They fear that she is unable to reproduce because she is deteriorating from stress. I am not deteriorating from stress. I am drinking all of my Gatorade. My teeth are deteriorating from sugar, but I am not deteriorating from stress.

Whenever Carla leaves to get doctored, I draw on the walls with a Sharpie marker. Sometimes I draw out my name in block letters. Sometimes I draw Jean Luc-Godard in *Breathless* with a fedora and a gun. Sometimes I draw two stick figures having sex doggy-style or holding a stick figure baby. The stick figures are Carla and myself.

I recently sent in a request form for a queen-sized bed. Under additional comments, I suggested moving Carla and myself into the same dormitory. Snuggling together nightly should help expedite Carla's familiarity with our coital routine.

I have not decided whether I want to see the face under Carla's helmet. In my mind, she is attractive, but I am aware that this might not be so. I have decided Carla does not want to see the face under my helmet. I am not Hector, and she continues to cry for him at night. But still, we are the only ones with natural antibodies that can withstand what they brought. But still, time changes everything.

They reassure us that our helmets are for our own safety. From what I do not know. They did not tell me. Nor did they accept my request for monochromatic helmets. They did accept my request for a queen-sized bed. I have not told Carla. I am afraid she will cry. I am afraid her helmet will turn black. For one-hundred-and-eighty-five days, we have lived in this compound. At least once every day, her helmet has turned black.

Yesterday, they brought Carla a dog to help fight her depression. Like us, he is supposedly immune. He is nine months old and a chocolate lab. He makes Carla happy. Today her helmet has stayed a neutral blue. He does not make me happy, however. I detect competition, and I do not know their long-term intentions with him. I do not know *his* long-term intentions with Carla. If it comes to it, I plan to kill and eat him. But I do not share this with Carla. It would only make her upset. I am afraid it would turn her helmet black. Carla's helmet is always turning black.



ELICIT

"Elicit" was originally published in Forklift, Ohio

CLIFFORD PARODY

I am the stretch of easement
beneath a stretcher beneath
your broken body, your weight,
and I hate that the last hand you felt
was gloved in blue latex, attached
to a man who detached himself
from the boy who lay bleeding
before him. I am the minivan
and the pilot, frame and feet,
I am the kids in the backseat,
how I scream, how I scream,
how my body tenses, my
tires screech, we meet. I am
the green light so quick
to turn yellow, I am the aluminum,
the seat, I am the pedals
beneath your feet, how we
creak turning tires that took you
and took you, I am the backpack
you threw on the floor as you walked
through the door, I am the door
and the floor, I am the school bus
that carried you home, I am the school,
I am the bell that carried you from room to room,
I am the bedroom you woke in, the bed
where you slept, I am a flash card
on the side of the road, weeks later,
stumbled upon, staggering stoned:
to draw forth— to bring out from the source—
I am picking it up, I am thinking,
and the only word I can think of is theft.

SINCE YOU LEFT

CLIFFORD PARODY

Is it strange that I stand before the mirror
and carefully tuck your toenail clippings
into my tear ducts? Is it strange
that it doesn't hurt? I want you to know
I am living off butter spread on the backs
of black-and-white photographs, frames
of family at the dinner table, our mouths
again full of song. I want you to know
they taste like sleep. I want you to know
I keep your teeth in amber on top of my tool chest,
that I once had a scab shaped like your right eye, and
before you left I took ten strands of your hair
fourteen of mine, strung them up
between the branches of a low hanging pine,
hoping one day someone would—
something else I didn't have the chance tell you—
for months I left a kink in the blinds of your bedroom
so I could sit in the driveway and pretend
you were ten, spying on me again.
I turned your voice into a box
of bent spoons and rolled-up dollar bills, brother;
I searched for you in the crook of my elbow,
the itch on the backs of my hands, in my hands,
and when they x-rayed my wrist
I swear I saw you in the off-grey mist.
You were stunning. How many hands
does it take to make a bird, brother? How many
blades of grass to make a boulder? And why
did they never bring your clothes back?

IN A MINUTE I WILL LEAVE

CLIFFORD PARODY

While your body grows cold I lay in bed
straddled by a girl with long dark hair, large
freckle on one cheek pirouetting with the pulls
of her sad and ecstatic mouth. I lay alongside
your bedroom in my old bedroom, now guestroom,
muted tans and this near-virgin looking down on me,
mother's Mary on the wall, dried fronds
tucked behind the cedar frame,
mattress on a cedar frame,
you remain in cedar frame,
my fingers digging deep into cedar flesh of hips,
cedar flesh of breath it comes
heavy leaning forward
heavier long hair falling forward
one hand gripping flesh pulling
her breasts to my chest
her ear to my mouth
a knock on the door:
I whisper your name.



WELL

JANE FLETT

I'm in the garden digging for coins when I find it. Kirsty always says I'm a gype for thinking I'll find coins in the garden dirt – which, when you think about it, is just what Kirsty would say. But it doesn't matter anyway, because when I find the thing, I stop digging. And the thing is way better.

I think it's water at first. Like an underground spring, maybe? A little tunnel of water, parading around, certain of all the places it's got to go. By this point, my hole is almost a foot deep, and the soil's crumbling from the wall where the liquid is streaming in. It takes a count of five, and there must be a full pint.

Then I put my hand in it, and I realise it's nothing like water at all.

When I touch it, the stuff in the hole begins to dart and swish. It runs

over my wrist, and it's as soft and cold as milk in the back of your throat. It feels funny against my skin, and for a moment I get a sick feeling tucked in beneath my ribcage – a rush of metallic saliva behind the molars of my bottom jaw. I shift my weight on my heels. I do not want to boak in the hole. Mum's going to freak if I come in for tea with vomit on my breath. She's been noticing everything lately – she's as bad as Kirsty when it comes to telling me what I've been doing wrong. Worse.

And then... *whoosh*.

It's all of the feelings, all at once. Tiny fingernails scritch over the tops of my arms. Carnations blooming and collapsing in my stomach, scattering my insides with petals. I can suddenly feel my heart, and it's pink and swollen as pomegranate seeds.

My mouth is open and my teeth are bared and there's something coming out but it's not sick, it's not bad. It's kind of like laughter, but better. You know that thing when you start laughing and then you hear how loud and hammery your laugh is, and it's still funny, but it's also kind of a cringe?

This isn't like that. How could anything ever have been like that? I hear my laugh and it's like a pop song blasting out a car window in summer, and I can't help singing along, "Ha ha ha ha," all the way to the beach, throwing open the door before the ignition's even off, "Ha ha ha ha," bare feet on hot sand, all the way into the sea.

I lift my hand to my mouth like I'm going to catch the laughter in my mitt. "Ha ha ha..." And then...

Then the feeling's gone.

Like it's been sucked right out of me. Like I was a total twat for ever thinking things could be that good. Like in a dream, when you suddenly realise you're stark-stupid-naked. I don't get it at first. And then I look back in the hole, at the strange splooshing liquid down there. Like... really?

I dip a finger in – just the tip – and nothing happens. And then I make my hand into a fist and plunge it in. And the moment the stuff laps against my wrist, it's back.

Everything is really, really good. *Ding-ding-ding-ding*, say the secret bells that have been living in my chest up until this moment, just waiting to chime. I understand what the word suffused means. I totally get it. And I don't know what I've been doing with myself all this time, wandering around like a lunk, not even bothering to feel ecstatic. Not even realising that joy was a thing, right there, with a handle, like a satchel you could pick up and hug to your chest.

I don't know what I've stumbled upon, but I'll tell you one thing: no way am I going to tell Kirsty about this. She got all the firsts: first period, first kiss, first exam results, first boyfriend.

Just because she's not-even-two-years older. Well, whatever.
I got here first.

*

It's hash browns and beans and peas again. Since Dad moved in with Sarah, there's been a total free-fall in meal creativity round here. No ravioli with shiitake and blue cheese; no experimental quiche Saturdays; no Mini Burger Stack Surprise.

Mum tried using the pasta machine once, right after he left, but the dough ended up thick and gluey, egg smears stuck like snot to the worktop. And then she left the attachment in the sink soaking, and the mechanism got all caked in rust. When he came to pick it up, along with his records and the better car – the car that smells better, anyway – of course, it turned into a whole Thing. And the dumb bit is, he's right; I mean, it doesn't take a genius to take a little bit of care. It would be nice if we could just, for once, have some nice stuff.

I'm pushing the peas onto my fork, and I'm about to tell her this, when I remember the feeling in my chest in the garden. The swelling, the bare feet on hot sand. And I wonder: maybe it's not so difficult to let happiness in after all.

"This is good, Mum," I say.

And Mum can't stop the smile from leaping onto her face. It barrels into her – an over-excited Labrador, muddy paws all up on her thighs. And it's not such an effort to grin back, but then I catch a glimpse of Kirsty, the well beneath her bottom lip swollen where her tongue's pushing it out. Loser.

"I mean, yeah." I impale a pea on the tines. "Great... peas."

It's like a magic trick, it's that quick. Mum shrinks into herself as if she's been hit, and Kirsty kind of snorts, and I look back down at my plate.

So maybe everything is just shit, and it's stupid to expect anything more.

*

After tea, I go to take the dishes, but Mum takes the plate from my hand.

"It's fine, it's fine," she says. "You kids go do your things." Her voice sounds like a big old rope being dragged across the ground, and I think about offering to help, but there's still an hour or so of light left, and the hole's still outside. Kirsty's already halfway up the stairs. So I slide the latch on the back door open, and step into the garden.

I don't think Mum can see the hole from the sink in the kitchen – the angle's not quite right – but I make sure I kneel down with my back to the house anyway. Then I peer into the hole.

*

It's still there. The liquid glints in the pale dusk light, and for a moment I'm almost convinced there's something living inside it. I think of that time two summers ago, when we spent July at the house by the beach. And that night – I was sitting in the sand, feeling slightly greasy and too full of charred meat, when I heard Kirsty shriek.

"Oh my god, it's magic!"

And I ran to her and the water, and we splashed our hands around, and the ocean lit up with a thousand blue phosphorescent stars.

While this image is thick in my throat, I sink my hand into the hole. I splay my fingers and, once again, everything rushes up inside of me. I am so dizzy and so happy, I could capsize. But of course, I won't. I'm the sturdiest of ships; in fact, I can feel my sails becoming wings. The soles of my feet tingle. I can feel the heat rising all the way to my shins.

I once heard magic described as science we don't understand yet. I don't know if that's what this is, but I'll tell you something: this feels right.

*

The hole gets me through the week. Like, it doesn't really matter if I get my *les* and *las* mixed up in French class, or if Patrick picked Helen and Lisa before me in gym. I can't explain it, but I'm filled with the feeling that there's something that's both bigger and better than myself. I know I can get through the day, and go home to the hole, and reset everything.

It's hard to be petty, is what I'm saying. I know logically that everything's not fine, but then again, what if it was? What if we all had a place

to go that was good, and the goodness could seep out into the rest of our lives? If moments of happiness could blare as loud and bright as a strobe, would it ever really feel dark in between?

Then on Thursday night I go to put my hand in the hole, and I'm sure there's something different. I mean, I still get there; I angle my arm and dip and whoosh. There's nothing inside me but pure, clear love.

Still. Afterwards, when I take my hand out, and I think about it, I'm sure I didn't have to contort my wrist quite so much before. I look down into it, and it seems almost as if the hole is slowly leaking. It can't be. It's impossible.

But it hasn't rained in ten days. They're talking about how it's the hottest April since records began. And all at once worry lodges in my stomach like a big, glutinous anchor. I can't help but wonder: what happens when the thing you're relying on disappears?

*

All of Friday passes in an itchy, distracted haze. I can't focus on anything. Eventually, Miss Gates snaps and tells me to move to the desk at the corner and finish the equations on my own. I want to tell her it's not about that – and also, maybe, that none of this is important? – but it's not worth it. I doubt she'd get it anyway.

When I finally get home from school, I rush through the kitchen, throwing my backpack on the counter. Kirsty's yelling something, but I don't stop. I run into the garden and get down on my knees and look into the hole.

It's empty.

I think for a moment I've hallucinated this, the way sometimes in the dark you see a bad man in the shadows, and then you blink, and he's gone. I squeeze my eyes shut, but when I open them there's still nothing. My hands are sudden rabid animals, clawing at the soil.

There's nothing there.

I hear Kirsty's footsteps behind me but I ignore her, scabble deeper in the hole, the dirt sticking like needles beneath my fingernails. It's dry. Dry as old ladies' hands and onion skins. Dry as my throat.

"Janey," she says. "You are such a dork."

I look at her and wonder how I can ever explain everything.

"We're going for pizza," she says. "You wanna come?"

I give the hole another poke. Any minute now. Any minute now the soil

is going to slump and happiness will seep back into our lives. I make a silent promise to the well: Come back, and I'll be generous. *I'll tell Kirsty. I'll take some to Mum – she could use it, I know.*

Nothing happens. I hold my breath, and I hear Kirsty exhale, and her sigh weighs as much as a rock. For a moment, I can see myself as she must see me: on my knees, frantic, my arms caked in mud. I want to tell her it's all okay. But what if it's not? What if we're already broken?

I turn to Kirsty – her hip is cocked, she's drumming her finger against her arm. I try a smile. "Can we get chicken and mushroom?" I say.

She considers this for a moment. "Okay. But next time, it's pepperoni."

"Deal."

I take once last look at the hole, then I get to my feet. I brush my hands off on my thighs, and follow my sister to the car.



GOING UNDER

MACK W MANI

I always thought we'd leave this place
but now the signs are everywhere
in the city, the light of digital billboards
cuts through the smog;

A way to live on...

Wake up in the future!

Time travel exists TODAY!

My sister and her husband
went under almost a year ago,
into a deep fifty-year sleep
with an option for fifty more
if they find that future less appealing;
she said we could visit her anytime.

They woke up for Christmas last year
which they kept reminding us, isn't cheap.
When I asked what it was like,
they compared it to sleeping in
on a cold winter's day.

She said that they did not dream.

Since then, I've had nightmares
of power failure or economic collapse
leaving them asleep forever,
tucked away in some dusty warehouse
or worse, awake and trapped in that clear coffin,
raking nails against glass, gasping for air.

And what if it worked,
but the sleepers awoke

to find the earth overtaken,
by some more cruel generation
or simply emptied out,
mankind having abandoned this world
and turned off the light?

I visited my sister for her birthday,
she looked peaceful, I suppose,
suspended there, under glass,
a silver jumpsuit tight around her neck.

I watched her for a long time,
to see if she might stir or speak
or give any sign that she were living.

But she did not move,
she did not breathe,
she did not even dream.

HEIR

MACK W MANI

My first memory is of the jungle,
the warm darkness of that place
a patient mother to me,
I hunt her tribes for many generations
before sailing west with DeBrazza.

As the ship makes landfall
I slip beneath the city,
deep in the sewers of Paris
I encounter the low man's plague
and together we cut a swath
through Western Europe,
rotting men and women alike
from the inside out for almost two-hundred years,
halted only by the advent of penicillin.

Over the next three centuries
I cultivate in Russian cold,
well-hidden in the shadows of the old czars,
watching as their lives burned,
their children screaming,
ripped from their beds of a night.

Weary of the cold, I sail again,
this time to The New World,
where I speed headlong
down forested highways,
on these dark roads I kidnap, torture,
and mutilate twenty-three women
over four states in a manner local authorities
will come to describe as
ritualistic in the extreme.

Before my crimes can be connected,
I head south into the desert where
nuclear tests obliterate landscapes
and sow the earth with radiation,
aided thus by mankind, I create my first life,
a two-headed rodent that chews her way
out of the mother's womb.

She was beautiful to me beyond description,
though she lived only for a day.

Feeling lonely, I depart for the heart
of civilization where,
in the shadow of a great nuclear plant,
I find the greatest human minds
gathered to solve their greatest problems,
finally becoming adept to the rhythm
of their own suffering.

I listen to a treatise on the
nature of time and energy
before disappearing amid
the crowd of protestors outside,
their homemade signs sagging in the rain:

WHEN will we act?

WHAT will we leave behind?

and

WHO will inherit the earth?

BELASIS AND HASTUR

MACK W MANI

It is the first cold night of Autumn
and I smoke a cigarette to myself
looking up to the sky;
you can't see many stars from the city
but you can see Belasis and Hastur,
the new constellations.

When they first appeared
two weeks ago,
no one knew what to do
but crane their necks upward to see,
everyone asking the same questions.

Even during the day
you can feel the weight of them
hovering above us, waiting.

No one showed up at work
but the administrator and me,
a lot of places are closed
but the bars are all open
and in every joint it's the same thing.

A TV on mute,
some harried looking news anchor
mouthing the words:
No idea as of yet...
No one seems to be able to explain...
We will keep you updated as...

After a few beers I dial my ex,
who sounds scared

so I offer to come over,
but she says she's fine
that she has it under control.

Shots.

The girls at the bar,
they seem scared too,
but the words
get caught in my mouth
and all they want to talk about
is the sky.

Alone now with another beer
then another and at midnight,
birthday drinks,
one for me and one for
Belasis and Hastur.

Outside,
it's starting to rain,
the sky coming down
dark and close,
but I can still sense them,
up there watching
and I imagine
I can feel their pull,
tugging me gently across
the vastness of space.

Gently, I ask what they are
but the only answer I receive
is thunder,
without any flash of light,
just a loud rumbling
cast down from the heavens.



RED FEATHERS

TARA WHITE

Seventeen-year-old JD DeMondo is positively flapping with excitement, straining against the straps on his seat. He is inside a giant metal bird. This bird is way up high in the sky. The sky is the best colour. This is JD's first time on a plane. He got the window seat. He is on his way to New York City, but he doesn't know that. He scans non-stop for clouds and other birds and pinches at the bracelet on his right wrist, makes it go *SnapSnapSnapSnapSnap*. He doesn't know speech but he's learning about rhythm, fast. One of his aides gave him an iPod for the journey, midway through his rehab, when he'd finally stepped away from the walls and into the room. It's loaded with Beastie Boys and Ghostface. He clucks along and bobs his head. Occasional squawks escape him.

The stylist this morning had smelled *wonderful*. JD wanted to touch her, really, really badly. He tried. He tried to touch her breast. Same but different. He didn't know why or how or what it was for or what it would be like. He wanted to know. The rest of his haircut was done in handcuffs. She smelled sweet and fresh and lovely, like outside. She gave him a mohawk. The producers wanted a comb. Now he skims his newly trimmed nails through it. Soft spikes now. All different.

Chicken Boy hatches! Keep up to the minute with Chicken Boy on your hand-held device! Download the CB app now!

The viral campaign featured eggs being catapulted out of special spring-loaded guns on the back of a truck, driving around towns and splattering people, all in good fun.

Will Chicken Boy rule the roost or cock it all up? Install the livecam now!

People will pose for photographs with him on the street. He will never know why, but he very much likes to examine each one afterwards, and takes great pride in pointing out who he is in the picture.

Subscribe to the RSS feed from the CB fanpage! Premium subscription gets a free CB welcome pack including tracker device!

Street vendors will give him free hot dogs, corn dogs, pretzels and sodas. It will all taste like heaven.

Will chicken boy be cock of the walk or a feathered failure? Install the real-time ticker now!

His name will be spoken at water coolers in real life and spread in virtual life like a virus, filtering past the usual talk of the NFL, the humidity, the Middle East. *"How 'bout that Chicken Boy?"* It's not his real name, though he answers to it now. Even his real name is not his real name.

"Did you hear? Somebody tried to mug Chicken Boy at knifepoint. Got shot twice by a DeMondo sniper! One in the head, one in the chest!"

He has three snipers on staff, two full-time bodyguards and a private detective in his entourage. He's never met them. Chicken Boy is always intercepted with chloroform so as not to witness aggression incidents. Standard DeMondo damage limitation policy.

"Why did the chicken cross the road? Because DeMondo Corp paid him a million bucks" – #DeMondo #CB #chickenboyfail

JD enjoys percussion and wind instruments, his express favorite being the didgeridoo; riding the Subway; a great variety of foodstuffs, in particular Vietnamese and Cantonese cuisine; the New York Knicks and nudity when

permissible. He also exhibits a confident preference for redheads.

"CB's ideal woman? Lauren Bacawk" - #CB #KentuckyFriedKid #chickenfucker

John Doe "Chicken Boy" DeMondo has no family, not to his knowledge, to this day. He had birds. He was good with them. Some of them kept him warm at night, all curled up like cats. He was fed maize meal – rolled oats on good days – and he learned to fight for grubs, meal worms and crickets. He could use his hands to scoop the hens out of his way, but it was a struggle. There were lots of them. His hands and feet were always, inevitably, covered in open sores. Beaks are sharp. You have to be quick, in and out. On bad days he felt like something was missing, something big. Something else told him maybe the missing part was the most important one.

Chicken Boy has hair like straw and a scraggle-feathered scruff beard the colour of maize meal. He is fine-boned and small in stature with an exaggerated C-curve in his spine. In the coop, he defecated in only one corner: the top left. He didn't know how he knew to do this; birds go everywhere. But he felt increasingly strongly with time that he was rather a different entity. The cleaners, mechanics and collectors never spoke, never touched him and always wore the full regulation garb, a shapeless full-body shroud obscuring all features. His earliest memory is of a hand reaching in from outside. If he knew the first thing about age he might attribute this memory to five. The hand came up the chute. JD watched from a safe distance. Groping, feeling, five fingers in an industrial rubber glove. Five orange, bloated fingers. The wrist caught on a barb of rusted wire. The glove peeled off. JD was momentarily horrified. He squawked and crowed and stomped his feet to sound the alarm. Something was very wrong with this. As the call went up, the hand pawed about to retrieve the glove. It wore a ring on its baby finger. A fat, gold, insignia ring. The nails were ridged and bitten way back. And. And. It had *pink skin*, this hand, just like JD. The call went up and kept up, a cacophony of squawking, flapping, clucking, madness. And then they left, and left the glove behind. He examined it closely, after a time, when he'd begun to believe they weren't coming back. Its smell was overwhelming. He put it on immediately. Over the years, as he grew into it, in contact with pecking, scrapping poultry and various splintered edges, it shredded away to almost nothing, leaving him only a scraggy orange band, which he was particularly mindful of.

He was utterly repulsed by the thought of egg-eating. He tasted it once, the yolk, because he was too, too hungry. It was awful, the newness and the

texture and NO. Sometimes an egg broke. Sometimes he stepped on one and there was chaos. He would be severely reprimanded and felt terrible, although he dimly felt a sense of ascendancy in this, obscured like some speckled perfection of shell winking out from a dusting of straw. He felt – he thought – no, he *knew* he could make this if he wanted to. That he could cause pain, social reshuffling, something else. He didn't understand where the eggs came from, he tried and tried but he just couldn't, although he knew they were special. He knew some birds tried to hide them, as if they knew they were special too. He wondered why he couldn't produce anything like that. He wondered if that part of him was broken or dead, if his insides didn't work. But he could make something else, and it made him feel good. He occasionally retreated into a compulsive suspension in this bliss and would emerge pained, underweight and inexplicably apologetic. He enjoyed the smell, distinctive and saline, which he would smear on himself freely. He liked it because it didn't smell like them. It smelled like something else. That was vital.

The deep yellow of a yolk was his next favourite colour to see, after blue. He neither suspected nor proved a connection between the delicate semi-precious objects the hens expelled and the batches of fluffy pastel chicks he saw further down the line. He saw the eggs siphoned out by gravity and simple mechanics. The floor would be levered up by four of his fingers at ten, two of his fingers at fourteen, then came the *thook, thook* of dropping eggs, from all around like rain as they rolled into the lined rubber chutes underneath. As a young adult this process went from terrifying him to entertaining him to nothing, nothing at all of note. He saw the chicks arrive in crates once a month. He watched them grow and develop, all at a unanimously accelerated rate. He felt slow and somehow unworthy by comparison, inchoate.

In his teenage years he entered phases of an awful chronic blackness, an endless internal starless night. In these times he refused to eat. In these times, after some weeks, when his skin was a mere film over his bones and its usual translucence had dulled and soured, they took him out. They took him to the medicine room. The hands there were white. The coats blue. *Fascinated* by blue. He knows the silver of the surgical table from the automatic feeders, the freshly replaced sheets of metal on the roof. He knows white from lots of places. From the lights, from reflections. From the rarer birds. But blue! Blue is sky, in through the vents and the pinholes. Sky was *on* these creatures, these other hims. He moaned as they wiped and injected his noodly upper

arm. Wept freely and delightedly as they inserted the feeding tube. And then an incredible thing. Somebody spoke. And somebody else answered. He grabbed for it, for either the noise or the place that sweet hum came from, for whatever was contained behind the mask, under the visor. He wailed and cupped his own throat, bleated a sound and felt the tremor of it shudder through his vocal chords out on to his waiting fingertips like the reverberation of a strummed guitar. *Me too*, he was saying. *Me too! You too! You, me, us! Music!* The room soon blurred, the chemicals diffused quickly and his focus left him. He went heavily under like a dropped stone.

He had figured out, after feeling, tracing, pushing, tweaking, pulling, scraping, two places where nails come loose from the galvanized iron, easily and simply. One was above the top roost, three decks up (Chicken Boy was an avid climber). He could fit neatly as a boy, but it was a tight squeeze now. Flakes of rust got in his eyes. That was the day something changed. They came in to activate the grain silos and freshen the bedding. He had spent the night on the top roost, angled poorly and quite squashed, watching the light change and the sky sift through all the different colours, in the space behind the loose nail. With the kindling dawn, he felt something bubble up inside him, some foul urge belch up as in a cesspool. His finger and thumb grasped the nail, pressing, pressing until he had milked a bead of blood from the sinews of his forearm. He let it trickle a moment, the slow red teardrop, his head, his heart, his head, everything swirling, expanding and contracting, *out-in* went his chest, too quickly. *Out-in*. He bruised the wound and drank from it, spreading the blood around his mouth and savouring the unusualness, the novelty and the dark thrill he felt deep in his churning belly, knifing through his watery insides predatory and threatening, the fin of a shark above an opaque pool. Power. Power was what he felt. The incomparable exhilaration of making something happen. He felt he had discovered and understood and *was about to prove* a universal truth: that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

When the hands came to turn on the lights, they heard it all before they saw it. Before they saw headless birds still flapping, turning perfect circles as if on little red tracks. Before the blood darkening the walls as if seeping in from outside. Down softly raining from the ceiling in beams of starched sunlight. Raw pink ripped flesh, cartilage, intestines and blue veins knotted like electric cabling. Before they saw JD DeMondo, almost a grown man, naked and crimson and coated in feathers, his eyes burning like charcoal, dark and

too bright both at the same time, burning with something ferocious and new, the panic reached them on the wind like a bad smell. Squawks, screeches – and over the din, the low, curdling wail of a territorial lion. Change. Change was what they heard, and what awaited them in the worst way.

JD has finished his grape soda, there are no more peanuts left and both his ears have popped. His clucking is soft and worried. They are descending, wheeling, at twelve thousand, at ten thousand feet. The slow pour of a New York twilight is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Insects on water, on fire. He knows he can't touch them. He thinks if he touches them they might burn him and he would stub them all out. The plexiglass is cool and firm against his fingertips.



WHAT WAITS

ELIZA VICTORIA

1.

To live is to face a security camera
and say *hi*,
good morning,
with the understanding
that there is no one watching
on the other side.

2.

Every now and then you knock on a door,
every now and then you make a call,
every now and then you say *Hello*
say *Is it an animal? Is it made of rust?*
Is it used by children?
Is it larger
than my room?
to figure out what waits for you
in the end.

3.

To give is to understand
that whosoever asks will ask
and ask and ask
again until they
strangle you in your sleep.

4.

Every now and then an old memory
reaches out from the dark,
brushes against you like glass
slivers after an explosion,
and you slap it away,
wash the sting from under
your eyelid, say *yes*
I know, yes I know, yes
I know this already.

5.

You stand in a corner, count to a hundred.

When no one comes, you ask,

Does it have moving parts? Is it flat like a piece of paper?

*Does it involve windows? Does it have the energy
of a forest fire? Is it comfortable*

like a threadbare couch? Does it smell like mint?

Is it hiding in the parking lot?

6.

To trust is to blindfold yourself
with a piece of black cloth
while in the distance a voice shouts

Left, go left,

now

right, now

take the bus, now

pay the deposit,

now close

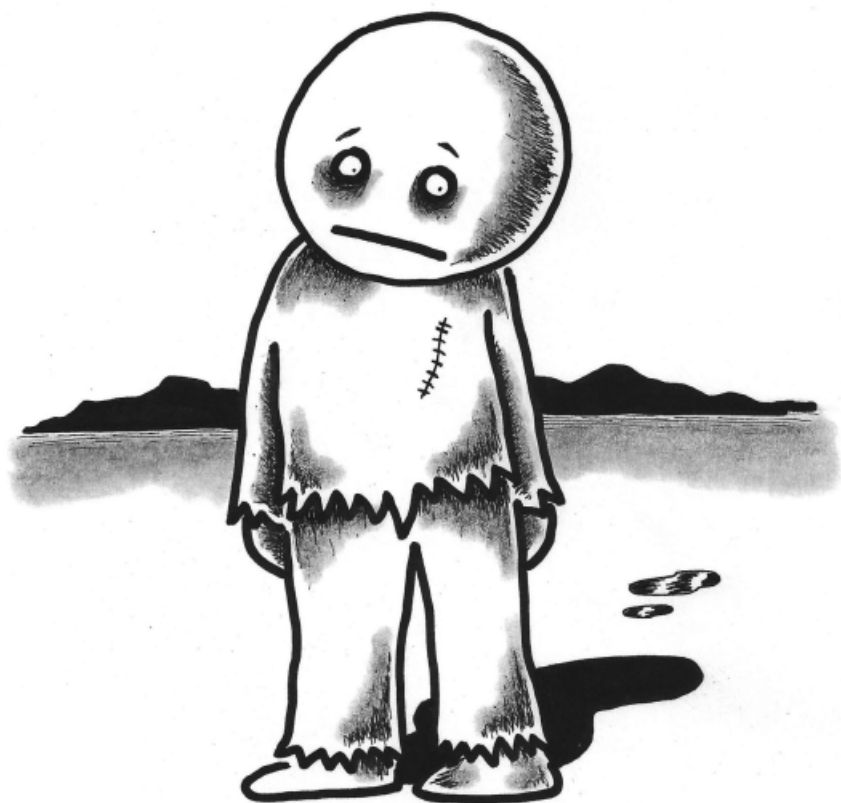
the windows,

now wait,

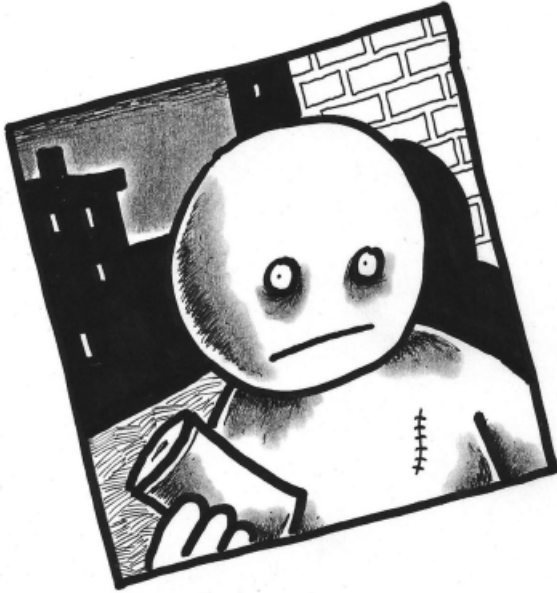
now wait, now

take another step.

Bad Hands



Someone's



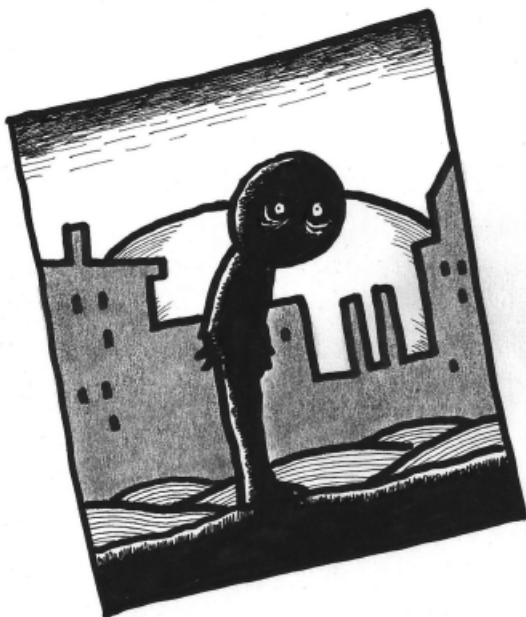
been
preparing

the
deck

Someone's

been
cheating
here



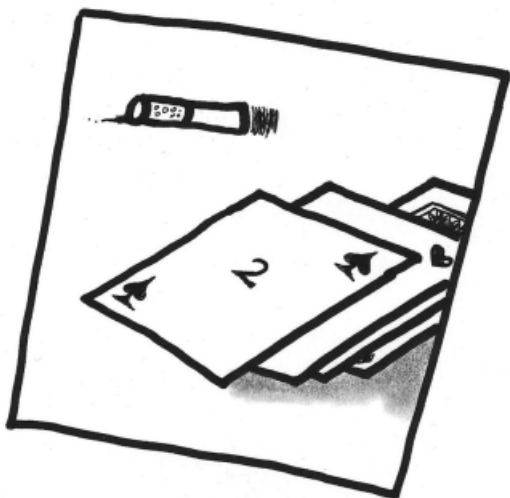


Someone's
been
handing
out
dirty
cards

giving
me
an
ugly
deal



but
you
know
what



i ain't
rubbing
these
goddamn
oblongs
no more

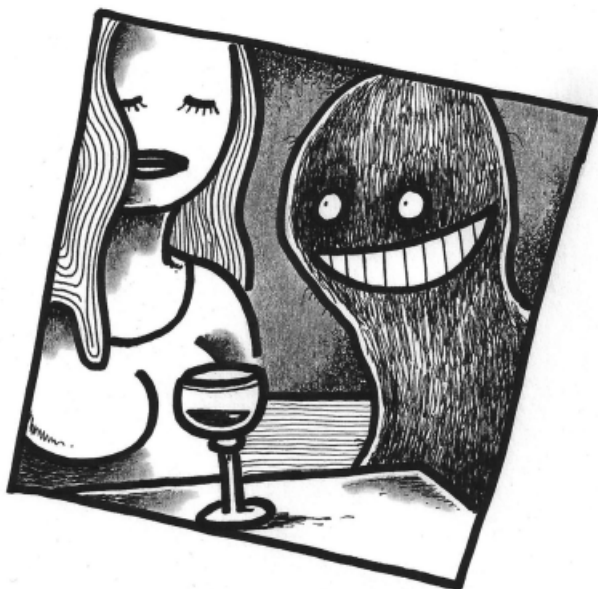
no sir

from
now on

i'm going
full-circled
down



fuck the unicorns



i'm
gonna
eat
people



that's what i'm gonna do.



© JANNE
KARLSSON



WITH BLOOD

GREGORY CARTWRIGHT

It is exactly 14:47 on a tired Tuesday afternoon when I set eyes on her. I know because I look at my watch, then straight back at her silent face. And I'm suddenly aware that one day I will either have her or I won't.

So as not to draw attention from the rest of the group, I keep glancing down at the cadaver on the stainless steel table in front of me. Inside a long blue bag the body lies covered by a weightless white cloth.

We're down in the cellars, as usual, with their low ceilings and artificial light. I'm stood opposite her, on the other side of the lab. We're both wearing blue scrubs, aprons over the top and plastic gloves. Despite the unflattering attire and focussed frown, her beauty still creeps through, tied-back dark hair and red lips on show, undiminished by the clinical blue that dominates the

room. I've been studying medicine for two months but this is the first time I've seen her. In fact, I have attended every lecture so far, making this her first.

Turning away again, I look down at the dull body, its face disgustingly pale. I ignore the students stood next to me, imagine myself studying with her instead. I close my eyes for a second and summon her face, which appears vivid in my mind, immortalised, like an English rose ripped from the pages of a classic novel. I focus on her mouth and play out a scene in my mind: she looks over and teasingly sticks out her tongue, before it slips back between her moistened lips.

Today we're taking a look inside the skull. The professor shows us how to break through the bone and use a T-shaped key to pry open the skullcap. It is not my turn to lead the dissection, so I watch two students in my group as they get to work with the hammer and chisel. The scent of embalming fluid gets up my nose. Over on her table a boy turns pale and passes out. The sound of his body striking the floor reminds me of the time I buried the family dog; the thud of damp soil hitting the grass as I dug a shallow grave.

When we're done, we clean up. Close the skull as best we can, return the white cloth and zip the bag shut. I steal one last look before the class finishes and she leaves.

*

That night I tidy the kitchen. I'm starving, so I cook food, but halfway through I feel sick and throw the rest away. I also go over my notes, realising that I didn't take many. Once I've finished, I check my phone and see that I have a voicemail. The tiny symbol in the corner of the screen angers me, so I listen to the message: my mother, she's working extra hours on the ward. She asks if I have plans for my birthday yet and hopes the course is going well. She wants me to call her back straight away, so I decide to ring tomorrow.

*

It's one week since I saw her and we're in the anatomy lab. The blue bags seem to hover weightlessly above the tables as we wait for the professor. She's here, talking to a tall boy stood next to her as the other two students watch. I feel nauseous, even though the bag on my table hasn't been unzipped yet.

The tall boy doesn't like me, so I try to avoid his eyes when I look over. He sees me staring and smirks, engages her and helps pull back the skin, hooking his finger through a hole he slices in the flap. She thanks him and pauses to scrape back a loose strand of hair. As she does so she looks straight ahead and I catch her eye. I smile but it doesn't register. I wonder if my mouth actually moved at all, whether the stiff corners even twitched. She looks down and concentrates on her work, dissecting muscles, pulling at tissue, grasping the tool firmly between her long fingers. I continue to watch as she prods, slices, pokes and snips, her lips locked in concentration; the body demanding her attention in the way that only the dead can.

Then she begins to cry. And the sound is foreign to me. I see the tall boy say something and fold his arm around her. She turns her face away from the body and into his shoulder, stifling the sound. When she turns back, composure regained, she dabs at her eyes with the back of her finger, like a bridesmaid during the vows.

This display of emotion awakens something in me. And as we pick apart the cadaver piece by piece and examine the physiology more closely, I reach the basic conclusion that we are all different inside, not identical, as the diagrams inside textbooks suggest. I notice how the tendons and arteries – the strings and tubes that mechanise the body – follow different paths. I start to feel sick at the thought of people living and dying without ever knowing what's inside them, unaware of their internal glitches, the cysts that pepper the body like mould.

I'm deep in thought when the professor tells us to wrap things up. We throw our gloves into a bin and wash our hands at the sink. She's leaving and I see her wave to the tall boy and I have to look away. I want to speak to her but instead I just stand and watch.

When the lab has cleared I head into the mortuary, where the bodies are kept cold inside great steel chests. I pull up a chair and sit for a while. I ask myself why she got so upset, why she cared. I stare at the vats of bodies, lined up and stored as mere specimens, nothing more than scientific tools. Do they cease to be people when they enter the lab? Do they still have an identity, a history, a personality? I ask myself why it is that a human can feel empathy for something so empty, drained of blood, drained of life. I ask myself why but I accept that she does. I hear the porters locking up so I leave.

*

I'm sitting in the flat, listening to the radio. I cook food but I don't feel like eating so I throw it in the bin, still warm. I think about calling my mother but I'm tired, so I turn off the radio and sit for a while. It continues to emit a quiet buzz so I pull the plug from the wall.

Later, I switch on the TV, flick channels and for some reason stop at a nature programme. I watch intently, turning up the volume. Gripping a branch, two frogs slip and slide across one another, until, from behind, the male mounts the female's bright green body and claws at her back. A strange fluid covers the leaves as they balance. The male slips as he moves away and falls to the forest floor, absorbed by a supple bed of leaves, lying still except for the blood throbbing inside his bulbous neck.

That night I dream that I'm inside the lab. But I'm looking down from the ceiling, viewing the whole scene from above. On the tables lie the cadavers, and one of them is the tall boy, whose eyes are closed. There are others from the class too – but they're all faceless. I can also see my own body, lying inside a blue bag. She is bending over me, one hand resting on my hairless chest and the other dragging a scalpel along my skin. Her second hand moves from my chest to my stomach and I wake up just before she reaches my groin.

*

It's Tuesday again. My birthday. And I wonder if I should be treating myself to a lie-in and a late breakfast. Instead, I head to the morning seminar early. The sun is bright and today I take specific notice of the flowers that line the pathway. I enter the building, walking past the receptionist talking to a man dressed in a black suit. Warm from my walk, I'm relieved to be out of the sun and as I descend the stairs into the darker lower level I feel the air grow colder. There is nobody here yet and the seminar isn't due to start for forty-five minutes.

I walk steadily across the cold lab and through to the mortuary. I want to look but the silence makes me nervous. After taking a minute to regulate my breathing, I open up a large refrigerator and pull out the heavy draw. I unzip the blue bag and begin to pull away the white cloth, removing separate pieces for the head, torso and legs. The naked cadaver is now lying there, waiting for me to act. I decide to remove the blue bag, turning the rigid corpse onto its side with great effort and sliding the bag out from beneath.

I notice a waste bin in the corner of the room, reserved for used gloves and paper towels. I head back into the lab, find what I need and return to the body. Again, I take deep breaths. Then I start to remove the limbs from the sterile lump of flesh lying beneath me. To make them smaller, I then cut the limbs just beneath the knees and elbows. The children's song, *Heads, Shoulders, Knees And Toes*, briefly surfaces at the back of my mind. The torso is the trickiest part. Luckily, the bin is empty and I manage to thrust the segments inside. The flip lid even closes.

There is no blood; it's already been extracted. But there are hardened pieces of flesh and fragments of bone. I feel something – nervous excitement, maybe – but my brain is too active and my heart beating too fast for me to question it. I check my watch and there are twenty-nine minutes until the seminar starts.

Acting quickly, I undress, taking off my watch, bundling up my clothes and cramming them into the overfilled bin. Next, I take the bag from the floor and lift it back onto the metal draw. Before I lie down, I gather the white cloths and bundle them in my arms. Once I'm comfortable I wrap the material around my legs and then my torso. Finally, I pull the last piece over my head like a hangman's hood. Prepared, I pull myself inside the refrigerator, close the door as best I can and wait.

I lose all sense of time and place, until two lab techs enter. They notice the unlocked door but think nothing of it, talking in murmurs and deciding to wheel me out first. I control my breathing and resist the need to shiver as they lift me onto an anatomy table. We have set stations and I know this is hers, so I wait as they wheel out the rest of the cadavers. They leave and I suddenly notice how cold I am, my muscles stiff, my skin numb, my heartbeat almost non-existent.

I hear the crowd before I see them. She appears, standing over me, her features slightly distorted by the filter of the white cloth, vague like a face in a dream. Other students gather. I feel their presence but my gaze remains fixed on her and a pang of excitement shoots through me because she is not aware.

Starting the class, the professor announces that today we'll be exploring beneath the chest: making incisions, cutting down from the jugular, through the sternum using the sternal saw, and then along the bottom rib. She takes the lead and reaches over to remove the material from my chest. She's so close I can smell her perfume and I feel my penis start to grow in size, shifting slightly to rub against the cloth. I decide it would be an unnecessary

giveaway, so I think of nothing and my desires fizzle out. I notice blemishes on her cheeks and chin, a barely-healed cut above her lip, and something green stuck in her teeth.

Her hand is now resting on my chest, but I cannot feel her skin through the gloves. She raises her scalpel but pauses, as if sensing a faint warmth – the life inside me, perhaps – cutting through the cold.

I make no sound, feel no pain, as she makes a careful slice from my jugular to my chest and opens up a flap of skin to peer inside. The afternoon anatomy class takes an unnatural turn but she fails to register the blood seeping from my neck – a dead body isn't supposed to bleed. As she pulls away the sheet covering my face, I close my eyes. She observes the weak colour in my cheeks and looks down at my dislodged heart, still beating but losing pressure.

Right now, I am committed to her.

Still not believing, she pulls open my eyelids and peers inside for the first time. I am necessary and for a second we are weightless. I feel her now, closer to me, as warm air leaves her open mouth and nestles itself amongst the hairs on my head. It sends a soothing shiver from my neck to my spine and the cold continues to spread. Through the darkness an invisible weight bears down, as if a thick bed quilt is being stretched over my body and pulled tight from either side.

The last thing I hear is an agitated cry. And I think I feel her lips lock with mine.



THE JELLYFISH OF DESIRE

CAROLINE HARDAKER

See that little tremor I did,
pink and flush?

What a rush!
God –
it's due to you I shiver
in this delicious
boneless bliss.
You've totally stolen my insides
so see right through me,
and now everyone can too.
There's nothing I can do.

I'm goop
and at your mercy.

Feed me fruit and seafood
or soup when I'm sick with flu.
Pick me up tenderly
or slap me sallow to the floor.
My wet welly form won't protest
jellylike and warm
limp as though chloroform
has undone all tension
and dissipated my form.

You could Hoover me up
if you wanted to,
I wouldn't stop you.
Collecting me up
with your bits of stuff

cocooning me in shed skin
and soft mallows of fluff.
I'd finger your jumper threads
wearing them like rings.
Such fleshy pleasure they bring.

But beware of my barbs.
They do sting.

HASN'T ANYONE TOLD YOU CRACKING YOUR KNUCKLES IS AN UGLY HABIT

CAROLINE HARDAKER

When you cracked your knuckle
and your finger buckled and broke
as a splinter of wood should
what a shock it was that your hand
took on this rotten gapped fork look.
We couldn't even talk about it.
You just gawked, plastic eyed
and laughed an elastic blast,
rubbing the ragged stump
seeking a distraction.
Anything to tug me away
from your phantom phalanges
and the remaining clean lump.
No blood
no skin peeling
nothing
just a flush plastic edge
and cheap manufactured seam.

It seemed more off to me when
you continued to crack
your knuckle without the point
to pull on, on autopilot,
and though no finger to jerk
there was still a distinct snap.
I couldn't fathom how it worked.
In time, you stopped and sat
inert having stolen my smile, a

slice of you a curling prawn
settling on the floor.
Your attention suspended
I wondered whether
the finger would disintegrate
or mummify
and dry before my eyes
to lifeless leather.

You didn't even glance below,
and then why you started
on your toes
I'll never know.

SKINS

CAROLINE HARDAKER

Wolf pelt
think of how it's spelt.
Was the beast shelled,
peeled like a nut,
or was it bullets in the bone
that felled it?

Reading the label
it's all polyester. A little
less drama but less blood
I guess, though I still smell
tin, ochre, rust and sin,
and it permeates me,
staining earnest skin.



MATEUS GOES HIGHER

NATALIA THEODORIDOU

Mateus can no longer see the ground from the top of his tower. He calls it a tower somewhat pompously, as in reality it is but a crooked structure made of scavenged materials stacked higher and higher towards the sky. But what is he supposed to call it? A stack? Tower is good. It conveys its importance. Mateus balances on the platform of the latest level he has added and begins his descent to collect the materials he needs for the next. The brown cloud swirls around him and a sudden gust of wind blows dust into his face. Bits of sand make tiny scrapes on his goggles. He'll soon need to find a new pair. He puts one hand on his bandana and holds it tightly over his mouth. In the little while it takes for the wind to die down, the sound almost drowns out the whisper in his ears: *Higher. Go higher.*

He contemplates the idea of towers on his way down. Towers can be so many different things. They can be fortresses and observatories. Transmitters. Monuments, clock-holders, and structural parts of a bridge. They can even be tests. Prisons. And platforms from which to dive or launch. Who knows what Mateus's tower will be when it's finished and its purpose is revealed to him? But it's bound to be great. And so he has to go higher.

The moment Mateus's feet touch the ground, his legs feel like rubber and his stomach turns. After days of living on the tower, with its soft, lulling oscillation in the wind, the sudden solidity of the ground nauseates him. He takes a few moments, leaning against the tower, until the earth stops behaving like the sea. Then he grabs his cart and heads out.

He's cleared a large area that extends a couple of hours' worth of distance around the tower, except for a big stack of planks that he's left next to the base of the construction. For an emergency, he told himself, although he had no idea what an emergency might look like. So far he hasn't run into anyone in his scavenging expeditions. But with the dust cloud that surrounds everything now, visibility is very limited. He could be a few feet from an army and have no idea that anyone was there. An army. Ridiculous thought. There are no armies any more.

He's picked a direction that he's signposted with glowing yellow rods so that he doesn't lose his way in the dust. There's nothing else around. The ground is worn asphalt covered in so much dust you could mistake it for a dirt road. His cart's wheel is whining. He might find some grease to put on it, if he's lucky. But first he needs to find wood, nails, more metal rods. Bricks and stones are less and less useful the higher he goes; they make the whole structure unsteady. Precarious balance. He's no architect – Mom loved reminding him of that every time he set out to build something, anything – but he can tell when a tall building starts tilting. The whole way the whisper keeps nagging at him, persistent, unrelenting. *Higher. Go higher.* But I'm on the ground, he wants to reply. I'm on the damn ground. *Go higher. Go higher.*

A small pile that starts being discernible a few meters outside the radius he's already cleared turns out to be a goldmine of semi-rotten planks, broken window frames and black refuse bags. Mateus tosses the refuse bags aside; they feel squishy and emit a faint putrid odour – he's not eager to look inside. He loads the planks and frames onto his cart slowly, carefully. He's cut himself before on a rusty nail. He'd really believed that he'd get tetanus and

die that time. But the fever went as it had come, one day in the faint dusty light of the sun.

On the way back, he takes a few minutes to sit down and eat some beef jerky he's brought with him. The ground feels oddly warm. His hands are dusty – hell, his whole body is covered in a thin ochre-coloured film – but there's nothing to be done about that any more. He smuggles small pieces of food under his bandana and into his mouth, exposing his inside to the dust as little as possible. He chews every bite for a long time. He pretends he's enjoying a meal in the park. Everything around him is quiet, all the sounds muffled by the soft dominion of dust. Except for the whisper, of course. Monotonous. Predictable. Invariably the same. *Go higher.*

It's dusk when he arrives back at the tower. He unloads the contents of his cart into a large rectangular canvas. Then he ties the corners together diagonally around his shoulders and starts climbing the tower, relieved to be leaving the unsettling undulation of the ground.

His muscles tremble under the weight of his building materials. Climbing the tower this way takes everything he has and more, every time. He times his movements to the beat of the whisper in his ears and he goes higher, and higher, and higher.

It feels as if hours pass before he reaches the top level. He unwraps himself from the canvas and collapses on the wooden platform, breathing heavily behind his bandana. He will go inside the little makeshift room he's put together out of a piece of tarpaulin and some metal rods to sleep, but not yet. He will go in a little while, after he's gotten some rest here on the floor, swaying in the dusty breeze with his tower. He feels it balance underneath him and he suddenly remembers that game they used to play when they were kids, he and his brothers, where you stacked wooden bricks one on top of the other, and then you removed some and put them on top, going higher and higher until the tower collapsed. But who won? If every time the tower collapsed in the end, what was the winner left with? Mateus racks his brain. He sees his older brother beaming over the ruins and detritus on their bedroom floor, and can't make any sense of it at all.

*

He spends the next couple of days building the new level. The whisper is still there in his ears, urging him on. He pretends it sounds more satisfied today. He's doing good work. It's difficult to judge how high his tower has gotten now that he can no longer see the ground. But he's doing good work. He's sure of it. So he keeps going higher. The wind is getting stronger up here, and there's more light. He may be nearing the top edge of the dust cloud he's in. A little higher and he might even see some sun.

*

He's on his way to the ground again with renewed enthusiasm about the prospect of seeing something other than brown all around him if he manages to escape the cloud. He touches his feet to the ground and braces for the familiar nausea to hit like a giant wave and then subside enough for him to be able to walk. When it does, he looks around, trying to decide which direction to go in today. Something feels wrong, though, the landscape seems different somehow. All the poles he's planted around the tower are there, marking relative directions in yellow, green, red and blue.

Then he sees it and it hits him like a punch to the gut. His emergency stack is gone. His forehead breaks into a cold sweat that turns the film of dust that covers him into a thick paste. The whisper drills into his ears, pressing him *Higher. Go higher.* He runs towards the blue poles, the ones closest to his former stack, but he can't see well enough. He's being careless and he stumbles and scrapes his knee on the deceptively soft ground. He pushes himself to calm down, to check the area more methodically, more meticulously, the way he's done before, the way he's accomplished everything he has so far, that's gotten him this high already, nearly out of the cloud. He finds nothing. No being, no traces, nothing of use.

He decides to put it out of his mind as best he can, to focus on the whisper and its instructions, as wise and pressing as ever. He goes back to the tower to pick up his cart and ventures out towards the red poles. The dust is as thick as ever and the wind is rapidly changing directions, making the sand creep into every dimple of his body, every nook and cranny of his self. He pushes through and piles his cart as high as he can, not as picky about his materials as usual, he collects the tires he usually ignores and hoards every piece of wood he finds, even the rotten, disintegrating ones that he usually

passes by in favour of the more sturdy ones. When the cart becomes almost too heavy to lift, he makes his way back to the tower, dripping muddy sweat.

*

The next few levels come into being faster than ever out of an exercise of pure will and determination. He never thought his hands could work so quickly, never felt so grateful for the nagging whisper in his ear before. *Go higher. Higher. Go higher.* No longer the crack of a whip, but a cheer.

He almost misses the moment the tower breaks the upper end of the dust cloud and emerges into the blue, blue sky. Mateus feels something burning the top of his head and he's alarmed, about to douse himself with water, when he lifts his head from his work to look around, and he suddenly realizes that's the sun on his head. That's clear, dust-less air on his skin. He takes off his goggles and his bandana and gulps the air down until his lungs burn and his head feels so light it could double as a helium balloon. His eyes take a while to adjust to this new brightness and to so much colour, so much blue. His ears buzz from the rush of oxygen and the whisper is but background static. And then his vision clears and he sees another tower a little further, maybe a hundred meters away, poking out of the dust cloud a couple of levels higher than his own.

The shock makes Mateus fall back onto his platform and retreat as far as he can. Then something urgent rises in him and he finds himself back on his feet waving madly and wanting to speak, to shout, except he's not sure he knows how any more. He's rummaging through his stash for something to write with, something to write on, to send a message to this other creature he'd never imagined he would see again, that he was sure he had lost forever, when something hot whizzes past him, barely missing his right ear. He turns around. The flare that had no doubt been aimed at his head has landed on the platform. The tires have caught fire. Mateus quickly pushes them off, as far from the tower as he can. The whisper returns to his ears, accusing, oppressive. He stands at the edge of his platform to look at the person who shot him up here, above the cloud. He simply stands there at the edge of his own platform, looking back at Mateus. Then he lowers his head and sits down slowly, his back turned and sullen.

*

Mateus ceases his building for a while, spends the next few days and nights watching the other person get up, build, eat, drink, climb down his tower and come back up with coveted pieces of wood and metal sheeting. It takes a lot of energy for Mateus to ignore the whisper for so long, but this is important. He can't let the other person out of his sight. He is in danger. The tower is in danger.

One night, the person doesn't return to the top of his tower. Mateus assumes he must have decided to spend the night on the ground, maximize the efficiency of his trips. Now that the towers are so tall, climbing down and then back up again is no minor feat. But he doesn't come back the next day, nor the next night, nor the day after that. Mateus is sure he must have perished. Reluctantly, he resumes his building. He goes higher. And higher. And higher.

Days pass, but the other one doesn't return. Mateus decides to go look for him, or, if he's gone, for his tower – perhaps dismantle it and use the materials for his own. He follows the blue poles in the direction of the other tower. He spends hours walking, certain now that he has covered more than the hundred meters he believed separated the two towers, but he finds nothing. There's no person. There's no tower.

Exhausted, he returns to the top of his tower above the cloud. The other tower is there, almost identical to his own, only empty. The whisper in his ears remains unfazed. *Higher*, it says. *Go higher*. He decides to take the night off, and continue building the next day. And so he does. And the next day. And the day after that.

*

The newfound sun has baked Mateus's skin pink and he's flaking, but he continues to work as fast as he can, stealing furtive glances at the other tower every now and then. It is noon when he hears the grunts. The other person is back. He's sprawled on his platform, lower than Mateus's now, panting and holding his ribs. He must have broken them somehow. Mateus thought something like this would give him satisfaction, but it doesn't. He turns his back to the other person and continues his building to the familiar tune of the whisper in his ears.

Night comes and the other person is still laid out on his platform. He must be unable to move, but he's still breathing heavily. Coughing occasionally. Pierced lung, maybe. Mateus is sitting at the edge of his tower eating beans out of a can and watching the other person's chest rise and fall, rise and fall. He thinks of his brother again, his wide, victorious smile over the ruins of their tower.

He stands up. He pretends the whisper says *Talk to him*. But it doesn't. It only says: *Higher. Go higher.*



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